

And ideally, our errors become teachers and guides too. Of the many navigational technologies that the Israelites utilized in the wilderness, perhaps the oddest was the ark: “The Ark of the Covenant of Adonai traveled in front of them a three days’ distance, to seek out a resting place for them” (10:33). This presents a difficulty. Elsewhere (Num. 14:44) we learn that “the ark of the covenant of Moses and the Lord did not move from the midst of the camp.” How can the ark be in the middle of the camp, and also somehow travelling by itself three days ahead? In solving the problem, the Midrash (Sifrei Bemidbar 82) offers a profound lesson in how we progress toward our goals. There were two arks: One (with the tablets) stayed in the middle of the camp. A second ark proceeded ahead to seek out the encampments. And what was in that second ark? The broken tablets, destroyed by Moses on seeing the Golden Calf (Exod. 32:19).

The path to the future moves through the past. We look ahead in our travels only to discover that our mistakes and sins, our brokenness, are “three days’ journey ahead”—allowing us the benefit of critical distance, but waiting for us nevertheless. The ark with our brokenness tells us *where we need to stop and wait*—to explore the issues and places that need attention, rectification, and healing, in order to move forward again in the right direction. It takes courage, patience, and resilience. Perhaps this is why “the place where they rested is also called a *journey*” (מְקוֹם (תְּנִיטָהוּ אִם הוּא קְרוּי מַסָּע) (Rashi on Exod. 40:38).

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z”) and Harold Hassenfeld (z”).

Beha'alotekha 5780

בהעלתך תש"ף



The Journey

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, Director, Block / Kolker Center for the Spiritual Arts, JTS

How do we progress toward our goals? Individually and societally, how do we know when to move forward, and which direction to go?

At first glance, the description of the Israelites’ journey from Sinai to the Promised Land seems to offer a model of clarity and ease:

Whenever the cloud lifted from the Tent, the Israelites would set out accordingly; and at the place where the cloud settled, there the Israelites would encamp. **At the word of Adonai the Israelites journeyed, and at the word of Adonai they encamped** (עַל־פִּי ה' יִסְעוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל־פִּי ה' יִחַנוּ): they remained encamped as long as the cloud rested on the Mishkan. When the cloud lingered on the Mishkan many days, the Israelites observed Adonai’s mandate and did not journey on. There were times when the cloud was over the Mishkan for a few days—**at the word of Adonai they encamped and at the word of Adonai they journeyed** (עַל־פִּי ה' יִחַנוּ וְעַל־פִּי ה' יִסְעוּ). There were times when the cloud was there from evening until morning and would lift in the morning—they would journey. Whether day or night, when the cloud lifted they would journey. Whether two days or a month or a year—however long the cloud lingered on the Mishkan—the Israelites remained encamped and did not journey; only when it lifted did they break camp. **By the word of Adonai they encamped and by the word**

of Adonai they journeyed (עֲלֵפִי הִי יַחְנוּ וְעֲלֵפִי הִי יִסְעוּ); they observed Adonai’s mandate by the word of Adonai through Moses. (Num. 9:17–23)

It’s a comforting solution—*just follow the word of God!*—but unfortunately, not especially helpful. If the Torah’s message is eternal, what does this model offer those of us (i.e., *all of us*) to whom God doesn’t “speak” quite so distinctly?

Fortunately, it’s not the only answer the Torah provides. Intermingled with this description of a straightforward, unwavering journey at the clear command of God, the Torah offers also a counternarrative.

Looking more closely, we come to suspect that God’s directions were anything but clear. Within this passage itself, God’s “guidance” is expressed not in distinct speech, but through a cloud—a metaphor suggesting obfuscation, not clarity—and needs to be mediated or interpreted “through Moses.” And immediately afterwards, we discover that additional navigational “technologies” are necessary:

- journeying instructions were given via trumpets specially crafted by Moses and blown by the *kohanim*. (10:1–8);
- the Ark of the Covenant traveled on ahead of them “to seek out a resting place for them” (10:33);

and most tellingly,

- Moses pleaded with his father-in-law Hovav to be their human guide (“[Moses] said, ‘Please do not abandon us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you will be like eyes for us.’”) (10:31).

In other words, the path forward is never clear, and God isn’t a divine GPS. Revelation and faith shape our vision of where we want to go; they offer a compass pointing to true north, orienting us in the general direction of that vision. But to get there, we need maps, road signs, traffic signals, and human guides with a variety of expertise—religious and secular.

Similarly, although on the surface God “intended” and Israel expected that they would proceed directly and quickly to the Promised Land (per

Rashi on 10:29, 10:33, within three days), the counter-narrative suggests that was never a realistic vision. The commentators sensitively pick up on the challenges inherent even in what was supposed to be a short journey—most especially, the standing still and waiting, for an unknown time.

For example, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (on 9:16–23) writes: “it is not so much the strain of lengthy wanderings as the patient endurance of the lengthy stops which seem to be stressed as the real task of the tests.” Similarly, Ramban, Bahya, and Seforno highlight the uncertainty and unpredictability of the encampments as especially difficult to bear. The result was on the one hand impatient, self-reinforcing complaining about the current situation (11:1 ff), and on the other hand disastrous spying ahead into the future, sapping the community of courage and keeping them from moving forward (12:1 ff). Combined, they turned a short trek into a forty-year, roundabout journey.

Here again, the contrast between the idealized “intent” and the reality on the ground speaks directly to the human condition. A journey worth taking is never linear, never easy, and we never handle it perfectly. While it’s natural to fantasize about quick fixes, lasting transformation—true progress—takes time, and inevitably meanders through error, regression, and backlash. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, it is rarely as simple as “at the word of Adonai we journey, and at the word of Adonai we encamp.” Rather, our fears keep us stuck when we’re called to advance, and our impatience and inability to bear uncertainty push us ahead when we’re called to stand still.

Thankfully, Judaism offers a wide complement of navigational tools to hone our powers of discernment, make us more sensitive readers of the terrain we traverse, and keep us on the path. Torah study with a partner, prayer and meditation, halakhic observance, deeds of lovingkindness, the practice of *mussar* (character development), participation in Jewish community (live or virtual)—all function as the maps, signposts, and traffic signals we need. And they nourish our resilience when the road ahead looks frightening, or the waiting and uncertainty seem almost too much to bear.