

This week, we begin a new book of the Torah, Sefer BaMidbar, the book of Numbers. It's honestly a relief to have finished the book of Leviticus. I suspect tonight's crowd is especially grateful to be past that one. But Numbers is also filled with many challenging moments: harrowing tales of rebellion, myriad existential threats to the people, and restive Israelites themselves who really don't know which way to turn. Not to mention a leader who's at his wit's end.

There they are, and here we are...bamidbar. Still in the wilderness. Each year it probably feels like we're caught in some wilderness for one reason or another, and this year I think we all have some idea of why the metaphor feels especially resonant. After exactly eight months since October 7th, with war still raging in Gaza, and so many of us in a constant state of anguish, we still have an uncertain path ahead. As much as we might pray for a ceasefire and hostage release, they haven't yet materialized. And as much as we try to ground ourselves in tradition and ritual so that we can live meaningfully in the morass of this time, many of us remain *unmoored*, and *unsure* of what to do next.

Our clergy team has spoken at length from this bimah about the fissure within the Jewish community around Israel/Palestine. And we are well acquainted with the ways in which various groups want us to pick a side or march in one direction only. That feels especially true for those of us who are also in the queer community, for whom the conversation feels louder, at a time when it's often a delicate balance to be both queer and Jewish in familiar spaces.

Whether we identify as queer or not, most of us have spent our adult lives undoing all that we thought we were *supposed* to be. But again and again, we are taken to task for *not* being what others think we should. Not being supportive enough of Israel, or not adequately advocating for Palestinian liberation. Not caring enough about our fellow Jews, or being overly focused on our own needs. Standing *with* queer siblings in activist spaces or feeling alien *from* them. Like all the other binaries we've sought to

reject in other arenas, we know we must resist the impulse to fall into the binary thinking of our public discourse...choosing instead to believe in a future where Israelis and Palestinians together will find a way through this in peace. But resisting that binary leaves us, now, without an obvious path. And therefore, in some kind of wilderness.

Classically, there are a few benefits to being in the wilderness. The midrash teaches that the desert is the perfect place to encounter G-d. Only in the desert, where you are thirsty, can you drink fully from the well of Torah. Or, we might say, only without distraction, only far away from the niceties or expectations of other people, can we focus on our unique missions in life. Samson Raphael Hirsch taught that Bamidbar contrasts “the people of Israel as it actually is” with “the ideal to which it was summoned in [Leviticus].” Whether we like it or not, the wilderness may be the perfect place to figure out who and what we are.

In this week’s haftarah reading, we get a reframe of this same idea. In this passage, the prophet Hosea condemns the people for losing their way in relation to G-d, and uses the wilderness as a central motif for describing their course correction. Hence the connection to this parsha. In verse 5 of that text, G-d says, in reference to the people: “I will strip her naked and leave her as on the day she was born: v’samtiha chamidbar. And I will make her *like* a wilderness.”

Hosea describes the desert as a place where the people are naked, and stripped of everything that guards them. They have to take off the garments that society would otherwise demand, and exist in their most basic form. Vulnerable and exposed. And in Hosea’s telling, it’s in this sort of state that the people can return to who they really are as Israelites.

In our case, we might imagine that returning to ourselves in this wilderness requires that we remove the uniforms we wear in different spaces, and unfasten the armor that shields us from feelings we wish to avoid. Only with this sort of vulnerability might we find a messy truth of who we actually are. And if we allow ourselves to do this, presumably what we’ll find is that we are not just one thing or another, but so many different identities and values

interlocking, so many points in between the spectrums that exist among people. Being forced into a binary robs us of all the complexities that we are or that we hold. That's as true of our genders as it is of our politics, or pretty much anything else. The benefit of being in an in-between space of wilderness, is the recognition that despite the many voices who want us to be all one thing, we have no choice but to be many all at once.

This, I imagine, was what the Israelites were. Many things all at once, as they stood there in the desert, still far from their destination.

Given their multitudes, it makes sense that the first thing that happens in this parsha is a census. In the second verse of the portion, G-d commands them: S'u et rosh kol adat b'nei Yisrael. Take a census of the community of Israel. To determine who this community is.

And once the people are counted, G-d commands that the Israelites shall set up camp *ish al diglo*, each person with their flag. Every household was supposed to have its own flag raised high. Rashi explains the phrasing to mean that every one of those flags should look unique, color coded to distinguish one tribe from the next, but with emblems and insignia that are distinct to every individual.

There could be literally no more perfect commentary for Pride Shabbat. That every Israelite needed to wave a flag with colors distinct to their identity. Which, taken together, could only look like a rainbow. I'm not saying that Rashi *invented* the Pride Flag, but I'm not *not* saying that.

Really, what I'm saying is that as important as it was for a census of *numbers* to take place in this parsha, it seems that equally important was a census of *individuals* who knew who they were – without being forced to fit into any one particular mode of being. Every person needed to understand themselves before being counted. And thus, the setting of the midbar, the wilderness, with all its raw landscape ripe for soul searching, was the

perfect place for a census.

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Friends, it is very hard to find stability or direction when things feel wild. And these days, it is understandable why anyone might want to seek out a straightforward narrative or accept a black and white answer when the world feels so upside down. But counterintuitively, I think a wilderness like the one in which we find ourselves is precisely the time to resist conforming to one prescribed set of values or identities. And maybe it's a chance for us to get real about the raw, exposed, vulnerable complexities of who we really are. Like the Israelites with their flags, it may be that the only way through this together is for each of us to figure out on our own what colors really feel right to us as unique individuals. And to likewise accept that everyone else's colors will be, and should be, different from our own.

A color, after all, is only a perception of light. And on this Pride Shabbat, may we find a bit of that light, refracted in our own unique way, and may we enlighten each other.

Shabbat Shalom.