



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Bamidbar 5771

By Rabbi Elliot Kukla

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This week, we are pleased to welcome guest writer, Dvar Tzedek alumnus Rabbi Elliot Kukla.

Whenever I am on an airplane, the in-flight entertainment makes me cry. Even if what is playing is the most outrageously juvenile comedy or a lengthy infomercial, I find my eyes strangely misty. I used to think I was the only one, but when I began talking about this with my friends I found out that many people feel similarly vulnerable in the air. There is something about that sense of having already left home, but having not yet arrived at our destination, that strips us of our usual composure.

Parshat Bamidbar—which literally means “in the desert”—is all about this challenging time and space in between departure and arrival. It concerns the lengthy period of wandering in the desert after the Israelites left slavery but had not yet arrived in the land of milk and honey. Every year, we read this *parshah* in the middle of counting the *omer*, a ritual that marks the 49 days between Passover (Exodus from Egypt), and Shavuot (receiving the Torah on Mt. Sinai). This moment of Jewish time is all about having left our point of origin, but not yet having arrived at our destination. We are neither here nor there.

In fact, most of the Torah takes place in this literal and metaphoric wilderness. There is a brief moment of being at home in Canaan in the beginning of the book of Genesis, but it's followed quickly by exile and slavery in Egypt at the beginning of Exodus. The rest of the Torah is about the journey back to the Promised Land—a trip that is never quite completed.

Why is so much of the Torah and so much of the Jewish holiday cycle focused on the “in between”? Perhaps because most of life, as well, takes place in the desert—the biblical equivalent of floating in an airplane between where we left and where we're going. Brief moments of clearly delineated arrivals or destinations—like graduation, the birth of a child or the beginning of a much-anticipated promotion—often punctuate long periods of waiting and wandering.

This is also true in our lives as global justice activists. As seekers of justice we often only feel productive when our work leads to a clear accomplishment—the passing of legislation, the prohibition of an injustice, the saving of a life. These moments of arrival are important and energizing, but so are all the steps in between.

It's important to realize that just because we have not arrived at a destination, it doesn't mean we are nowhere at all. After all, the wilderness is a place to be. Anyone who has spent time in the desert soon sees that what looks empty is actually gloriously alive. It is filled with odd bugs and countless grains of sand, broad horizons and sparkling stars. Likewise, the desert zones of our justice work are alive. Advocating for debt forgiveness (even if it is not yet accomplished) can lead to change down the road, and may help us refine our understanding of fairness; donating money (even if we don't yet have a lot to give) makes a difference to those who receive it, and helps us to experience

generosity; learning more about global health issues (even if these problems are not yet resolved) is a step toward change and helps us to appreciate our own moments of health and healing.

The Hebrew word for wilderness, *midbar*, is euphonically linked to *m'daber*, speaking. God speaks to us in the wilderness because when we are in between familiar landscapes we are open-hearted and can truly listen. When we are at a moment of arrival or departure we think we know what justice looks like; but it is in the wilderness, as we wander toward our next oasis, that we are stripped of certainty and hence vulnerable and open to new ideas and possibilities for what change might look like.

Perhaps in some cases actually reaching the destination isn't even the goal. The generation of Israelite slaves never made it to the Promised Land, but it was during a nebulous period of wandering in the middle of the desert that they became a cohesive people. Likewise, as we struggle for justice in our own time, may we appreciate the moments of being in the wilderness on the way to social change, since this might be where the real change is happening after all. It's important to remember that each step of wandering along the road towards justice, no matter how lost we feel, is wholly holy.



Rabbi Elliot Kukla is a rabbi at the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center in San Francisco where he provides spiritual care to those struggling with grieving, illness or dying. He trained in chaplaincy at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF) Medical Center and was ordained by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles. He is also an activist, writer and educator. He has lectured and led workshops on diversity, stigma and Jewish healing throughout Canada and the U.S. and has been published in numerous magazines and anthologies. Elliot can be reached at ekukla@ioaging.org.

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