

Into the Unknown

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It feels like in the past few weeks, we've reached a new stage of the pandemic. First, there was a period of shutting down; then, there was a period of sheltering in place; and now, we're in the period of wondering how and when to re-open. There are no obvious answers. And although our public officials have provided us with guidelines to follow and benchmarks to meet, still there are a lot of unknowns.

Many conversations over the past few weeks have centered the question of how do we plan for the unknown. Public health officials looking at reopening guidelines, companies thinking about their employees and their budgets, families looking ahead to their planned celebrations and life-cycle events, economists looking at the unemployment rate, summer camps looking ahead to June, schools looking ahead to September, civic leaders looking towards the upcoming election -- all of us are asking a variation of the same, central, difficult question: how should we go about planning for the unknown? When so much is still uncertain, how do we plan for the future?

This week's Torah captures the challenge of planning for the unknown. We begin this week reading from the fourth book of Torah, a book that has two names. In English, it is known by the name the Book of Numbers. And indeed, as that English name suggests, the Book of Numbers begins with numbers, figures, tallies, charts, and maps -- a detailed description of planning.

The Israelites have been encamped at the base of Mount Sinai. And here, at the beginning of the Book of Numbers, they are preparing to leave that mountain and begin their journey towards the Promised Land. And as they prepare to set out on their journey, they realize they'd better have a plan. And so, they first take a census -- a counting of the entire Israelite camp. Hence the name, the Book of Numbers. But the planning that the Israelites undertake is far broader than just a census. Not only do they count all the people, they also determine which tribes will march at the front of the pack, who will march at the side, who at the rear. They determine which families will be responsible for packing up and moving their portable sanctuary -- who will carry the altar, who will carry the lampstand, who will be responsible for the walls of the tent, who for the tent pegs. In excruciating detail, the Torah outlines all the particulars and minutiae that the Israelites consider as they prepare to begin their journey from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land -- a sweeping, thorough, comprehensive plan.

All this we gather from the English name "the Book of Numbers." But as we've mentioned, this fourth book of the Torah has not one, but two names -- not just an English name, but also one in Hebrew. In Hebrew, we refer to the fourth book of the Torah as Bamidbar -- a word whose translation has nothing at all to do with numbers, nothing at all to do with details, nothing at all to do with planning. In fact, Bamidbar means nearly the very opposite. Bamidbar translates to mean: "in the wilderness."

This is a fitting name for the fourth book of the Torah. After all, this fourth book describes the journey from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land -- a journey that takes the Israelites through 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. They are trying, challenging years. Water is scarce. Food is limited. The desert sun is hot. The other tribes they will encounter on the journey are antagonistic. The Israelites break out into complaining. A few rebel factions start to mutiny against Moses's leadership. Moses grows tired. God grows frustrated. It is all in all a bitter journey through an inhospitable, uncharted territory -- a wilderness.

These two names for the fourth book of the Torah -- Numbers, on the one hand, and Bamidbar, in the wilderness, on the other -- capture the challenge of the time we're living in. On the one hand -- as the name "Numbers" suggests -- the proper functioning of human society depends on our ability to plan. We need to have some ability to project outward into the future, to see what's coming down the pike, and to make our arrangements accordingly. And yet, on the other hand -- as the name "Bamidbar / in the wilderness" suggests -- we are moving into territory that is entirely unknown. None of us has a crystal ball; no one can predict the future of this pandemic, and how we will come out of it. And while there certainly are more likely and less likely scenarios, if there's one thing that the past several months have shown, it's that things don't always work out the way we expect.

In many ways, we are like those Israelites, standing at the base of Mount Sinai: we are doing our best to make adequate plans, as we prepare to enter an unknown wilderness.

It is a challenging position to be in. And if our journey turns out to be anything like the Israelites', we should expect that even with all of our planning, there will be unexpected surprises, eventualities for which we could not plan.

And equally, if our journey turns out to be anything like the Israelites', then maybe there's a lesson for us waiting to be learned in the wilderness -- a spiritual insight that we might glean from this challenging time. After all, despite all of the challenges of our people's journey through the wilderness, looking back on that era, we see that it was one of tremendous spiritual growth for the burgeoning Jewish people. A new generation of leadership emerged. The holidays and customs that we now take for granted were born, trial-tested, and honed in those early, wilderness-wandering days.

The wilderness represents all that is as yet unknown -- all that could be, all that is possible. Scientists and artists alike live on the edge of the wilderness. Scientists probe beyond the boundaries of human knowledge, peer into the teeming darkness of the unknown, and from beyond the frontier, they bring back new knowledge. Artists, too, dwell at the edge of the wilderness. They push us to see the world in ways that we'd never before considered -- to gaze beyond the limited horizon of our everyday consciousness. For the scientist and the artist -- certainly, the wilderness can be daunting. (Who hasn't stared at a blank page with a feeling of trepidation?) But equally, for the scientist and the artist, the wilderness holds immense potential.

The writer Rebecca Solnit captures the power of the wilderness in her cleverly titled book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Solnit writes -- and I'll quote her at length: "Lost really has two disparate meanings. Losing things is about the familiar falling away, getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing. There are objects and people that disappear from your sight or knowledge or possession; you lose a bracelet, a friend, the key. You still know where you are. Everything is familiar except that there is one item less, one missing element. Or you get lost, in which case the world has become larger than your knowledge of it." Solnit continues: "Imagine yourself streaming through time shedding gloves, umbrellas, wrenches, books, friends, homes, names. This is what the view looks like if you take a rear-facing seat on the train. Looking forward you constantly acquire moments of arrival, moments of realization, moments of discovery. The wind blows your hair back and you are greeted by what you have never seen before."

Following Rebecca Solnit -- what if we approached our upcoming journey into the wilderness ready, prepared, expecting to get lost? How might we orient ourselves so that when the path ahead becomes unclear, we are attuned not only to being lost, but equally, to the new, as yet unfamiliar things we have found?

There are innumerable questions for which we as a society must plan for in the coming months. As the name "the Book of Numbers" suggests, our planning will likely be sweeping, thorough -- nearly comprehensive.

And even as we properly plan and prepare for the months that lie ahead, let us also remember the other name for the fourth book of the Torah: Bamidbar, "in the wilderness." There is creative potential in the unknown, waiting to be tapped -- new ways of thinking, new ways of connecting, new ways of conducting business, new ways of marking life's milestones. If there's one thing that is certain, it's that the future is anything but certain. Let us be prepared for that.