

Sefer Bamidbar (In the Wilderness), also called Numbers because of the censuses and other counting it contains), is a vivid description of the human condition with all its ups and downs. Its protagonists represent a cross section of humanity, acting and reacting quite like people do today, and its pages contain timeless lessons that are as relevant for us as they have been for our ancestors. On a macrocosmic level it is the often-painful story of former slaves learning how to build a viable society based on individual and collective responsibility. On a microcosmic level, it is a coming of age story with equally painful journeys on the rocky road we all traverse as we progress from childhood to adulthood. It is a story of negativity and conflict, but also a story of promise. It is about how we deal with authority, both divine and human. It is about individuals, and it is about a people. And it is about charting an equitable course between the needs of the individual and the needs of the community. Ultimately, it is so very human, and that is why it is my favorite book of the Torah!

Parashah Matot contains tremendous violence that shocks and offends our 21st century, Western sensibilities. The all-out slaughter of women and children after the defeat of Midian is difficult reading, especially for us post-Shoah. It is difficult not only because of the appalling brutality, but also because we realize that things like this still occur today. Yet Parashah Matot with all its violence also contains a magnificent example of conflict resolution based on skillful negotiation, and Parashah Masei presents a crucial amendment to a previous ruling – hopeful signs for the future. We humans may be the most dangerous animal on the planet, but we have the potential to learn and grow.

The tribes of Dan and Reuben own large herds of livestock. They realize that the land on which they are presently encamped is more suited to their needs and ask Moses and Eleazar to allow them to settle there instead of joining the others across the Jordan. This proposal is fraught with danger on many levels. Their reluctance to enter the new land could discourage the rest of the people, who might recall the negative stories brought back by the scouts and become afraid to go on. Also, the land must still be conquered, and everyone is needed. Would the Danites and Reubenites abandon their compatriots, putting their individual needs above the needs of the nation? With straightforward eloquence Moses lays out these concerns, graphically reminding them of all they have been through and appealing to their sense of duty. An agreement is reached, the terms of which are fair for all concerned: In exchange for granting their request to remain where they are, the two tribes will not only go to battle for the rest of the Israelites, they will put themselves in extreme danger as the advance guard, and they will not return home until the rest of the Israelites are settled on their lands. After so many terrible conflicts during their nearly 40-year journey, this is a true breakthrough – a win-win situation offering a ray of hope for the future. From this, the Talmud derives the principle of *zeh neheneh v'zeh lo chaser* – this one receives benefit and that one does not suffer a loss (Bava Kama 20b) – an integral component of all successful negotiation strategies to this day. But Moses' masterful act of mediation also subtly points out a flaw in the priorities of these two tribes: The Danites and Reubenites say they want to build pens for their livestock and cities for their children. Bringing the negotiations to a close, Moses tells them to build cities for their children and pens for their livestock. It seems the two tribes are more interested in their possessions than their children, and Moses' answer is not only a gentle rebuke, it is a way forward. Indeed, we Jews have always put the welfare of our children first, which includes educating them well, so they are able to perpetuate the legacy of our ancestors *ledor vador* – from generation to generation. Caring for, and educating our children is one of our greatest, and most unique, strengths.

The heads of the tribe of Manasseh approach Moses with an important concern: The daughters of Zelofechad will be allowed to inherit land because he had no sons. But if they marry someone from another tribe, their land will pass to the tribe of their husbands, diminishing the holdings of their own tribe. Moses understands the inequity of this, and rules that the women may only marry into families of their own tribe if they wish to keep their inheritance. The daughters each have legitimate claims on the land, but so does their tribe. With this evenhanded ruling Sefer Bamidbar ends.

Now, a new generation is poised to enter a new land and embark on a new future. They will make mistakes large and small, mistakes we fallible humans still make today. But secure in our eternal covenant with HaShem, and guided by the wisdom of our Torah, we have always known the way forward. May we continue *ledor vador*.

Shabbat shalom!