

Sunday is Rosh Chodesh Sivan, which marks the Israelites' arrival in the wilderness of Sinai. The Hebrew word for wilderness is *midbar*, derived from the root דבר, which forms words for speaking, word, or thing. The prefix מ turns verb roots into place-nouns, making the *midbar* of the Israelites the place where HaShem speaks to them, and to us. Since leaving Egypt and crossing the Sea of Reeds, the Israelites have been in the wilderness, literally as well as figuratively. Physically, the people are free, but after generations of slavery they have no idea what freedom really entails. In a mere three days, they will stand at the foot of Mount Sinai and receive HaShem's *aseret ha-dibrot* (Ten Words/Things – or Commandments, as they are commonly called). Their unanimous, "All that the Lord has spoken we shall do." (Exodus 19:8), spoken in the euphoria of arrival, is bound to falter once reality sets in. Freedom is not achieved in a moment of revelation; it must be learned and practiced. And this barren, inhospitable wilderness is the best place to learn trust, understand holiness, and practice what they proclaimed. One of the first lessons of freedom in our parashah is the necessity of standing together – or as Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z'l put it, "The only way to get it together is together." Alas, we remain very poor learners. Now that the *mishkan* has been completed, the priests invested, and civil and religious law codified, the next crucial step is organizing the people by tribe and clan. To facilitate this, censuses are taken, starting with men 20 and above, to form an army. Their legions, under the banners of their respective tribes, are assigned specific locations surrounding the *mishkan*, which define their responsibilities and determine the order in which they will travel. Our parashah outlines the placement and designates the representatives of each tribe, arranged in an inner and an outer circle around the *mishkan*. In the inner circle is the tribe of Levi, divided by clan. They are dedicated to the service of HaShem in lieu of the firstborn (3:11-13, and Exodus 13:1-2). Their special duties, which exempt them from military service, also include conveying the laws of Torah to the people. Because they have no land inheritance, they are sustained by the people's tithes and offerings. Moses, Aaron and the priests encamp on the eastern side, Kehat to the south, Gershon to the west, and Merari to the north. Encamped on the outer circle are four divisions, consisting of three tribes. Each division has its own banner and each tribe its own insignia. To the east, in the lead, is Judah's division, with Judah symbolizing leadership and responsibility, Issachar Torah wisdom and Zebulun wealth and outward engagement. This triad is the clearest reflection of Jakob's characterization of his sons in his final blessing. To the south traveling next, is Reuven's division, with Simeon and Gad. The heat, intensity, and danger of the south suits the violent temperaments of Reuven and Simeon and Gad's fierce defensive posture. This triad also reflects Jakob's demotion of Reuven and separation of Simeon and Levi. To the west is Ephraim's division, with Manasseh and Benjamin, descendants of Rachel. According to Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 2, "West, the storehouses of snow, of hail, cold, and heat ... The Divine Presence [*shechinah*] is always in the west, on the border of Benjamin ... the beloved." The western side, where the sun sets and concealment begins, is associated with the innermost area of the *mishkan*, a place of hiddenness, reflecting Joseph's trajectory. To the north, the direction of danger, is Dan's division, with Asher and Naftali. The Hebrew word for north, *tzafon*, also means hidden/concealed. *Tzafun* is the time in the Pesach seder when the *afikoman* is found. This is the rear guard, with Dan as protector, Asher symbolizing abundance, and Naftali swiftness, all echoing Jakob's characterizations. The outer circle reorganizes the negative family traits of rivalry, violence, instability, favoritism, and betrayal into four perfectly balanced divisions that transform family trauma into nascent national structure. The inner circle does the same with Levi's trauma. Separated from Simeon, his raw intensity is channeled into service in the *mishkan*, the place where holiness is the most dangerous. In the east, Moses, Aaron, and the priests mediate the revelation that defines their origin and shapes their lives. The tribe of Kehat, Levi's middle son, is located in the south, the place of volatile power. They receive the holiest responsibility of carrying the ark and its furnishings on their shoulders after Aaron and his sons, descendants of Kehat's oldest son Amram, dismantle and pack the inner furnishings and utensils of the *mishkan*. Only after everything had been completely covered are they permitted to carry them, "but they shall not touch the sacred objects, for [then] they will die." (4:15) Indeed, the tragedy of Aaron's two eldest sons, whose impetuosity caused them to be consumed by the fires of holiness, was a powerful lesson. Gershon, the firstborn, is located to the west, to the back of the *mishkan*, its most concealed place. They are in charge of the *mishkan's* layers, veils, boundaries, and hidden architecture. In the north, the direction of danger, Merari carries the structural bones of the *mishkan*, holding it upright with strength and endurance. In short, the outer circle channels the raw energies Jakob names in his blessings into communal structure, while the arrangement of the Levites refines those energies into sacred service. The entire architecture of the Israelites' wilderness encampment is a veritable spiral of transformation from divine speech to embodied action in service, society, and life. *Va'yidaber Adonai el moshe b'midbar* – And HaShem **spoke** to Moses in the **wilderness** – and the speaking continues. Are we listening?

Shabbat shalom!