

Connecting in the Wilderness

Daniel Mutlu | March 20, 2020

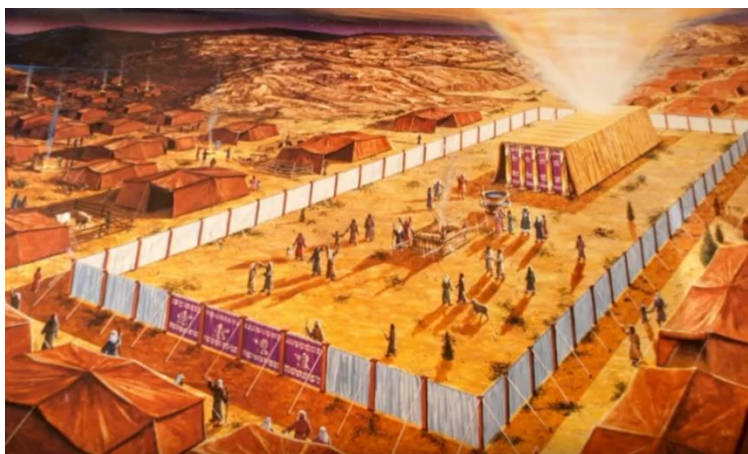
... and what a difference a week makes. Last Shabbat feels like a year ago, and the irony is hard to bear. We need to be close to each other more than ever but, the danger of being close to one another has never been greater. What do we do when our instinct is to reach out, to hug to kiss, to lend a hand to embrace, when rather we're told to keep at least six feet apart? And not to gather in groups larger than 250, then 50, then 10. A very natural reaction to all this sudden and scary change is panic and fear, and our Torah knows very well these dangers when we disregard others and fight everyone for ourselves.

It was just last week, a week ago in Ki Tisa, when we read about the Israelites making the golden calf. Together, they were trying to make something, but they didn't realize how destructive their behavior was. It might seem that they were working together, but they weren't. They panic, and they care about no one except for themselves. They don't want to connect with one another, rather they want to swage their greatest fears in that moment. "Where is that man Moses?" they cry out, and demand that Aaron find new gods for them to worship. Even Aaron, the high priest, panics, and we can imagine him saying, "Okay, okay, I'll give it my best shot give me some gold." And so, the people tossed some earrings to Aaron so he could make something, anything they didn't really care what. Aaron was a priest, not an artist, and he had defiled not only his people's spiritual mission, but also his very personal calling and purpose. It's no wonder then, that the golden calf didn't inspire good behavior, rather, it was a total disaster the people, and no wonder: The people hadn't contributed any time or talent to the project, they didn't take any pride in the thing that had been made. Instead, they let fear and panic get the best

of them, and as a result they made something which led them to sin and act in selfish and immoral ways.

It's so scary, especially right now, to read about how our people fell apart, how they so easily lost faith and trust in one another; but it only takes one week, one week of our Torah cycle to get the remedy in the portion that immediately follows Via Kel. The people are instructed to build a home for the covenant they have just received. God tells them to take gold, silver, copper, wool, fine linen, ram skins, seal skins, acacia wood, oil, spices. But most importantly above all of these, God tells them that these offerings must come only from those whose hearts move them to give. Only those who are moved can give. And the people start lining up with their finest possessions until they have donated so much, they had to be turned away. And when they gathered all their materials and got down to work, the portion says again that everyone whose heart uplifted them came and brought the offering of God. Under the direction of a few master artisans, the people work together to create an elaborate and portable structure. The Ark was made of acacia wood and gold, it was decorated with two angels made of solid gold. Around it rose the Mishkan made of colorful linen and woolen curtains. They were embroidered with beautiful designs and joined together with gold clasps.

Now, it's hard to picture this. when we read about this beautiful detail to construction, I always want to see an image, and here is one of my favorites:



It turns out, there are lots of pictures of the Mishkan described in this week's Torah portion, but I like this one best because it depicts the closeness of the people. It shows how the tents were snug up to the Mishkan, how the people went up with their lives around the Mishkan, and how they gathered inside of it too—as the Torah tells us this was an act of love, one done from the heart, and the final product inspired love and togetherness too—during this past week which has felt like a year, we have seen over and over again the closeness of our people. On weekday mornings, our congregants have been coming together for their minyan service, we've seen each other's faces, and praying through Zoom, we've seen two hundred LCLJ students begin learning Hebrew online, our adult engagement ran its first two virtual events this week with many more to come, our clergy staff and congregation have been calling our more vulnerable members to check in on them. This morning, I led a Shabbat Beachad service, a nursery service for our youngest members from my living room, and I saw their beautiful faces digitally, but I could feel the closeness of that moment.

The need to connect with each other deeply is stronger now than it's ever been. The Israelites needed to build a portable sanctuary because they didn't have a permanent home in the wilderness, and their sanctuary was where God's presence dwelled among them. Right now, our wilderness is that of physical separation, and fear, but we can still come together in community with open hearts and build together a sanctuary so that holiness thrives; so that all of us can weather this storm together and heal.