

לע"נ

הרב יעקב צבי ב"ר דוד אריה ז"ל

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# Liminal Space

## Bamidbar

In English, the book we begin this week is called Numbers, and for an obvious reason. It begins with a census, and there is even a second count toward the end of the book. On this view, the central theme of the book is demography. The Israelites, still at Sinai at the beginning of the book, but on the brink of the Promised Land by its end, are now a sizeable nation, numbering 600,000 men of an age to embark on military service.

Within Jewish tradition however, this book has become known as Bamidbar, "in the wilderness", suggesting a very different theme. The superficial reason for the name is that this is the first distinctive word in the book's opening verse. But the work of two anthropologists, Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, suggest a deeper possibility. The fact that Israel's formative experience was in the wilderness turns out to be highly significant. For it is there that the people experience one of the Torah's most revolutionary ideas, namely that an ideal society is one in which everyone has equal dignity under the sovereignty of God.

Arnold Van Gennep, in his *The Rites of*

Passage, argued that societies develop rituals to mark the transition from one state to the next - from childhood to adulthood, for example, or from being single to being married - and they involve three stages. The first is separation, a symbolic break with the past. The third is incorporation, re-entering society with a new identity. Between the two is the crucial stage of transition when, having said goodbye to who you were but not yet hello to who you are about to become, you are recast, reborn, refashioned.

Van Gennep used the term liminal, from the Latin word for threshold, to describe this second state when you are in a kind of no-man's-land between the old and the new. That is clearly what the wilderness signifies for Israel: liminal space between Egypt and the Promised Land. There Israel is reborn, no longer a group of escaping slaves but "a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation". The desert - a no-man's-land with no settled populations, no cities, no civilisational order - is the place where Yaakov's descendants, alone with God, cast off one identity and assume another.

This analysis helps us understand some of the details of the book of Sh'mot. The daubing of the doorposts with blood (Sh'mot 12:7) is part of the first stage, the separation, during which time the door through which you walk as you leave your old life behind has special symbolic significance.

Likewise the division of the Red Sea. The division of one thing into two, through which something or someone passes, is a symbolic enactment of transition, as it was for Avraham in the passage in which God tells him about his children's future exile and enslavement (B'reishit 15: 10-21). Avraham divides animals, God divides the sea, but the movement between the two halves is what signals the phase-change.

Note also that Yaakov has his two defining encounters with God in liminal space, during his journey from his home towards the dwelling of Lavan (B'reishit 28:10-22 and 32:22-32).

Victor Turner added one additional element to this analysis. He drew a distinction between society and what he called *communitas*. Society is always marked by structure and hierarchy. Some have power, some don't. There are classes, castes, ranks, orders, gradations of status and honour.

For Turner what makes the experience of liminal space vivid and transformative is that in the desert there are no hierarchies. Instead, there is "an intense comradeship and egalitarianism. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenised." People cast together in the no-man's-land of the desert experience the "essential and generic human bond". That is what he means by *communitas*, a rare and special state in which, for a brief but memorable period, everyone is equal.

We now begin to understand the significance of *midbar*, "wilderness", in the spiritual life of Israel. It was the place where they experienced with an intensity they had never felt before nor would they easily again, the unmediated closeness of God which bound them to Him and to one another.

That is what *Hoshei'a* means when he speaks in God's name of a day when Israel will experience, as it were, a second honeymoon:

"Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her ... There she will respond as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt. In that day", declares the Lord, "you will call Me 'my husband'; you will no longer call Me 'my Master'." (*Hoshei'a* 2:14-16)

We also now understand the significance of the account at the beginning of *Bamidbar*, in which the twelve tribes were encamped, in rows of three on the four sides of the *Mishkan*, each equidistant from the holy. Each tribe was different, but (with the exception of the Levites) all were equal. They ate the same food, manna from heaven. They drank the same drink, water from a rock or well. None yet had lands of their own, for the desert has no owners. There was no economic or territorial conflict between them.

The entire description of the camp at the beginning of *Bamidbar*, with its empha-

sis on equality, fits perfectly Turner's description of *communitas*, the ideal state people only experience in liminal space where they have left the past (Egypt) behind but have not yet reached their future destination, the Land of Israel. They have not yet begun building a society with all the inequalities to which society gives rise. For the moment they are together, their tents forming a perfect square with the Sanctuary at its centre.

The poignancy of the book of Bamidbar lies in the fact that this *communitas* lasted so briefly. The serene mood of its beginning will soon be shattered by quarrel after quarrel, rebellion after rebellion, a series of disruptions that would cost an entire generation their chance of entering the land.

Yet Bamidbar opens, as does the book of B'reishit, with a scene of blessed order, there natural, here social, there divided into six days, here into twelve (2×6) tribes, each person in Bamidbar like each species in B'reishit, in his or her rightful place, "each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house" (Bamidbar 2:1).

So the wilderness was not just a place; it was a state of being, a moment of solidarity, midway between enslavement in Egypt and the social inequalities that would later emerge in Israel, an ideal never to be forgotten even if never fully captured again in real space and time.

Judaism never forgot its vision of natural and social harmony, set out respectively in the beginnings of the books of B'reishit and Bamidbar, as if to say that what once was could be again, if only we heed the word of God.

### Around the Shabbat Table:

- (1) What do you think makes an experience "formative?" Can you think of a time when you have had such an experience?
- (2) What are some rituals that you have during transitions?
- (3) Can you relate to the idea that challenging times can lead to positive transformation? Why or why not?

## Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH