

## Bamidbar

By Rabbi Zahavit Shalev

A few verses into Bamidbar we come across a strip of (metaphorical) crime scene tape – that black and yellow tape that the police use to mark off, protect, and preserve a crime scene: “and the stranger who draws near shall die.”

This crime-scene type warning is given three times in Bamidbar. (1:51, 3:10, and 3:38.) It occurs just once more (in a 18:7) in Parshat Korach, which we’ll read in five weeks’ time. Each instance in this week’s portion speaks about the role of the Levites, more specifically the sons of Aaron, whose job it is to construct and dismantle the Mishkan, the portable shrine which the Israelites used during the Wilderness years.

All three instances warn unqualified people not to encroach onto holy (dangerous?) jobs on pain of death. Even a Levite who has not been specifically tasked with the job is considered a *zar*. Aaron’s other sons have already been (literally) burned by bringing *eish zarah* (strange fire) to the Lord. The word *zar* is exclusive – it indicates someone or something which is categorically and perilously in the wrong place.

Contrast the word *ger*. Less than one letter, the smallest pen stroke, separates these two words – *ger* and *zar*. If *zar* is crime-scene tape, then *ger* is a caution sign.

*Ger* is a far more nuanced word. Coming from the root ‘to dwell’, there are different sorts of *gerim*. The Torah appears to imagine at least two types of *ger*: the *ger* who lives alongside Israel whilst doing their own cultural and religious thing. And the *ger toshav* a non-Israelite local who is apparently religiously and cultural assimilating to Israelite ways. We are commanded to love the *ger* and to show kindness to them countless times in the Torah.

A *zar* is a dangerous category to belong to. Rituals are high-stakes events and mistakes are not easily rectified. There’s a clear binary – do it right and you’ll be fine. Do it wrong and you die.

By contrast, there are different ways of being a *ger* because day-to-day life itself offers a lot more ambiguity. A *ger* is more an instance of category expansion than category violation. The Torah’s focus on the *ger* suggests that blending, blurring, and co-

existence, are possible. The *ger* is not going anywhere, and their difference must and can be accommodated

Might we say that over the last few weeks we were in the *zar* phase of Covid-19? The message was clear (its application perhaps less so but that's another story.) 'Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save lives.' But now that the lockdown is easing off there is uncertainty. The crime scene tape is down, and instead there's a caution sign which reads 'Stay alert. Control the virus. Save lives.' The same outcome is desired ('save lives') but the way to achieve this is much less obvious.

We are starting out on the accommodation period of Covid-19. We could call this the *ger* phase. Covid-19 is going to be living with us for a long time and we need to figure out a method of co-existence. Each of us will need to take our places somewhere on the spectrum between staying-at-home and going-back-to-normal. And we'll be doing that whilst minimising, rather than eliminating, risk. The crime scene tape is down. The caution sign is up.

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