

Norman Lamm
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The Jewish Center
Beamidbar

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE SPIRIT

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There is a geography of the spirit as well as of nature, a topography of the soul as well as the soil.

I do not mean this only in the poetic sense -- that there are mountains in man's life when his vision is almost unlimited and he has ascended new heights; that there are valleys when he brushes with the shadow of death in the deepsth; long plateaus of inactivity and boredom; and volcanos when he explodes emotionally and ^{his soul} ~~for some time~~ he quakes with new experiences. I do mean it in the Torah's choice of words, which while apparently geographic, are on a deeper level symbolic of the spiritual. Not only poetry and metaphor, but Torah and Tradition spoke to man about the geography of his life.

The Rashbam makes a brief but incisive remark on the key word of today's Sidra which is most relevant to our subject. That word is one by which the entire Fourth Book of Moses is known -- Beamidbar, which means in the desert, or wilderness. ^{וּבְמִדְבָּר} "And the Lord spoke unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the tent of meeting," the latter term referring to the Mishkan or Tabernacle. Rashbam points out that until the ^{Ohel Moed} Mishkan was built, the revelation of G-d to Moses always took place be'har, on the har or mountain top. Once the Tabernacle was built, however, the Bible no longer refers to G-d's command given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, but rather Beamidbar, in the wilderness

Before the Mishkan or Ohel Moed, it is always be'har, on the mountain; afterwards it is Beamidbar, in the Ohel Moed -- in the tabernacle, in the desert or wilderness.

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Here indeed is implied geography of the spirit. ~~And never before was this lesson more pertinent, more significant or more relevant than these past two weeks.~~ Consider the symbols of mountain, desert and tabernacle: be'har, on the mountain of Sinai, was the place where G-d revealed Himself

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but only Moses was there to experience the revelation and hear the word of G-d. The rest of Israel was not even permitted to go near the mountain. ~~Indeed, tomorrow we begin the three days of Hag balah in preparation for Shabuot.~~ For on Shabuot when G-d revealed Himself on Sinai, Moses specifically commanded the people to keep away from the mountain where only he might ascend. The mountain, therefore, represents the faith of the people in their great leader. He alone ascends to the summit of be'har and then comes down and transmits the Divine message to the ordinary people.

The Ohel Moed or Mishkan, the ~~Tabernacle~~, represents something quite different. True, that here, too, Moses is more at home than are the people. But it no longer is his exclusive domain. Aaron and his children, the Kohanim, minister therein. And they are, according to one opinion, shelu'chei di'dan, the representatives or delegates of the people of Israel. ~~To the Mishkan,~~ ^{Ohel Moed} there repaired the ordinary Jew when he brought his thanksgiving offering or when he came to find religious inspiration and re-affirm his loyalty to G-d. The ~~Tabernacle~~ was, in short, a symbol of popular participation in the religion of Israel. ^{Ohel Moed} Contrary to be'har, Ohel Moed signified that not only Moses had direct access to Almighty G-d. All people in all stations of life, if they were clean of hand and pure of heart, could come to the ^{Ohel Moed} Mishkan and in this spiritual sense participate in the religious fate, in the destiny and leadership of all of Israel.

Ohel Moed, therefore, is a symbol of the responsibility that we as individuals accept upon ourselves: the responsibility to live the fullness of the Torah life in accordance with G-d's will, and not to rely upon the Moseses of every generation, who ascend each his own Mt. Sinai. The ^{Ohel Moed} Mishkan is our synagogue. The ^{Ohel Moed} Mishkan is our school. The ^{Ohel Moed} Mishkan is our community. The Mishkan is our home.

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This then is what the Torah meant to tell us about the geography of the spirit. There is an alternative to the one Moses ascending the mountain. Even if you live Ba-midbar, in a great wilderness and in a barren wasteland, still -- each and every individual must build his Mishkan and shoulder the spiritual responsibility in a spirit of Torah maturity. If we live in a wasteland where the principles of decency and rightness are lacking; if in our society, ^{in which} the soil of the soul is ^{desiccated,} dried, and parched, thirsty for the elemental human qualities of love and compassion and meaning -- ^{only} then we cannot rely on be'har, on the single leader who will satisfy the religious drought that prevails in the spiritual midbar. Moses himself does not want us to rely upon him alone. Great as he is, he prefers that we have a more direct contact with the Ribono Shel Onam. If the people are overawed by His appearance, He puts on the masveh or mask so as not to overwhelm them by His stature. When G-d declares that He will ^{try} ~~disappoint~~ Israel and make Moses the father of a new nation, Moses declines and pleads for his people as individuals, as well as a nation. Moses is himself the architect of the Ohel Moed, that which binds, therefore, ^{Sense} ~~justice~~ with G-d. Moses meant to teach all generations that while great leadership is of crucial importance, while anarchy spells death in both the political and religious sense, nevertheless, people must never suffer from over-reliance upon their leaders. If they want to survive in a midbar, then every Jew must have his ^{Ohel Moed} Mishkan.

In most times and for most individuals life is usually a midbar, and most people out of sheer inertia would prefer to leave the great challenges of life to the few dedicated souls who are willing to scale the summits of Sinai.

But our Torah does not ^{wish} ~~prefer~~ to let us rest in this laziness of the spirit.

~~Each of us must conquer the midbar with our own Mishkan.~~ ^{his} We must bring our best efforts to the Mishkan or Synagogue, where we must strive to ^{make it a true place by working} ~~make~~ our

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worship a meaningful experience, a mitzvah of sheer Kavannah. The Mishkan ^{school} of ~~our souls~~ must become not only a playground of the intellect but a ^(N,a) factory of faith where Torah will be studied in America as intensively as it ever was before. The Mishkan ^{of the home} must be a ^{place} where G-d ^{can} dwell without embarrassment, where His presence will be apparent in every aspect from the right relationship between husband and wife, to Kashrut; from family purity to honoring parents. Each of us must strive to overcome the midbar, by way of the Mishkan, rather than rely upon the single heroic individuals who strive for be'har.

Remember if you will that the heroic attempts at leadership are not always successful. Even Moses in his first attempt to ascend to the summit of Sinai failed; the tablets he brought down had to be broken before the mobs who danced about the golden calf, Whereas the Mishkan later developed into the Temple, the Bet Ha-Mikdash, and ^{then} later into the Synagogue and school, -- the Bet Ha-Knesset and Bet Ha-Midrash.

These past two weeks we no longer have to be told of the dangers of be'har, the failures of summitry. One of the most astute commentators has pointed out that one significant result of a recent disastrous failure of the summit conference was a realization by the people of the world that our leaders in both camps had failed. Until the recent summit conference, there had been a general feeling of exaggerated hopefulness. The leaders of the East and West would certainly not allow the world, as we know it, to be transformed into a ^{awful} hungry mushroom cloud. We left it to the be'har people and assumed that the summit would solve all problems. Now the leaders of the small nations and the citizens of all the world have learned differently. They have learned that issues of such world-shaking import as peace cannot be confidently placed in the hands of the be'har people. Peace has now become the first order of business for every intelligent human being.

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It must be solved in every Mishkan lest the midbar overwhelm all of us.

We have learned in the last year or two that even as elementary a human matter as race relations cannot be established on be'har alone. Supreme Court justices sit on the mountain top of American law, ^{and} legislate proper relations -- but unless these principles are put into practice in the Mishkan of schools and voting booths, of stores and houses of worship, then the midbar again prevails and the har is ineffectual.

How ironic that the same week that the world as a whole was so deeply disillusioned by their leaders in Paris, we felt a shock of disappointment in one of our great leaders too. The achievements of the Prime Minister of Israel are sufficient to assure him an unassailable place in the history of Israel. He is one of the greatest pioneers, brilliant ^{statesman,} ~~politician~~ and diplomat, that any people could want. He is in addition a man of culture and understanding. Yet, I do not doubt that more than the religious community alone felt let down and disillusioned by his amateurish foray into a field which is sacred to so many and in which he is very far from expert. Standing on the mountain top of the governmental structure, the prime minister somehow imagined that he was speaking from Sinai itself and in a show of disappointing dilettantism challenged the authenticity of the Torah's narrative concerning the Exodus from Egypt; ^{challenged the validity of the very Sidra we read today, which told of Jews ^{over} mustered in the desert.} How human our leaders are! How weak and fallible are even those few who ^{seem to} climb to the summit in the eyes of their contemporaries! I do not believe that this weakness should be countered by demonstrations or government crises. There is only one way to respond to this failure of be'har: and that is to overcome the midbar of ignorance and half-baked theories by intensifying the Mishkan of education, and only thus, will we succeed in raising a generation of knowledgeable people from whom the leaders will find the necessary moral and spiritual support.

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Finally, this insight of Rashbam into the Torah's geography of the spirit is something which affects the whole fabric of American Judaism. There *that first appears in the Seder Chasidim some 200 years ago, but is generally* is an old saying attributed to a German Jewish poet -- "Wie es Christen ^{sich} geht, ^{sich} so es Juden ^{sich} geht." ^{אין די צייטן פון די חסידים} American Jews have to a large extent taken over a practice that is common to ^S a certain Christian denomination. They have allowed their religion ^{and experience and service} to become a demonstration by the few instead of an exercise by the many. It has transformed the religious practice of so many modern Jews into a religion by proxy, a be'har type of existence. The rabbi studies for you, the cantor prays for you, the choir provides inspiration for you, the social workers take care of your charitable contacts, and all you need do is stand around the mountain top and gaze in awe at the summiteers of the spirit.

This is not the Jewish way. When it comes to Torah, summitry can often become the cemetery of the spirit. In the Mishkan all appear before G-d as equals. Every Jew must study, every Jew must pray, and every Jew even if he lives in an affluent society such as ours must make it his business to know the poor man and to offer him solace and companionship as well as cold cash.

In the geography of the spirit there will always be a need for the few who must climb to the top of be'har. But if the spirit is to be civilized and the Midbar to be overcome, then each of us must assume for himself the responsibility for the fate of all of us. The Mishkan or Ohel Moed stands a better chance of conquering the Midbar than does be'har, *alone*.
Then will come true the prophecy of Isaiah: , 3 23 10 13 11 11 11 11
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