

Parshat Bamidbar

Joy and Fear

Our parsha describes the encampment of B'nei Yisrael in the wilderness. Not a detail goes by unaccounted for: the number of fighting men and the layout of the camp, tribe by tribe; the Levites, their roles and encampment. By the end of our parsha we have received a detailed blueprint of the plans for the Israelite settlement in the desert.

At the centre, of course, stands the jewel in the crown - The tent of meeting, the Mishkan - home to the holy ark, where God talks to Moshe. A focal point of holiness, spirituality and Torah.

When the Torah instructs us as to the central positioning of the Mishkan, it uses a rather unusual and enigmatic phrase [2:2];

“ The Israelites shall encamp, each man by his tribal flag, by their ancestral insignia, they shall encamp; opposite, around (*mi'neged saviv*) the mishkan”

The relationship between the camp and the tabernacle is described by two Hebrew words: *mi'neged* - usually translated as opposite or opposed to, and *saviv* - which generally translates as surrounding, encircling.

On closer examination we realise that these two phrases indicate dramatically different, contrasting, orientations vis a vis the Mishkan.

The word *mi'neged*; opposite, indicates a pulling away, a clash, a repulsion. Being *mi'neged* indicates opposition, friction, tension. A distancing force.

The word *Saviv*, however, means; surrounding, encircling, gathering round. If we still remember our High School Physics and the laws of motion, we will remember that in a circular motion the pull is always to the centre. *Saviv* means an inwards magnetic pull, a centripetal force which attracts one to the centre of the circle.

If we apply this to the Mishkan, at the centre of the circle we might say that *saviv* tells us one story and *mineged* tells us another. *Mineged* - that for some inexplicable reason, the Jewish nation might feel a desire to distance themselves from their spiritual nexus. They stand opposite, keeping their distance; at variance with the Mishkan. On the other hand, the word *saviv* describes a more positive orientation. This word indicates an attraction, a desire for closeness towards the Mishkan which draws Am Yisrael inwards to the epicentre of spiritual life, to Torah and to God.

But why this dual relationship? How do we reconcile these opposing phrases? Why should we feel distanced from our holy Mishkan? and how should we decide between the two options ... is our relationship to the Mishkan one of attraction or one of repulsion?

Maybe we might suggest that this description is indeed representative of the dialectical reality that animates us as individuals and indeed, as a nation too. What is true about religion in general is described by the Torah when it tells us about the Mishkan.

On the one hand we have a strong desire to draw near to God and religion. We feel attracted to it and it gives us meaning. We desire to envelope and totally immerse ourselves in the holiness of God and in the way of life that He has given to us. We want to be better Jews, to keep Shabbat more punctiliously, to dive into our Judaism head first with all the enthusiasm that we can muster.

And yet, despite this positive pull and in direct contrast to it, there are times when we feel a need to escape, to break “the yoke of the kingdom of heaven”. There are times when Judaism seems too much, too restrictive. We need our space, our freedom.

There are times that Judaism enchants and attracts us, when it seems like the potion of life. That is the *saviv* relationship drawing us inwards. At other times when we experience a need to flee from religion; when Judaism feels like a crushing load of 613 mitzvot controlling our every action, our every move - A *neged* relationship.

This dialectic goes back to the very origin of our religion. We have just celebrated Shavuot. At Mount Sinai, the people demanded that God Himself speak to them rather than Moses. They desired the closeness to God that religion may offer. God even commanded that a restrictive fence be built to prevent the surging masses from breaking through to reach God, invading the mountain in their spiritual fervour. And yet, the Torah also records how the people reacted with fear to the intensity of the Divine presence by fleeing, running away from the intensity. “let not God speak to us lest we die”.

Apparently this oscillating dialectic of attraction and repulsion, religious enthusiasm and hesitancy, are part and parcel of the existential religious experience of every Jew.

Our hope as we approach the Chag of Matan Torah is that our enthusiasm may prevail and that we can truly experience the words of the Torah, “*vesamachta lifnei Hashem Elokecha*” ... “and you shall rejoice before Hashem your God”