

Shabbat Bemidbar

LJ Biennial @ Home

23 May 2020 / 29 Iyyar 5780

What a strange and unsettling experience it is to sit in the comfort of our homes, and yet to know that through the screen that stands before us, we are able to connect to hundreds of people around the country and beyond.

I am here, in my home office, talking to my computer, and I know that wherever you sit, you are listening to my voice and watching my face on your computer. It takes imagination to accept that our connection is real, that something is happening between us, without the usual eye contact, recreating a subtle sense of togetherness found in our synagogues.

But this is our new reality. We stay in touch, albeit remotely. We can talk to each other, through the medium of a microphone and camera, seeing only the upper part of our bodies.

We have managed to create an entirely online large gathering of liberal Jews in the UK and beyond, reaching out to more people than we would have done physically. What can we learn from this ?

This Shabbat, we are opening a new book of Torah, called *Bemidbar: Vayedaber Adonai el Moshe bemidbar Sinai be'ohel moed be'echad lachodesh ha-sheni be-shana ha-shenit le-tzeytam me-eretz Mitzrayim*, And the Eternal spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of the Meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they came out of Egypt (Numbers 1:1).

The Torah gives us a very precise location and time, and it all happens in the wilderness of Sinai. It starts with a census of the people, followed by the start of their wanderings in the desert, organised around the Tabernacle that was built in the previous book. The Ark becomes a sort of Sat Nav for their voyage in the desert, punctuating their journey and also their wars. But the central part of the book of Numbers describes something that is a recurring pattern: they are upset, anxious, distraught, and then they rebel against God, Moses and Aaron, moaning about the land they just left, and expressing their fears for the future. There is an interesting dynamic between God and Moses: God gets

angry, wants to punish the people, and Moses acts as an intercessor, trying to appease God's anger.

It is hard to see God as a petulant, somehow impatient God. Torah teaches us here that life is hard, it is a learning curve, and we need to listen to the voice of the peace maker, the one who gives perspective, as Moses did.

We can all relate to our ancestors' anxiety, to this deep sense of uncertainty they are experiencing in the wilderness. They have left a world that was, if not entirely acceptable, at least familiar to them. They knew its unwritten rules, how to avoid its pitfalls. They took a leap of faith, trusted Moses, fled Egypt in a very dramatic way. What happens now ? What is this promised land that Moses mentions all the time?

The similarities with today are rather striking. We have left behind a world in a dramatic way. We have been thrown into a new reality, with a invisible virus lurking about, smiting people with unpredictable might and gravity. And we don't know where we are heading to. We don't know how the new world that awaits us will look like.

We are being tried. We are being tested.

Some of us have sadly lost their lives; some of us have lost loved ones, without the solace and comfort normally offered by our tradition. Some of us have been to hospital, or have suffered what they call milder symptoms. A large majority of us won't, thankfully, experience this virus, but we are like our ancestors in our personal wilderness, going through this time with anxiety, revolt, despondency, and sometime guilt.

Sometime, during the same day, we grapple with a whole range of emotions, because we have lost a major delusion: we have come to realize that we are not in control of our lives. How do we adjust to this new reality? How do we accept our powerlessness?

Accepting that we do not have much control over our lives is actually a liberating thought, because it opens the possibly of a new world. It helps us to fight our inertia and to accept change. The world of tomorrow cannot and will not be like the world of yesterday. This pandemic has changed everything: the way we see the role of the government, the importance of the collective versus individualism, the necessity of working together to alleviate the burden of the suffering, the need for communities as places of solace and comfort, even virtually and remotely.

The Babylonian Talmud (Gittin 6b) tells us that after the destruction of the second Temple, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai led a small group of Jewish refugees to the town of Yavneh, where they set about rebuilding Judaism for the new realities they faced. Of course, Covid-19 does not have the same magnitude for us as Jews as the destruction of the Temple, but we need, as they did, to reconsider Judaism in the face of this new reality.

Many people have tried to give an all-encompassing definition of Judaism, from the Chabad *Torah u'Mitzvot*, the Orthodox definition of a *Derekh Eretz*, or Judaism as a civilisation according to Mordecai Kaplan.

In our small corner of the Jewish world, we have coined the expression Collaborative Judaism, a Judaism of *Shutafut*, of partnership between all, lay leaders, Rabbis, congregants, seeing ourselves as explorers of the tradition, re-inventing it to make it relevant for today's Jews.

We have seen in these past two months how strong our communities have emerged from this pandemic, how resilient our members are. Working together in partnership, we have kept our communities going, we have offered online services, classes, social events, and even a large Biennial!

As Liberal Jews, we have a message to the world: when this crisis is over, when we assess what has just happened, and what lessons can be learned, remember what kept our world going. Not the powerful ones, not the rich ones, but the humble ones, those whom you have called "key workers", all these people who have looked after you when you were ill in hospitals, who have made sure that food was available in our supermarkets, those who have cared for our elderly, who have collected our bins, who have delivered parcels and food, all these people who have ensured that communities carried on serving the public. I've witnessed this positive energy in my community, KLS, and all over Liberal Judaism. Very quickly, we have taken the measure of the situation, and acted accordingly. We are not heroes. We are human beings.

Our communities have been laboratories of this new world that we want: places where people work together for the common good, caring for each other, valuing human life above every other consideration, and exploring ways to protect the environment. The future is holistic, compassionate, and respectful of life in all its forms and of the environment.

That is our mission, and that is our message to the world.

Ken Yehi Ratzon,

May it be God's will,

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Rene Pfertzel

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