

Rabbi Peltz Weekly Message – August 6, 2020

Why did the Israelites have to wander for 40 years in the wilderness? The Torah gives two answers to this question. The first answer is given when the wandering begins, and the second comes when the wandering ends. Both answers give us perspective on the story, as well as our current moment, where we can feel like we are lost in the wilderness. Many will recall that initially the Israelites, after receiving Torah on Mount Sinai, were headed straight to the promised land. Then, towards the beginning of the book of B'midbar, Moses sent out 12 spies to scout out the land. They returned with a demoralizing report. As a result of this, and the chaos it causes, God tells Moses that that generation will not enter the land. Rather they will wander for 40 years, until a new generation is born and ready to enter the land of Israel (Numbers 14). Now, in the book of Devarim, Moses is speaking to this new generation. Listen to how he now describes the reason for the 40 years of wandering in our Torah portion for this week, Ekev: "Remember the long way that the Lord your God has made you travel in the wilderness these past 40 years, that God might test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts..." (Deut. 8:2). Here there is no mention of the sin of the spies (though Moses does speak about that earlier in Devarim). Instead, Moses describes the past 40 years as a test. Some commentaries see this is a test of faith and others see it as a test of obedience. Still others point out that a test is an opportunity to see if we really live by our values.

In other words, to use a cliché, a test can determine if we walk the walk, or just talk the talk. Understood like this, the trying times of the 40 years in the wilderness were a test to see if the Israelites were ready to live by the laws and values of Torah. For, the logic seems to go, if they were able to do this in the desert, then surely they would do it once happily settled in the land of Israel. What the Torah is teaching here is that living our values during good times is one thing, but living them during difficult times is another. But doing so provides an opportunity to demonstrate who we are, and what we hold dear. Over the last few months we have all come to better appreciate the lives we led before the pandemic. Now that we are living in difficult times, we too find ourselves and our values tested.

One way we are experiencing this is a test for how we support our Jewish community, and our synagogue, during this time. [My friend Rabbi Nicole Guzik wrote a powerful article in the LA Jewish Journal entitled "An Open Letter to Jewish Parents About 'Opting Out'."](#) I encourage you [to click the link and to read the whole article.](#) I found this part to be particularly meaningful: "When we are forced to be separated, the choice of "opting out" of community becomes tempting. Not seeing one another understandably dissolves some of the attachment that comes with being physically present. But when temptation leads us away from strengthening the Jewish spirit, that is the exact moment we should sprint in the opposite direction. Many parents wonder how to teach their children the value of community. They ask how children will understand what it means to be something bigger than themselves — part of a greater cause — and feel the essence of being Jewish. There is no greater way of imparting this lesson than with the following: Show them. Your actions pave the way for every decision they will make in the future." This is not only the case for parents, but also for grandparents and anyone who is part of our Jewish community and the Jewish people.

Periods like the one we are living through challenge us to live by our values. They give us the opportunity to set an example for our children, grandchildren, friends and neighbors. Belonging to a synagogue, continuing your child's Jewish education, participating in our virtual services, classes and programs all send a powerful message. It shows that you stand with our Jewish community. It shows that you are proud to be a member of the Jewish people not only in the good times but also in difficult times. It shows that you are invested in the Jewish future. Like our ancestors, we pass our tests by standing by our values, together. By doing so, we ensure that we too will arrive at our destination as a stronger, closer, and more inspired community.