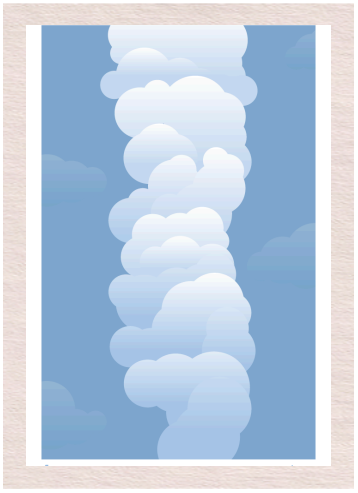
Beha'alotcha: Bamidbar (Numbers)

What's it all about?



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The Levites are initiated into service in the Sanctuary, and Aaron is commanded to light the lamps of the Menorah. A group of Jews who were unable to bring the Passover offering because they were ritually impure successfully petition for a "Second Passover." God instructs Moses on the correct procedure of journeying and camping in the desert, and, after nearly a year of huddling by Mount Sinai, **the Israelites venture forth into the wilderness**. Pretty soon, they're satisfied with the manna they receive from heaven and demand that Moses give them meat. Burdened by the people's demands, Moses appoints 70 elders to help him govern. Miriam speaks ill of Moses and is punished with leprosy, and after Moses prays for her healing the Israelites wait seven days for Miriam to recover.

"Whenever the ark set out, Moses would say, "Arise, God! May Your enemies be scattered, and may those who hate You flee from You.""

Take a deeper dive

This week's parsha finds Moses, our greatest leader, having what can be fairly described as **his greatest crisis**. No sooner do the Israelites embark on their journey towards the Promised Land than they begin complaining: "Our bodies are dried out," they wail, "for there is nothing at all; we have nothing but manna to look at." Even worse, they reminisce about Egypt, where, they say, at least they had cucumbers, watermelons, leeks, and garlic to enjoy.

Fearful of change, lacking spirit, the broken Israelites think back on Egypt and, rather than remembering that they had been slaves there, they simply think fondly of the empire and its culinary delights. Which, understandably, **drives Moses to the brink of despair**. "Why have You treated Your servant so badly?" he asks God. "Why have I not found favor in Your eyes that You place the burden of this entire people upon me? Did I conceive this entire people? Did I give birth to them…?"

Moses's breakdown will be familiar to anyone who ever experienced **the profound loneliness of being in charge of anything**. But it's also an indication of a real shift. Harvard professor Ronald Heifetz argued in his research that there are two kinds of leaders: technical leaders and adaptive leaders. The former, the CEOs we admire and compensate so richly, often just have to solve problems, which, while a difficult task, is often a finite one. Moses of Exodus was a technical leader: Pharaoh is hard-hearted? We'll bring plagues. The Egyptians are giving chase? We'll split the sea. Thee Israelites are hungry? Here's manna. But Moses of Numbers is different. He's an adaptive leader, because he realizes that in order to merit the Promised Land, the Israelites will have to change. This kind of leadership is difficult because **it doesn't come with a blueprint**; the leader himself has to change with the people.

And change Moses does. He appoints 70 elders to help him govern, forgives two young fellows, Eldad and Medad, when they prophesy without authorization, and, by the end of the parsha, prays lovingly for his sister Miriam, even though she had spoken ill of him. He forgives her because, like her, he, too, knows what it's like to stumble, sin, and fail. He also knows that Miriam can grow and change, just as he had. And in doing so, Moses realizes **the true genius of Judaism**, eloquently captured, as always, by Rabbi Sacks: "Most religions are about accepting the world the way it is. *Judaism is a protest against the world that is in the name of the world that ought to be.* To be a Jew is to seek to make a difference, to change lives for the better, to heal some of the scars of our fractured world."

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