



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Bamidbar 5768

By Rabbi Dorothy A. Richman

May 31, 2008

God did not lead us by the nearer way
when Pharaoh let the people go at last,
but round-about, by way of the wilderness—
pillars of fire and cloud marking night and day—
to the edge of the flood-tide—uncrossable and vast.
If God had led us by the nearer way,
we cried, we would not die here; let Egypt oppress
us as it will; let us return to the past...
God did not lead us by the nearer way,
but into rising waters, which do not part unless
with an outstretched arm we step forward, and stand fast...¹

– Dan Bellm

This week's *parshah*, and the penultimate book of the Torah it begins, narrates the experience of the Israelites negotiating the round-about way of the wilderness. The two names given to the book, *Numbers* in English and *Bamidbar* in Hebrew, tell different stories about the mission of the fugitive slaves as they move from Egypt to the promised land of Israel.

"Numbers" was chosen as the book's English title because of the census-taking that occurs at its beginning. In the opening chapter, the people are counted in preparation for war. Counting the people is a move toward stability and order: each clan is named, given a place in the camp and reckoned.

This counting exemplifies human action and organization. Its purpose is communal protection. Given the dangers of the wilderness, especially its other inhabitants, the traveling Israelite camp must be secured and armed to protect itself. Numbers tells the story of control and the need for security.

The Hebrew name for the book, "*Bamidbar*," means "in the wilderness." Unlike *Numbers*, "*Bamidbar*" connotes chaos and disorder. The very definition of a wilderness is that it is untamed. Yet, it also connotes an interim space, a knowing-where-you-want-to-go-and-not-yet-being-there period of transformation. It was into this kind of wilderness, generations earlier, that God sent Abraham on his revolutionary journey, away from the place he knew and toward one he would be shown, telling him that his descendants would be a blessing to all the families of the earth.²

¹ An excerpt from Dan Bellm, "The Crossing: Geulah." The full poem movingly "recasts the Exodus as a kind of 'coming out story'" (Bellm). See <http://templebethshalom.wordpress.com/2007/04/25/using-contemporary-poetry-in-the-liturgy-by-dan-bellm>.

² Genesis 12:3

“In the wilderness” suggests the situation of the Israelite people: they are escaped Egyptian slaves moving toward physical and spiritual freedom. Their round-about detour into the wilderness provides opportunities for the Israelites to learn how to become a blessing in the world.

In addition to the first census of our *parshah*, a military one, there is another counting toward the *parshah's* end. Perhaps each census corresponds to one of the names given to the book. The first, the military census, is the “Numbers” census. It focuses on the physical security of the Israelites. The second, a counting of the Levites, provides for the carrying of the Tent of Meeting – the place where God continues revelation throughout the wilderness years. The Tent of Meeting serves as a movable, responsive, dynamic Torah. This second numbering asks, “How can we move the Torah forward? How can we travel with it into a strange, new and difficult land?” The “*Bamidbar*” counting focuses not on physical security but on spiritual progress.

From the time that Abraham received the promise that his descendants would be a blessing to the families of the earth, we have understood that our Jewish mission transcends the needs of our own community. Perhaps the two names of this fourth book of the Torah together create a whole. The order and strategy of Numbers may have helped save our people from the dangers of the wilderness, yet it is that very experience of the wilderness, our work together to carry the blessing of God forward, that makes us worth saving.

After traveling to the developing world on AJWS service delegations, I was often asked by people in the Jewish community, “Why Honduras? Why Ghana? Why not Israel? Your local Jewish community?” The question concerns me.

Our challenge, in today's global community, is to both safeguard our community and move the Torah forward. How can we travel *with* our ancient teachings into the strange, new, interconnected land where we now live? Numbers and *Bamidbar* Jews, we both step forward and stand fast. Torah may be a blessing for us, but, according to the promise given to Abraham, it exists to make us a blessing for others, as well.



Rabbi Dorothy A. Richman is the Rabbi Martin Ballonoff Memorial Rabbi-in-Residence at Berkeley Hillel. Dorothy was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary and her first job after rabbinical school was as an AJWS group leader in Honduras. Dorothy continued to lead groups to the developing world with AJWS as she served congregations Beth Shalom and Shaar Zahav in San Francisco. She is also a Regional Council member for the Progressive Jewish Alliance. Dorothy is married to Dr. Mike Steinman and is Ema (Mom) to two boys. Dorothy can be reached at drichman@berkeleyhillel.org.

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org