

Bamidbar

Raf Dascalu

Bamidbar is one of those portions of the Torah that can be difficult for a contemporary reader to relate to. At its heart, I would suggest that it is about how a society structures itself around the living presence of the Divine in its midst. Indeed, in the opening passage of Nahmanides' commentary on the Torah, we read that the language that is used to describe the delineation of a boundary around Mount Sinai is now used to describe a similar relationship with the *Mishkan*, the Sanctuary that houses the Divine Presence. The Israelites must attain holiness and remain holy, so that this Presence may remain among them (see Exodus 25:8; Numbers 35:34).

When the Temple was destroyed, Jews had to reframe their relationship with the Divine. It could no longer be focused on an actual physical or geographical centre that represented the Divine Presence. Rather, dispersed Jewish communities reorganised themselves around new spiritual centres. As Rashi states in his commentary on Ezekiel 11:16, slightly reformulating the Aramaic Targum: “[I shall become for them] a small Sanctuary. Synagogues in place of the Temple.” And so states Rabbi Yitzḥaq in the Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 29a: “a small Sanctuary. These are the synagogues and study houses of Babylonia.”

So communal prayer in the synagogue and Torah study in the *beit midrash* came to fill the void left by the destruction of the Temple.

But what of the void created by COVID-19? A temporary void, G-d willing, but a painful one nonetheless? If shul is our Sanctuary, what can we do when we are denied access to it?

I would suggest that we return to the plain meaning of the verse from Ezekiel – if not for an answer, for preliminary guidance towards answers.

Therefore say, “Thus said the Lord G-d: Although I have cast them far off among the nations, and although I have scattered them among many lands, yet will I be to them as a small Sanctuary in the lands where they shall go.”

A straightforward reading of this verse reveals that it is not a physical place that is the “small Sanctuary”, but the Divine Itself, accompanying us always – wherever we may be. Under normal circumstances, community is a powerful locus in which to seek meaning and to experience something of the Divine Presence. In the absence

of the physical presence of community, we may still find opportunities to turn to the Divine within ourselves, within the world around us, and within the human beings – the Divine Images – with whom we maintain close connections (whether physically or otherwise).

There is loss and grief in this time, for too many reasons to begin to explore here. But there are also opportunities for spiritual growth. Being present in our joy and our grief, and developing spiritual practices that deepen our personal connection with the Divine, we have an opportunity to fulfill the literal words of the prophet. It is my prayer for this community, myself included, that we may be able to access the insights necessary for that growth – and that when we once again come together in physical presence once more it can be with a renewed and more deeply grounded sense of the divinity of our selves, our world, and our community.