

Parashat Bamidbar

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Many years ago I was driving into Manhattan from my home in New Jersey and while crossing the George Washington Bridge I hit some traffic. With the patience of a New Yorker and the driving skills of someone trained in Quebec, you can imagine how I began to (safely, of course) weave in and out of lanes, looking for a passageway through the backup. I found a gap in the one lane that was moving swiftly, and merged in. Looking in my rearview mirror I waved a “thank you” to the car behind me, feeling deeply satisfied for making a good move – you know the feeling. And then, when I looked ahead, my heart sank. There, just a few vehicles in front of mine, was the hearse. I had merged into a funeral procession. Feeling terrible, I quickly merged back into the slow moving lane from which I had come, and sank into my shame.

What triggered my feeling badly, of course, was the sight of this vehicle that we think of as so profoundly sacred. After all, it carries the dead. There is a mystical, numinous aura to a hearse that prompts us to feel awed and humbled in its presence. I was ashamed for having violated its holiness with my mundane need to rush to a meeting.

Ironically, later on that day, I was driving down the New Jersey Turnpike, (I do a lot of driving), still thinking about my obnoxious intrusion into the funeral earlier on the GWB. My kids were little then and trucks were ubiquitous in our playroom so I was familiar with different kinds and models. As I passed a large transporter in the right lane, the kind of truck that transports cars from ports to dealerships, I noticed that this one had

on its frame two hearses. There they were, totally out of their sacred context, being transported, like all other vehicles get transported at one time or another, probably from a factory or train to a dealership or funeral home.

“Oh,” I said to myself. “They’re just cars, like any other cars. They need to be built, repaired, taken from one place to another. A hearse is just a car.”

But I knew deep inside that a hearse is not just a car. It plays a role in society that is unique. It’s a symbol of our mortality, our connections to one another, our efforts to honor the dead and comfort the mourner. It commands our respect like no other vehicle on the road. And so I wondered, now that I’ve seen this sacred vessel naked, so to speak, outside of its holy setting, now that I caught a glimpse into the behind—the-scenes reality of the life of a hearse, would I respond with the same reverence the next time I see it in its line of duty, carrying a dead body to its grave? With my new knowledge of its ordinariness, would I still be able to muster up the same awe for its extraordinariness?

The risk of seeing something sacred in its natural or deconstructed form and not being able to regenerate the deep respect and devotion we feel when we behold it in its full, resplendent form is a serious one. So serious, our parashah warns, that it might be fatal.

In our portion of Bamidbar, the opening chapters of the fourth book of the Torah recount the census taken in the wilderness, the arrangement of the tribes in the desert camp, a more detailed census of the Levite families, and finally an even closer look at the Bnei Kehat, the family of Levi’s

middle son Kehat. Their job in the Mishkan, the desert sanctuary, was to carry the bundled up sacred objects and vessels when the Israelites journeyed in the desert to a new camp. Packing up and moving camp meant disassembling the whole sanctuary and carefully wrapping screens and curtains, bowls and jugs, tables, the menorah, fire-pans and tongs, the altars, and all the vessels used in the sacrifices and placing them in dolphin skins which were then carried by the Bnei Kehat.

But the Torah is very clear in the instructions for how all this is to be done: Only **after** Aaron and his sons have finished wrapping all the sacred objects are the Bnei Kehat to come in to lift them up and carry them. They are not to witness the disassembling of the sanctuary with their own eyes. Why?

“velo yavo'u lir'ot kevala et hakodesh vametu/ don't let them go inside and witness the dismantling of the sanctuary, LEST THEY DIE.”

“Lest they die”? Why would they die just from watching the Kohanim prepare the Mishkan for travel?

Abravanel thought that they might be induced into a mystical trance by staring with fascination at the holy objects and become unable to do their work.

More interesting to me is the insight of Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsch who suggested that the Bnei Kehat might become too accustomed to the routine of seeing the sacred objects packed and unpacked and become numb to their holiness. They might die a spiritual death, losing their vital awe for the divine sanctuary.

If we think about it, this warning is not so outrageous, particularly as we consider it in these days before Shavuot as we prepare to receive the Torah once again.

One morning about twenty-six years ago, while I was sitting in a class at York University, my whole world turned upside down when my (Jewish) professor of religion stated rather casually that the Torah was written not by God but by human beings. He assumed everyone in the room was on the same page about that one. This was, after all, an academic seminar in religious thought, not a Beit Midrash.

You might think that at the age of 19 this was an idea that I had surely heard of already. But remember, I was raised in the Orthodox community where the divine authorship of the Torah is unquestioned. All my formal and informal Jewish education up until that very moment had been in an Orthodox setting or taught by an Orthodox Jew. And I was still a practicing Orthodox Jew. Sure, I had my suspicions about the Torah, or several passages in it, and had done my share of challenging it, but not until that morning did I allow myself to consider that maybe, just maybe, God had not revealed it. I listened to my professor carefully as I worked to conceal my shaking hands and sweating palms. At the end of the class I bolted from the room, ran to a quiet place, sat down, and sobbed uncontrollably. I felt disoriented, terrified. It was hard to breathe.

One of my first thoughts was that I was going to get it for even entertaining such heresy. There were my parents' yeshiva dollars hard at work! But my deeper fears were about what my religious life would look like if the Torah was no longer the absolute source of what it was God

wants of me. Who and what was going to lead me now through the maze of what was right and wrong, permitted and forbidden? What really happened to those I call my ancestors? Who were they? Were they at all? If the Torah wasn't from God, would I still be inspired to live a Jewish life? Would any of it matter anymore?

Slowly, over months of sifting the idea around, I came to relinquish my acceptance of the Torah as the direct will of God, and instead embraced an understanding of Torah as the collective, though edited, memory of my people's history: their struggle to understand their relationship to the Source of Life and how it is we are to live meaningful, ethical lives.

With respect to my own religious life, my university and graduate studies exposed me to the critical study of religion – to biblical history, literary theory, the documentary hypothesis, archeology and anthropology – all geared towards understanding the mundane nuts and bolts of how a religious system develops generation by generation. I gained a renewed understanding of my faith and practice that could accommodate my intellectual and spiritual doubts about how any religious system could claim to be the revealed will of God. Far from feeling suffocated by my new insights, they opened more and more windows into the text itself, and into my very soul as I labored to build and sustain a connection to the Torah's sacred narratives, sacred not because God, if there is a God, authored them, but because they are our hallowed ways of coming close to the Divine.

That initial sacrifice of my belief in the divine authorship of the Torah is what salvaged my ongoing love for her, which has been enriched and deepened by decades of study and teaching. But the risk that it could

have gone the other way and ruined forever my relationship to Torah is real.

We all know those who say, "If it isn't "true", if it isn't "real", "if it didn't really happen", "if it's not uniquely Jewish" then why bother?"

It takes an evolved, thoughtful, and even courageous person to emerge from behind the curtain and still marvel at the show. It takes an evolved, thoughtful and courageous person to trek up Mount Sinai and realize the Torah is not what awaits them at the peak but what they discover during the rocky, slippery climb. Let's keep this in mind as we prepare for Shavuot and celebrate not only the giving of the Torah, but the experiences that make us ready and able to receive the Torah.

This warning of the Torah regarding the Bnei Kehat resonates deeply with us at Sha'ar Communities. In our efforts to grow organically and collectively, responsibilities for the spiritual, educational, ritual, communal, festival, charitable, logistical, programmatic and financial life of our organization need to be delegated amongst lay leadership from across our Gates.

But leaving the sanctuary filled with beautiful music and singing and meaningful learning, or the class filled with thought-provoking study, or the trip filled with exciting adventures, and coming behind the scenes to delve into the nitty-gritty of what makes a community work can be a risky business; for some, even soul destroying. The work is considerable, a lot of it mundane, some of it frustrating, much of it thankless. The politics can be brutal. As the Torah worried about the Bnei Kehat losing their faith when faced with the Mishkan in pieces, we worry about how you go from lifting

the Torah and singing the majestic “Vezot HaTorah...This is the Torah that Moses placed before the children of Israel” to “This is the Torah I’ll now place in the back seat of my car” without losing something. How do you go from poring over a gorgeous Midrash about the love of God and Israel to arguing over a kosher catering contract for an upcoming community dinner without becoming cynical?

Unwilling as we are to limit the “dirty work” to a select few as the Torah limits it to the Kohanim, if we play it right and engage in some thoughtful risk-management, these experiences and encounters can lead us to even deeper appreciation for the holiness of this kehilla, this community.

Having the right kavanah and directing our efforts towards building multiple Gates devoted to meaningful Jewish experiences will help us preserve the awe we want to feel when walking through them. Simple things like starting meetings with a niggun, or a teaching, a blessing or an intention will help us perceive the individual goals or tasks in front of us as integral components of a larger, indivisible whole. Take 10 seconds before picking up the phone to recruit or solicit – basic needs of a growing community – and stay mindful of the larger purpose to the call you’re making. The email you write, the ad you place, the chair you fold – none of these are profane acts. They are deeply spiritual in that they serve the lofty vision of building a mishkan right here, as Rabbi Art Green puts it, “a wandering sanctuary for the divine presence.”

It wasn’t long before I saw my next hearse in its formal role of transporting the dead. As a rabbi, when called to bury someone, I always ride in the hearse and accompany the dead each moment of their journey to their grave. Never have I lost my reverence for the sacred vessel that it is

simply because I once saw it on the back of a truck. In fact, I contend that it's precisely because I saw the hearse on the back of a truck doing its ordinary thing that I appreciate even more deeply when it steps up to its extraordinary task. Just like my love of Torah, which has room for her borrowed myths, textual inconsistencies and even her prejudices, still moves me deeply as it brings me closer to my authentic self as an expression of the inseparable Oneness of being.

So too may it be with our efforts here at Sha'ar Communities: that our hard work behind the scenes will serve to deepen our respect and appreciation for the noble goal we share of bringing Jews home to Judaism through the Gate that calls most genuinely to them. For in the end it is nothing if not our Jewish commitment, our abiding dedication, our blood, sweat and tears that anoint our Gates with holiness and sanctify them with hope.