

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Four Questions for the Mystery ba-Midbar

Ba-Midbar is the Hebrew name for the fourth book of the Torah. Literally, it means “in the dessert” and can also be translated as “in the wilderness.” Among other things, this book of Torah chronicles the journey of the Israelites along a mysterious path that took us from *Mitzrayim*/Egypt (also translated as “a narrow place”) to our eventual landing in the Promised Land. In many ways, we ARE on a mysterious journey today.

During our time in Egypt, all the Hebrew people suffered as slaves. Some probably suffered more than others. Some had tasks that were harder or masters who were more oppressive. Others may have had other difficulties, such as lack of strength or tolerance, that made the work even harder. Some may have suffered from illnesses or contracted illnesses and injuries due to their labors that made the work unbearable. And presumably, some may have experienced overseers who were more compassionate; these Hebrews may not have been beaten as severely, but they certainly were not free.

After being freed into the wilderness we struggled with a difficult journey and the rigors of nomadic living. It was a challenge to find adequate food and water and I imagine that the social dynamics of living in temporary encampments must have been very unsettling to say the least. With all these challenges, I imagine the most difficult aspect must have been the uncertainty. Can any of us imagine the questions going through the minds of our ancestors? So, as we are used to in the Passover Seder, I imagine there might have been Four Questions from our time in the dessert:

- 1) *How much longer?*
- 2) *Will there be enough food and other essentials for survival?*
- 3) *Do our leaders know what they're doing?*
- 4) *Will the “Promised Land” prove to be a better life than we had in Egypt?*

Regardless of how they experienced enslavement, every Hebrew person's life was changed by participating in the Exodus. Their world changed.

Our world has also changed. It's not nearly as dramatic as the Exodus, but the change is significant. Some lives have been affected minimally; others more extensively. Each of us is adjusting to a new way of living, new ways of shopping, worshipping, gathering and communicating. During this quarantine, some can spend more time with family. Others must be distanced from family. Households may become more crowded, leading to tensions; or less crowded leading to loneliness. Some people are enjoying a simpler life; others are going stir crazy for lack of connection. For some, our only connection to Coronavirus is watching the news and changing our lifestyle. Others have had a more personal, scary connection by either becoming sick or having someone close to them become sick. There have been deaths. There have been funerals in which mourners could not attend. There have been *simchas* – births, weddings, bar/bat mitzvahs, etc. that could not be celebrated in the ways that were anticipated when first scheduled.

The mystery is difficult. Four more questions:

- 1) *How long will **this** last?*
- 2) *How safe are we?*
- 3) *What will happen with our personal and collective economy?*
- 4) *How will life be the same or different in the future?*

G-D willing, we will soon be face-to-face before long. Moving forward, we can recognize the importance of learning from the experience. We are learning the challenges of staying connected while living apart. Just as the Israelites began to rebuild after their journey in the wilderness, we will continue our own communities by remembering to cherish every day, every person and every opportunity to be together.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon