

## Bemidbar: In the wilderness

**T**his week's Torah portion, Bemidbar, begins the book of the same name, meaning "in the desert" or "in the wilderness." In English, the book is called "Numbers," because it begins with a census.

Our Torah portion covers the military census, the holy tasks of the Levite clans, and the positioning of tribes for both travel and rest. Four families among the Levites surrounded the tabernacle to the north, south, east, and west, respectively. Then, in a wider, outer formation, the remaining tribes took their places on the four sides.

The center was occupied by the sanctuary – the literal and figurative core of community. Each tribe had its leader, its flag, its location – in short, its own identity. At the same time, each tribe was part of a pattern and a people. Any absence or shift would disturb the balance of the whole.

This Torah portion, so full of details and numbers, is also an apt introduction to the broad themes of the book. Can people be counted (upon) for military and communal service? Can each individual and group find our own independent expression, while still supporting – and playing a vital role in – the wider community?

Over the course of Bemidbar, the Israelites repeatedly complain, rebel against divine and human authority, become embroiled in political conflicts, lust after



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physical comforts, and want to give up. Sound familiar? Those same tendencies can be observed, at least occasionally, in Jewish communities today.

The opening of Numbers suggests that, despite the chaos we create, there is a holy order to things. There is a way of organizing the "organized Jewish community" so that each person, each tribe has a rightful and respected place in it.

In the Beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth. In the Wilderness, we created Community, under the tutelage of God and Moses. We learned to distinguish self-interested power-grabs (Korach, Datan, and Aviram, Num. 16) from healthy aspirations for participation (Machlah, Noa, Choglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, Num. 27) and leadership (Eldad and Medad, Num. 11: 26-29). We learned to trust God and each other.

It's common to describe the time in the wilderness as the "adolescence of the Jewish people." We wanted our independence – except when we wanted Moses to do everything for us. We thought we could succeed for and by ourselves, yet we depended from day to day on our Parent for food. We thought we were the center; we hadn't yet truly understood that, to be fulfilled, we would have to put the Ark and the Tablets at the center.

Jeremiah portrayed the years in the wilderness as a kind of honeymoon. "I remember the affection of your youth, the love of your nuptials, how you walked after Me in the desert [bamidbar] in a land that was not sown" (Jer. 2:2). Given the dissent and rebellion in the desert, you might accuse Jeremiah of rewriting history. But you could say instead that Jeremiah is seeing those desert years in the fullness of perspective. Like an older couple reflecting on their first years of marriage, he remembers the arguments and the struggles to feed the family, but he accounts the early days, in retrospect, as pure. We

had nothing but each other. We learned to know and to trust each other. Those were the years that shaped us.

We should not take life-stage analogies (whether to adolescent angst or to newly-wedded bliss) too literally. The point is: Building community, especially new community, involves both angst and bliss. Those formative years are full of outsized arguments, as well as outsized idealism. Teens, newly-weds, and humans in general, wish for control and independence and, simultaneously, for protection and union. Maturity demands that we

know that about ourselves, that we cultivate inter-dependence, and that we respect both ourselves and the Other.

The midrash teaches that Torah was given in the desert (bemidbar) because Torah is wild and free. So are people. God didn't want to tame us in the desert, but to help us find our place in relation to everyone else who is finding theirs. In short, God wanted us to grow up. This week is a good time to pause and consider how that enterprise is going.

*Rabbi Debra Orenstein is on a mission to free 100 slaves before Rosh Hashanah. Learn more and join in at [RabbiDebra.com](http://RabbiDebra.com).*