

*Parashat B'midbar* (Numbers 1:1-4:20)

Each book of the Torah has a central theme. Genesis is about beginnings, both of the world and God's *brit* (covenant) with the Jewish people. Exodus is about God's revelation at Mt. Sinai. Leviticus is about *k'dusha* (sanctity or holiness) and *tahara* (purity). *Parashat B'midbar* opens the fourth book of the Torah, also called *B'midbar*, which is about journeying.

*B'midbar* means wilderness, and the book describes the Israelites' 38 years of wandering in the desert before entering the land of Canaan. (The English name for the book is Numbers because it opens with and contains a series of census takings.) Like any family trip, there is complaining. Moses' and Aaron's leadership is challenged, and there is outright rebellion and betrayal. Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888; German rabbi considered the father of modern Orthodox Judaism) claims Numbers compares the Israelites in reality to the ideal society described in Leviticus.

Numbers tells us, the Jewish people, literally and figuratively, where we've been. By the end of the book, the generation that had been slaves in Egypt dies out, and a new generation is ready to enter the land. For this new generation, the revelation at Mt. Sinai is now a received tradition, not a personal experience.

Thousands of years later, the journey continues. We know where the Jewish people have been. The question is do we know where we, as individual Jews, want to go? Without the pillar of fire and cloud of smoke that guided the Israelites through the desert, we each must ask ourselves: what (or whom) do I choose to guide me?

*Gut Shabbos/Shabbat Shalom*