

The first ten chapters of *Sefer Bemidbar*, the Book of Numbers, are about structure and order, the establishment of protocols to help the Israelites travel through the wilderness with minimal disruption. Beginning in chapter 11, the story of the Israelite wilderness experience is full of disorder and disruption. What went wrong?

Allow me to expand briefly. In the past two Torah portions, and continuing this week in *Parshat Beha'alotekha*, the Israelites learn how to count their military strength, how and where to camp by tribe, what banners to raise, who's in and out of the camp, and how they are to move through the wilderness. This structure helps create a sense of purpose and peoplehood for the Israelites. As Erica Brown writes in her book *Leadership in the Wilderness*, "In the beginning of Numbers, these basic elements—numbers, colors, and symbols—contribute to the creation of national identity."

But by the end of the parshah, the only apparent traits of Israelite national identity are complaining and rebelliousness, and this will be the case for the next several Torah portions. We see one unfortunate episode after another, and at the end of the Torah, only two men are left standing to end the wilderness phase and enter the Promised Land. And Moshe isn't one of them.

There's a small hint in our parshah that despite all of the organizational structure that is put in place in Numbers 1-10, something is missing. This is the brief interaction between Moshe and Hovav, who is probably not Yitro but rather Yitro's son. In other words, he's Moshe's brother-in-law.

"Moshe said to Hovav, son of Reuel the Midianite, Moshe's father-in-law, 'We are setting out for the place of which the LORD has said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will be generous with you, for the LORD has promised to be generous to Israel.' 'I will not go,' he replied to him, 'but will return to my native land.' He said, 'Please do not leave us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and can be our guide. So, if you come with us, we will extend to you the same bounty that the LORD grants us'" (Numbers 10:29-32).

Hovav then disappears from the narrative. Not without coincidence, order and structure also disappear from the narrative.

Moshe asked for Hovav to come along for guidance in a directional sense: "*Vehayita lanu la'eynayim*--so you can be our eyes." Moshe hoped that Hovav would serve as his compass through unfamiliar territory. But there may have been another reason Moshe wanted Hovav to accompany them all the way to the Promised Land. It's an interpretation by the 18th-century German Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, in his commentary *Haketav VehaKabbalah*.

Mecklenburg notes that Hovav was not a born Israelite, but had cast his lot with them and become a fellow spiritual traveler. Moshe hoped that Hovav would stay so the Israelites would say, if that guy believes, I can believe. If that man is willing to leave his roots behind to follow God's plan, I shouldn't worry about what I've lost, but I can get excited about what I'm gaining. And when Israel enters the Land, Hovav would remain an inspiration in the battle against idolatry, which would surely be enticing.

In other words, Moshe wanted Hovav to be more than a mere directional compass. He wanted Hovav to remain as a moral exemplar as well.

Hovav leaves, and the Israelites soon fall off the faith wagon.

You can't blame Moshe for lack of effort. As firm as his leadership is at this point, and as confident as he is that God and the structures that are in place will guide him and the People through the wilderness, he knows he needs help. He asks the ideal person to stay and play that role. Hovav just turned down the job. And though there's Miriam, and Aaron, and Joshua, all the structure is insufficient—it can't do enough for the People, and it leaves Moshe exposed.

Today, we in America have structures and institutions—numbers, colors and flags—that may no longer serve us properly. What should be done about the current and perhaps flawed systems of law enforcement and criminal justice? What symbols serve to educate, and which are downright offensive and need to be removed? In the realm of media, what are the lines that separate true sensitivity from censorship? These are deeply serious questions, and deeply serious people can disagree. How should these questions be resolved? Our wisest leaders will ask for help, will seek out directional and moral guides. I pray that they ask the right people, for the right reasons, to guide us forward. We are facing the Wilderness, dangerous, un navigated terrain. We need today's Hovavs to say yes. But first, they need to be asked.

Shabbat Shalom.