

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Bemidbar, Numbers, Chapters 1-4

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

If you enjoy this commentary on the weekly Torah portion and want to continue learning with Rabbi Soloveichik, please visit MeirSoloveichik.com and subscribe today!

An Israeli Song, the Jewish Family, and the Surprising Name of a Biblical Book

In the weeks after October 7, one particular pop song went viral in Israel, and ultimately around the Jewish world.

The song, by Yigal Oshri, begins with a plaintive question:

אתם יודעים מה הדרך הכי טובה לצאת מדיכאון?

Do you know the best way to remove yourself from depression?

The song's chorus provides the answer:

גם בשעות החשוכות של הלילה,
תמיד יהיה כוכב קטן שיאיר לך
את עצמך את הדרך הביתה.
תמיד זה הכי חשוך לפני הזריחה.

Even in the dark hours of the night
There will always be a small star that will shine for you
[And light up] for you the way home.
It's always the darkest before sunrise.

These are lovely lyrics, but there are of course many moving compositions about finding strength and inspiration in difficult moments; this song, like the others, was written before October 7. If this specific song became especially popular, it is because of the way in which it was appended to, and overlaid upon, videos posted online that showed those serving in the IDF coming home after weeks away from their families. Many of you have seen them, so much so that they have become instantly recognizable to us: the moment we open such a video, we expect the song to play.



Parashah and Politics

Bemidbar



The joining of these uplifting lyrics and scenes of emotional homecomings are now instinctively taken in tandem. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported:

An Israeli reservist on leave from the war in Gaza sneaks back into his house in the middle of the night to surprise his wife and sons. Another opens the door of his daughter's preschool classroom and steps inside. Another stands behind his mother's desk at work, waiting for her to turn and see him.

In each video, and hundreds of others just like them, a Hebrew song with the lyrics "Good days will come . . ." builds to its crescendo as the soldier's family falls upon him.

The song seems tailor-made as an anthem for the emotional reunions that are providing Israelis a rare spark of hope at a grim time. "Even in the darkest hours of the night, there will always be a small star that will shine for you, for yourself and the way home," the singer croons. "It's always darkest before the sunrise."

It is these scenes of reunions—between husbands and wives, between parents and children—that have made the song so moving. To the question put forward by the singer of how one emerges from depression, the answer offered in the images is: through our connection to others, to family, to loved ones, to a feeling that we are part of something larger than ourselves. The greetings in the Jewish home, and by members of the Jewish family, between soldiers and loved ones highlight not only that Israelis will fight, but also, as importantly, what they are fighting for.



Parashah and Politics

Bemidbar

We bear this mind as we study a *parashah* that is ostensibly all about “numbers,” but which is actually, as we will see, about family.

The book known in English as Numbers starts with a verse that provides it, for traditional Judaism, with a very different, perhaps surprising, name:

The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, by families, by fathers' houses . . . (Numbers 1:1–2)

“In the wilderness of Sinai . . .” Because of this opening phrase, the Hebrew name of the book is “*Bemidbar*,” “in the wilderness.”

In preparation for entry into the Holy Land, a census is conducted to determine the number of Israelites in each tribe, hence the name “Numbers.” But to refer to the book as “In the Wilderness” seems surprising and strange. Why is this an appropriate name for this biblical book?

The answer, it would seem, is that the name seeks to make a point: to be “*bemidbar*,” to be “in the wilderness,” is to be tested. Winston Churchill, in his 1931 essay about Moses, attempted to describe to his British audience what it would mean to enter this desert, one he had himself seen:

Moses fled into the Sinai Peninsula. These are the most awful deserts where human life in any form can be supported. There are others, like the vast expanses of the Sahara or the Polar ice, where human beings cannot exist at all. Still, always a very few people have been able to keep body and soul together amid the rigours of the Sinai Peninsula. There are nowadays a few hundred Bedouin inhabitants. But when an aeroplane makes a forced landing in the Sinai Peninsula the pilot nearly always perishes of thirst and starvation.

The desert, then, is terrifying, and the name of the book is meant to remind us of the fearful site of Israel's journey. And we will see, later in the book, that Israel will give in to fear, complaining to Moses, and exhibiting a lack of trust in the Almighty. But in the first part of the book, we are introduced to what is meant to keep Israel strong, sustaining it in this terrifying trip through the wilderness. Israel, we are informed at the very beginning, is not only to be counted based on its tribes, but its families: “Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, by families, by fathers' houses . . .”

And as Israel journeyed, the people were arrayed not only based on tribe, but also by family:

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, The people of Israel shall encamp each by his own standard, with the ensigns of their fathers' houses; they shall encamp facing the tent of meeting on every side. (Numbers 2:1–2)

So the second chapter begins. It concludes:



Thus did the people of Israel according to all that the Lord commanded Moses, so they encamped by their standards, and so they set out, every one in his family, according to his fathers' house. (Numbers 2:34)

The family is a source of strength in this journey. The psychologist Martin Seligman, positing that radical individualism is linked to depression, explains why:

The arrangement of [the Israelite camp] embodies a placing of the individual within the larger context of faith, nation, and family.

our spiritual furniture—and revive our sense of who we were. I call the larger setting the commons. It consists of a belief in the nation, in God, in one's family, or in a purpose that transcends our lives.

The life committed to nothing larger than itself is a meager life indeed. Human beings require a context of meaning and hope. We used to have ample context, and when we encountered failure, we could pause and take our rest in that setting—

The arrangement of Israel embodies a placing of the individual within the larger context of faith, nation, and family. Thus, toward the end of the biblical book known as “In the Wilderness,” the Gentile prophet Balaam sees Israel encamped, and celebrates the familial tents he sees. As Rabbi Yonatan Grossman notes,

after Bil'am views this magnificent organization and order of the Israelite camp, by their tribes, each individual connected with his family and his clan, the wonderful blessing bursts forth: “How good are your tents, Yaakov, your dwelling places, Israel” (24:5).

The untamed desert bespeaks a world without boundaries: it is wild, devoid of order and regulation, a place without human habitation, a place where wild animals reign. Here, in the midst of the lack of boundaries that the desert embodies, a marvelous sight reveals itself: six hundred thousand foot soldiers, aside from women and children, journeying by tribes and by clans. It is specifically against the background of the desert that the splendor of the camp of Israel stands out: a nation that creates banners and tribes, that maintains clans and tents of families.

A nation dedicated to family, even in the wilderness, can sustain itself and resist desperation. And the families themselves, arrayed according to tribe, surrounded a sacred site at the center of the encampment.

Then the tent of meeting shall set out, with the camp of the Levites in the midst of the camps; as they encamp, so shall they set out, each in position, standard by standard. (Numbers 2:17)

The families of the tribes surround the camp of the Levites, for it is there that the Tabernacle rests. The Levites, we are further informed, are charged with dismantling and carrying the Tabernacle during travel. But this means, Rabbi Grossman adds, every other tribe is equally close to the Tabernacle, and thus



Parashah and Politics

Bemidbar

the form of encampment of the tribes around the [Tabernacle] also had educational value. In this way, all the tribes dwelled at the same distance from the [Tabernacle] (with the exception, of course, of the tribe of Levi). . . . Thus it was clear that everyone had the same opportunity, with the same effort, of reaching the holy place.

The generations of families, the arrangement of the “fathers’ houses,” is the path of resilience and strength—and also of holiness, each family in its own way.

It is noteworthy that in the Passover Haggadah, the familiar phrase “in every generation and generation,” *“b’khol dor va-dor,”* appears twice. First is the description of the evening’s purpose: *“b’khol dor va-dor hayav adam lir’ot et atsmo k’ilu hu yatza mi-mitsrayim,”* “in every generation we are obligated to see ourselves as if we left Egypt.” And then there is the other: *“b’khol dor va-dor omdim aleinu l’khaloteinu, v’ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu matsileinu mi-yadam,”* “in every generation they rise up against us to destroy us, but God saves us from their hands,” and we endure.

That this phrase appears twice, in one larger text, and seldom elsewhere, should hint to us that these two sentences are linked. It is as if the Haggadah is saying the following: if you wish to know how we endure even though enemies rise up against us in every generation, it is in our capacity for continuity and family in every generation. In each and every generation we remember the Exodus, and therefore we see ourselves as connected to those who have come before and will come after, and it is this that sustains us in the face of enemies that “in every generation” rise up to attempt to destroy the Jewish people. In our history, there have been many Jewish journeys “in the wilderness,” literal or otherwise, and it has been the bonds between generations that has sustained us.

[E]ven in moments of terrible loss, we find sources of inspiration and resilience, of the power of the Jewish family to overcome . . .

We have seen the evil of Hamas, an evil that expresses itself in the celebration of horrific acts of terror, a culture of death. And this evil contrasts profoundly to the images of Israeli soldiers returning home, a reminder of the source of resilience that is the Jewish family:

Even in the dark hours of the night
There will always be a small star that will shine for you . . .

Of course, in the past months, not all homes have had these reunions. There have been homes that have been destroyed; and there have been soldiers who have fallen in battle and will not be returning home. But even in moments of terrible loss, we find sources of inspiration and resilience, of the power of the Jewish family to overcome, with joy, such terrible and devastating loss.

It was on October 7 that residents of Shlomit, a religious village in southern Israel, were alerted that a nearby moshav, Pri Gan, was under attack, and seven residents of Shlomit immediately and courageously responded. An article describes what happened, based on an interview with one member of the group, Yonatan Werner:



Parashah and Politics

Bemidbar

The gun-toting security team found Hamas terrorists at the house closest to the village's gate and were able to fight them off. The seven-member team from Shlomit made up most of the force combating 10 Hamas terrorists.

“For over an hour, we battled the terrorists at the gate [of Prigan], because we knew that if they got in, they would kill everyone,” Werner said.

“We thought the army would come, but time kept passing and they did not arrive. At first, two [of our] people were injured, one moderately and one very badly, and then two more, another one very badly,” Werner said. “After an hour of battle, the terrorists understood they couldn't pass us, and they ran away.

“By standing strong, we saved Prigan from a terrible massacre. The devastation we saw in Kfar Azza and Beerli—if we didn't get to Prigan, it would have happened there,” he said.

Thus did these heroes guard the gate of Pri Gan, shielding its residents from evil. But two of the seven fell in battle: Reuven Sasportas and Aviad Cohen.

Five months later, Purim arrived, the first in which the Cohen home would not have its father. But Aviad Cohen's widow chose to decorate her door with words that would bring holiness to her home, and would signify to all who entered that even if monsters had cruelly taken her husband physically from his family, they could not take away the bond between her husband and his family, and that she would therefore not let depression enter her home. Thus she wrote the following upon her door:



Parashah and Politics

Bemidbar

Happy Purim! In this home, you are requested to enter with heads held high and with an upright stature! So fill yourselves up with courage and joy and then knock on the door. There is here [in this home] the family of a hero, who in his life and death spread light and hope!

Thus does the family home—the sacred tent of Israel so celebrated in Scripture—remain a beacon for Jews everywhere. And so it will always be.

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World is generously sponsored by Ivan Kaufman.

This week's D'var Torah is generously sponsored by Walter Fenska.

May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

Additional Resources

Amy Klein, “How an Israeli TikToker’s Little-Known Song Became the Soundtrack to Emotional Wartime Reunions,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, December 4, 2023. [Click here to read.](#)

