

COVENANT & CONVERSATION
A WEEKLY READING OF THE JEWISH BIBLE
NUMBERS: THE WILDERNESS YEARS



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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible

NUMBERS: THE WILDERNESS YEARS

The Koschitzky Edition

Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union

*Covenant & Conversation
Numbers: The Wilderness Years*

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כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה זְכוֹרְתִי לְךָ חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲהַבֶּת בְּלוּלֶתֶיךָ
לְכַתְּנֶךָ אַחֲרַי בְּמִדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה:
(ירמיה ב, ב)

This is what the Lord has said,
I remember of you
the devotion of your youth,
your love when you were a bride,
how you followed me in the desert,
through a land not sown
(JER. 2:2)



To Tamar

*Following you
with enduring devotion,
love, and awe*

Jono, Ikey, Kineret, Max, Ellian, Yishai, and Keren

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Numbers: Then and Now

November 1989. The Berlin Wall falls. The Cold War comes to an end. The Soviet Union begins to implode. A young American political scientist, Francis Fukuyama, captures widespread attention with an essay entitled “The End of History.”¹ In it he argues that the two great institutions of the modern West, liberal democracy and the market economy, have not only proved stronger than Soviet communism but are about to conquer the world. People are no longer willing to make the sacrifices or endure the privations of war for the sake of nation, class, or creed. John Lennon’s vision in his 1971 song “Imagine” – “Nothing to kill or die for / and no religion too / imagine all the people / living life in peace” – is, he claims, about to be realised, a secular equivalent of the Messianic Age.

Within three years, bloody ethnic war had broken out in the former Yugoslavia – first in Bosnia, later in Kosovo – between Muslims, Orthodox Serbs, and Catholic Croats, groups that had lived peaceably together for many decades. A rueful liberal intellectual, Michael Ignatieff,

1. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1993).

Numbers: Then and Now

wrote that the forces of “blood and belonging” had prevailed.² In 1993, Harvard political historian Samuel Huntington predicted not the “end of history” but instead a sustained and dangerous “clash of civilizations.”³

Fast-forward to January 2011. Aided by the new electronic media, a series of mass protests broke out in North Africa and the Middle East, beginning in Tunisia. There were insurgencies in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, civil uprisings in Bahrain and Egypt, and mass demonstrations in Algeria, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, and Sudan. The phenomenon was quickly named the “Arab Spring,” in the belief that what had happened in Eastern Europe in 1989 was about to happen in the Middle East as well: a grassroots-led rejection of tyranny in favour of democracy, liberalisation, and human rights.

As I write these words five years later, almost all of that hope has been destroyed as authoritarian regimes still prevail in Egypt and Bahrain, while civil war is tearing Syria, Libya, and Yemen apart at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. The twenty-first century has seen swathes of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia descend into a Hobbesian state of nature, a war of “every man against every man” in which life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” What succeeded the Cold War has turned out to be not peace and liberty but rather the old-new barbarism and oppression. Meanwhile, the liberal democratic West seems less sure of itself than it has been for many centuries. Thus do dreams of freedom end in a nightmare of chaos, violence, and fear.

This is why the book of Numbers – in Hebrew, *Bemidbar*, “In the Wilderness” – is a key text for our time. It is among the most searching, self-critical books in all of literature about what Nelson Mandela called “the long walk to freedom.” Its message is that there is no shortcut to liberty. Numbers is not an easy book to read, nor is it an optimistic one. It is a sober warning set in the midst of a text – the Hebrew Bible – that remains the West’s master narrative of hope.

2. Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (London: Vintage, 1994).
3. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

The Mosaic books, especially Exodus and Numbers, are about the journey from slavery to freedom and from oppression to law-governed liberty. On the map, the distance from Egypt to the Promised Land is not far. But the message of Numbers is that it always takes longer than you think. For the journey is not just physical, a walk across the desert. It is psychological, moral, and spiritual. It takes as long as the time needed for human beings to change. That, as we discover in Numbers, can be a very long time indeed.

Political change cannot be brought about by politics alone. It needs human transformation, brought about by rituals, habits of the heart, and a strenuous process of education. It comes along with knowledge borne out of painful experience, preserved for future generations by acts of remembering. It calls not only for high ideals but also a way of life that translates ideals into social interactions. You cannot create a democracy simply by removing a tyrant. As Plato wrote in *The Republic*, democracy is often no more than the prelude to a new tyranny. You cannot arrive at freedom merely by escaping from slavery. It is won only when a nation takes upon itself the responsibilities of self-restraint, courage, and patience. Without that, a journey of a few hundred miles can take forty years. Even then, it has only just begun.

A Bewildering Text

Numbers is a difficult book, the most challenging of the five Mosaic books. It contains an extraordinary range of texts, genres, and subject matters. There are narratives, laws, census lists, itineraries, details of how the tribes encamped and travelled on their journeys and laws about wives suspected of adultery, Nazirites, vows, purifications, sacrifices, and sundry other matters alongside cases that Moses himself had to bring to God for adjudication. There are accounts of battles, rebellions, and collective failures of nerve, and a strange story about a pagan prophet and a talking donkey.

It is not simply that the book contains materials of such different kinds; it is that it mixes them in ways that seem almost random. Stories are interrupted by laws whose proper place would seem to be elsewhere. There are times when Numbers resembles a bricolage of texts

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pasted together with no overarching structure or theme. Many of its laws, especially those to do with the Sanctuary, read as if they more properly belong to Leviticus, the book of holy places and times. Why place them here, in the context of the Israelites' journey, rather than there, in the sanctity of Sinai where the whole of Leviticus is set? Why break up the narrative flow with legal interjections that seem to have no relevance to the story itself? What is Numbers about? What is its overarching theme?

Other passages come with a sense of *déjà vu*, because they read like repetitions of stories we have already encountered in the book of Exodus: arguments about food and water and tales of the Israelites, overcome by fear and foreboding, questioning whether they should ever have left Egypt in the first place. Why tell us these stories if they are no more than more of the same?

Then there is the sheer overwhelming negativity of the narratives, forming an almost unbroken sequence of murmuring and complaints. We encounter three of them, immediately following one another, in chapters 11 and 12. First, there is an unspecified complaint. Then comes another in which the mixed multitude, and then the Israelites, bemoan the food they eat. Finally, Moses' own sister and brother criticise him.

No sooner have these ended than we move to the scene that is the turning point of the entire book. Twelve spies are sent on a reconnaissance mission to the land. Ten return with a demoralising report. The land is good, they say, but the people are strong and the cities impregnable. The people despair and say, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt" (Num. 14:4). This is the counterpart of the sin of the Golden Calf in the book of Exodus. On both occasions, God is so angry that He threatens to destroy the people and begin again with Moses. Moses pleads with Him not to do so, this time using the same words God Himself had used – the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy – in the earlier episode. God relents, but nonetheless decrees that no one of that generation, with the sole exceptions of Joshua and Caleb, the two faithful spies, would enter the land. Their children would; they would not.

At this point, one feels that this is as bad as it gets. However, things are about to get worse. Almost immediately comes the rebellion of Korah and his fellow discontents, the most serious of all the challenges to the authority of Moses. Then comes the nadir. After the extended story of

Balaam, the pagan prophet hired to curse Israel who instead blesses them, comes the lowest point of the entire wilderness years. Having protected Israel from the curses of their enemies, God then witnesses the Israelite men engaging in sexual immorality and idolatrous rites with the women of Moab and Midian – a complete breakdown of all that was supposed to characterise the Israelites as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). What hope is there to be rescued from this cumulative tale of failure and faithlessness?

Not only do the people falter, so too does Moses, the one figure we look to as a role model of faith. The man we encounter in Numbers is not the one we met in the book of Exodus. Early on, he gives voice to almost terminal despair in one of the most searing passages in Tanakh: “If this is how You are going to treat me, please go ahead kill me – if I have found favour in Your eyes – and let me not see my own ruin” (Num. 11:15). Moses eventually rallies, but as the narrative proceeds, he seems less and less in control of events. In the episode of the spies, the main burden of leadership is borne by Caleb and Joshua. During the Korah rebellion, Moses seems to overreact; his call that the earth open up and swallow his opponents inflames the situation instead of resolving it. In the next challenge, when the people ask for water after the death of Miriam, Moses and Aaron respond so badly that they are deemed guilty of failure and told they will not enter the Promised Land. Why is Moses of the wilderness so different from Moses of the Exodus?

The book also does strange things with time. The first eleven chapters cover a mere twenty days.⁴ There is even a point in chapter 9 when time moves backwards by a month.⁵ Later, however, thirty-eight years disappear. At one moment we are little more than a year from Egypt. In the next we are in the fortieth year, with the Israelites nearing their destination. It is also hard to say exactly where the break in time occurs. The obvious place is chapter 26, where a second census introduces us to the new generation that will complete the journey their parents began.

4. From “the first day of the second month of the second year” after leaving Egypt (Num. 1:1) to “the twentieth day of the second month of the second year,” when the people start journeying from Sinai (10:11).
5. Num. 9:1 is set “in the first month of the second year.”

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This seems like a new beginning. Yet the temporal leap actually comes earlier, between chapter 20, where we read about the death of Miriam and Aaron, and the next chapter, which describes the Israelites' first battles for the conquest of the land.

What are we to make of these difficulties? In this introduction, I propose seven exegetical principles that allow us to decode much of the mystery of the book and understand why it is structured the way it is.

Principle 1: Journey-from, Journey-to

The first task is to understand the place of Numbers in the Torah's system as a whole. The five books are in rough chronological order. Genesis begins with the creation of the universe, proceeds to the early history of humankind, and moves on to tell the story of Abraham and his immediate descendants. By Exodus, the family has become a people. Exodus to Numbers tell how they were rescued from slavery in Egypt and brought to the brink of the Promised Land. Deuteronomy then recounts the speeches given by Moses in the last month of his life. That is the surface structure. The books are ordered chronologically in temporal sequence. They tell what happened in roughly the order that events occurred.

Beneath this, however, is a chiasmic structure, meaning that the books are ordered in the form of mirror-image symmetry – ABCBA – with the apex in the middle rather than at the end:

- [A] **Genesis:** Prologue: the pre-history of Israel;
- [B] **Exodus:** Journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai;
- [C] **Leviticus:** At Mount Sinai;
- [B¹] **Numbers:** Journey from Mount Sinai to the banks of the Jordan;
- [A¹] **Deuteronomy:** Epilogue – the future of Israel as a nation in its land.

On this reading, the climax of the five books is the long, extended account, covering the whole of Leviticus, the end of Exodus, and the first ten chapters of Numbers. It is about the Israelites at Mount Sinai. There they made a covenant with God, agreeing to become a “kingdom

of priests and a holy nation” under divine sovereignty, with the Sanctuary in their midst and a code of ethics built on the idea of holiness.

Within this structure it is immediately clear that Exodus and Numbers have much in common. They are both about journeys. Both tell of distances traversed and battles fought. Both contain stories of complaint about the lack of food and water. Both tell of a series of breakdowns of morale. In Exodus, the people panic as they reach the Red Sea, pursued by the Egyptian chariots. In Numbers, they panic as they envisage the battles that lie ahead, having been told by ten of the twelve spies that they face a land whose cities are fortified and whose inhabitants are giants.

In both books, the people romanticise the past, thinking of Egypt not as a land of oppression but as a place of safety where they had food and security. In both there is a major sin that threatens the entire future of the people: in Exodus, the Golden Calf, in Numbers, the episode of the spies. In both, Moses suffers under the burdens of leadership and is told to delegate. Here are some of the parallels:

Exodus	Numbers
Led by a cloud (13:21)	Led by a cloud (10:11)
Victory over Egypt (14)	Victory over Sihon and Og (21:21–35)
Victory song (15:1–18)	Victory song (21:14–15)
Complaint (15:23–24)	Complaint (11:1)
Manna and quail (16)	Manna and quail (11:4–35)
Complaint about water (17:1–7)	Complaint about water (20:2–13)
Amalek (17:8–16)	Amalek (14:45)
Moses’ father-in-law (18:1–12)	Moses’ father-in-law (10:29–32)
Leaders to assist Moses (18:14–26)	Leaders to assist Moses (11:16–17)
Rebellion (32:1–8)	Rebellion (14:1; 25:1–3)
Moses intercedes (32:11–13)	Moses intercedes (14:13–19)
Divine judgement (32:34)	Divine judgement (14:26–35; 25:4)

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Plague (32:35)	Plague (14:37; 25:8-9)
Sabbath and festivals (23:12-17)	Sabbath and festivals (28-29)
Atonement through priests or Levites (32:26-29)	Atonement through priests or Levites (16:36-50; 25:7-13)
Census (30:11-16)	Census (1-4; 26)

Yet there are also clear differences between the books. In Exodus, the people are not punished for their complaints. In Numbers, they are.⁶ The most conspicuous difference is the response of Moses. In Exodus, on each occasion he turns to God, who provides what is needed by way of a miracle. In Numbers, his response is more fraught, ranging from despair to powerlessness. The tone is different. Something has changed.

One difference has to do with the covenant and the Sanctuary. In Numbers, the people are no longer simply a group of escaping slaves. They are now a nation in covenant with God, with a code of laws and the Divine Presence in their midst. The other key difference is in the nature of the journey itself. In Exodus it is a *journey-from*: from Egypt and slavery. It is the story of an escape. In Numbers, it is a *journey-to*: to the land, to conquest and settlement. It is a story of approach and preparation.

These are not just two halves of a single story. Exodus and Numbers represent two different kinds of liberty. In a distinction made famous by Isaiah Berlin, Exodus is about negative freedom, *hofesh* in Hebrew. Numbers is about positive freedom, for which the sages coined the word *herut*.⁷ Negative freedom is what a slave acquires when he or she is liberated. There is no one to give you orders. Individually, you are free to do what you choose. But a society in which everyone is free to do what they choose is not a free society. It is anarchy. A free society requires codes and disciplines of self-restraint so that my freedom is not

6. One example: In both books, people complain about a lack of meat and in both they are sent quails. In Exodus, no more is said. In Numbers, a plague strikes the people while they are eating the quails.
7. Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

bought at the cost of yours. It is a society of law-governed liberty. That is why Exodus and Numbers are profoundly different despite their surface similarities. What matters in Exodus is how the people escape from Pharaoh. What matters in Numbers is how they rise to the challenge of self-rule and responsibility.

Principle 2: Technical and Adaptive Challenges

This helps explain why Moses' reactions to the challenges are so different in Numbers from what they were in Exodus. In chapter 11 he comes close to despair. In the episode of the spies, though his prayers sway God, it is Joshua and Caleb who are the key actors vis-à-vis the nation. He loses his calm during the Korah rebellion, and later at Meriva loses his temper with the people, prompting God's verdict that he will not be allowed to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. At the lowest point in the book, the misconduct of the people at Shittim, it was Pinhas, not Moses, who took decisive action.

Event	Moses' response
People complain about food. (11:4–6)	"I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how You are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me – if I have found favour in Your eyes – and let me not see my own ruin." (11:14–15)
Spies' negative report; people demoralised. (13–14)	Moses and Aaron fall on their faces. (14:5)
Israelites seek to make amends by engaging immediately in battle. (14:40)	Moses warns against, but is not listened to; those who fight are defeated. (14:41–45)
Korah rebellion. (16:1–35)	Moses prays for ground to open up and swallow the rebels. This does not end the rebellion; people continue to grumble. (16:28–17:6)

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Complaint about water. (20:2–5)	Moses speaks harshly to the people; strikes rock; is denied chance to enter land. (20:7–12)
Shittim: immorality, idolatry, sin of Zimri. (25:1–6)	Averted by Pinhas, not Moses. (25:7–13)

What has changed is not Moses but the specific nature of the leadership task he faced in the two books. A helpful distinction is the one articulated by Ronald Heifetz between *technical* challenges and *adaptive* ones.⁸ A technical challenge is one where there is a practical problem and people turn to the leader for a solution. An adaptive challenge is one where the people *are* the problem. It is they who must change. Here the leader cannot solve the problem on his or her own. Leaders must educate the people on the need for change. They must be able to hand the problem back to them, giving them safe space in which to think the problem through and the confidence with which to solve it.

In Exodus, the leadership Moses was called on to show was essentially technical. The people were thirsty; through Moses, God provided water. They were hungry; God sent food. They were trapped between the sea and the approaching Egyptian army; God divided the sea. The people sinned; Moses prayed for forgiveness. No change of character was called for. The people had a problem, they turned to Moses, Moses turned to God, and the problem was solved. The book is about technical challenges and how they were met by miracles.

In Numbers, the challenge was quite different. The people were no longer escaping from Egypt. They were preparing to enter the land. That would involve battles and dangers demanding courage and collective responsibility. No longer would God fight their battles for them. He would give them the strength to fight them for themselves. They now had to become a people that acted, not a people that were acted upon. *They had to adapt, to change.* If they did not, they would no longer *have* a problem. They themselves would *be* the problem.

8. See Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2002).

This transformed the entire relationship between Moses and the people. We see this most clearly in chapter 11 when the people complain about the manna and the lack of meat. Moses is reduced to despair. Yet there was seemingly no reason for him to do so. He had faced the same problem before, in Exodus 16. He did not despair then. Why did he do so now, when he knew that God had sent quail then and could do so again?

It is not that he forgot that earlier episode, nor that he was suffering from sheer exhaustion. It was, rather, that *the people had not changed*, despite the fact that they had received the Torah at Sinai and built the Sanctuary. Those two events should have transformed the people. *The fact that they did not do so meant that Moses could already see that they were not yet ready for the adaptive challenge.* That was why he despaired. He could see in advance that a people who had experienced some of the greatest miracles in history yet still complained about the food lacked the necessary vision and courage to build a nation in the holy land.

Moses never had difficulty in his relationship with God. So long as all that was needed was a heaven-sent miracle, he was on safe ground. But he had profound difficulties in his relationship with the people. He could not get them to adapt. People resist change, especially when they perceive it as a loss. That is why the adaptive challenge is so stressful for leader and people alike. Moses became angry with the people, and they with him.

Principle 3: Time as a Factor in Overcoming the Fear of Freedom

At the heart of the negative emotion that suffuses the central chapters of Numbers is fear, specifically fear of freedom. The Israelites were about to undertake an unprecedented task, to create a new kind of society that would be radically unlike any that existed at that time, a society based on covenant, collective responsibility, and nomocracy – the rule of laws, not men.

Freedom means a loss of security and predictability. It means taking responsibility for your actions in a way a slave does not need to

do. It means letting go of passivity and dependence. It means growing up as individuals and as a nation. Throughout their journey from Egypt to Sinai the people did not have to think about freedom. They were fleeing their persecutors. They were focused on survival. But now, as they were leaving Sinai on their way to the land, the full realisation dawned on them of what lay ahead. As a nation, they were about to lose their childhood.

Michael Walzer points out that “there is a kind of bondage in freedom: the bondage of law, obligation, and responsibility.” The Israelites could, he says, “become free only insofar as they accepted the discipline of freedom, the obligation to live up to a common standard and to take responsibility for their own actions.”⁹ Freedom, the Torah candidly acknowledges, is immensely demanding. It is *avoda*, “hard work.” It is striking that the Torah uses the same Hebrew word to describe slavery to Pharaoh and servitude to God. There is all the difference in the world between being enslaved to a human ruler and serving the Creator of the universe who made us all in His image, but the difference is not that the one is hard and the other is easy. They are both hard work, but one breaks the spirit, the other lifts and exalts it.

Fearing freedom, the people take refuge in false nostalgia. They say, “We remember the fish we ate without cost in Egypt – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic” (Num. 11:5). The sages perceptively understood the meaning of the phrase, “without cost.” The cost after all was high: slavery and forced labour. “Without cost” means at no cost in mitzvot, in divine commands and human responsibility.¹⁰ The false nostalgia reaches its bitter climax when, during the Korah rebellion, Datan and Aviram call *Egypt* “a land flowing with milk and honey” (16:13).

In all this, we hear a clear message of political realism. There is no sense in the Torah that the journey to the Promised Land is easy or straightforward, free of doubt or conflict. To the contrary: despite its narratives of bread from heaven, water from a rock, ground that opens up to swallow opponents, talking donkeys, sticks that bud and blossom,

9. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 53.

10. Rashi to Num. 11:5, quoting *Sifre Zuta*.

and people who turn leprous because of slander, the fundamental message of Numbers is that the road to freedom is longer and harder than anyone anticipated at the outset.

In the end, it took longer than a single generation. That is the key burden of the episode of the spies, the central story of the book. The generation rescued by Moses from oppression in Egypt had grown used to its chains. The people were not yet ready for the “difficult freedom”¹¹ of battles, military preparedness, and the willingness to take destiny into their own hands. Change must come slowly; revolutions based, as were the French and Russian, on a sudden transformation of human nature are destined to fail.

Evolution, not revolution, is the point of Numbers. It is impossible, writes Moses Maimonides in *Guide for the Perplexed*, to go from one extreme to another in nature, and that includes human nature.¹² And although it took the episode of the spies to condemn Moses’ generation to die without reaching the land, Maimonides suggests that this was hinted at almost as soon as the Israelites left Egypt: “When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, ‘If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt’” (Ex. 13:17). When it comes to the human heart, change is slow, slower than can be achieved in a single generation.

But it is not impossible. It takes time – and time is one of Numbers’ themes. The two views against which it is set are neatly exemplified in the story of the spies and the immediately following narrative of the *maapilim* (Num. 14:40–45), the people who, having heard of God’s anger at the spies, presume the next morning to go straight into battle and begin the conquest. Moses urges them not to go, but they insist and are defeated. The two political ideas to which Numbers is opposed are *never* and *immediately*. *Never* is the counsel of despair and political reaction. *Immediately* is the temptation of political messianism and revolution. Both end in oppression.

11. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom* (London: Athlone, 1990). See also Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001).

12. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, III:32.

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Freedom is the work of generations. It is always an unfinished symphony, a work in progress. If there is one aphorism that sums up Numbers' view of society and its leaders it is R. Tarfon's "It is not for you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it" (Mishna Avot 2:16). Its view of politics is that rarest of combinations: a *pessimism that refuses to let go of hope*.

This is ultimately what makes the Mosaic books rare in the history of political thought. The Torah is among other things a work of philosophy written *not as system but as story*, or more precisely as a series of stories, because only stories operate in the medium of time. Systems do not. Either a system is true or it is false. If it is true, it is true regardless of time. If it is false, it is false regardless of time. But human beings are not like that. What one generation finds impossible, another may find relatively straightforward. It takes one kind of leader, Moses, to liberate slaves, and another, Joshua, to guide the destinies of people born in freedom. The timelessness of philosophy as conceived by Plato in antiquity or Descartes on the threshold of modernity is precisely what makes it inadequate as an account of human beings and the free exercise of choice.

Freedom is a journey across the wilderness that always takes longer than you thought it would, and the route lies midway between the twin temptations of *never* and *immediately*, resistance and revolution.

Principle 4: Rites of Passage and Liminal Space

Once we understand what is involved in adaptive leadership – the transformation of a people through accepting responsibility for their own destiny – we begin to see that not only does it need *time* (a new generation), it also needs a special kind of *place*. Hence the significance of the book's title, *Bemidbar*, "In the Wilderness."¹³ In the second essay in this book, I argue that the best way to understand the wilderness is by way of

13. In English, the book is known as Numbers, based on the Latin *Numeri* and Greek *Arithmoi*, all of which were derived from the early rabbinic name for the book, as *Homesh HaPekudim*, "the fifth [of the Torah, that is about] the numberings," i.e., the two censuses detailed in the book, in chapters 1–4 and 26. There is no doubt that this, the succession of the generations, is an important theme – but it is not as important as the theme of the wilderness, the place where the Israelites were transformed.

two concepts developed by the anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. One is the idea of a *rite of passage* – the transition from one life phase to another. The other, closely related, is *liminal space*, the place that is neither starting point nor destination but the place between. That is what the wilderness was: liminal space in which the Israelites could make the transition from a collection of tribes linked by ancestry and shared fate (in Hebrew, an *am*) to becoming a body politic (*edah*) formed by a covenant with God.

Liminal space plays a significant role in the Torah. It is no accident that the Jewish journey begins with God's command to Abraham to leave his "land... birthplace and... father's house" (Gen. 12:1). These three factors – country, culture, and kin – are the primary sources of conformity. We behave as do the people around us. Precisely because God wanted Abraham to be different, it was imperative that he leave and go elsewhere, to a place where he would be seen as *ger vetoshav*, "a foreigner and stranger" (23:4).

It is also no accident that Jacob, who gave the people of the covenant its collective name, had his most intense encounters with God in liminal space: on his outward journey, when he had the vision of a ladder set on earth whose top reached heaven and on whose rungs angels rose and descended (Gen. 28:10–17), and on his return when, alone at night, he wrestled with a mysterious stranger until dawn and was given the name Israel, meaning one who wrestles with God and man and prevails (32:22–32). These, especially the latter, were for him rites of passage, involving a change of identity.

The Israelites were about to undergo one of the most profound rites of passage ever experienced by a people. The historian Eric Voegelin put it well:

If nothing had happened but a lucky escape from the range of Egyptian power, there only would have been a few more nomadic tribes roaming the border zone between the Fertile Crescent and the desert proper, eking out a meagre living with the aid of part-time agriculture. But the desert was only a station on the way, not the goal; for in the desert the tribes found their God. They entered into a covenant with Him, and thereby became His people....

When we undertake the exodus and wander into the world, in order to found a new society elsewhere, we discover the world as the Desert. The flight leads nowhere, until we stop in order to find our bearings beyond the world. When the world has become Desert, man is at last in the solitude in which he can hear thunderingly the voice of the spirit that with its urgent whispering has already driven and rescued him from Sheol [the domain of death]. In the Desert God spoke to the leader and his tribes; in the Desert, by listening to the voice, by accepting its offer, and by submitting to its command, they had at last reached life and became the people chosen by God.¹⁴

The essence of the transition was “to found a new society elsewhere,” and to undergo that transformation they had to pass through a space that was literally no-man’s-land. There, alone with God, wrestling with Him as did their ancestor Jacob, they had to throw off one identity, a people “crushed, frightened, subservient, despondent,”¹⁵ and acquire another as a free people under the sovereignty of God.

According to van Gennep, there are three stages in a rite of passage. The first is *separation*, a symbolic break with the past. That is what happened when the Israelites left Egypt, the most advanced civilisation of its time. The key moment occurred when the Israelites passed through the divided Red Sea, passing irrevocably from the domain of Pharaoh into the desert. The third stage is *re-incorporation*, re-entering society with a new identity. That is what Moses was preparing the people for in the book of Deuteronomy, a book dedicated to teaching the people about the society they would be called on to make once they entered the land. In between is the *transition*, the point at which the person – here, the people – is remade, reconstituted, reborn.

The word *midbar*, “wilderness,” also evokes associations with *davar*, the Word, and *medabber*, the Speaker of the Word. It is there, in no-man’s-land, that the Israelites had their most sustained and intense

14. Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, vol. 1 of *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 153.

15. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 47.

encounter with the God who transcends the universe, the austere, invisible God of monotheism, identified neither with the nature familiar to the farmer nor the pinnacle of a hierarchy of power such as is familiar to the dwellers of cities. You have, as it were, to be nowhere to encounter the God of everywhere. In the silence of the desert you hear the voice of God. In the isolation of the desert you find yourself alone with God.

The wilderness was where the Israelites found themselves suspended between a past they could no longer return to and a future they did not yet have the courage to embrace. It was there, in the barren no-man's-land of the desert, that the nation found itself alone with God, with none of the normal distractions of a life rooted in the familiar landscape of home.

Principle 5: Order and Freedom

The fifth principle shaping the structure of Numbers is, in fact, the central drama of the Torah as a whole. In the beginning, God freely created a universe of order. Then He created human beings and gave them the supreme gift that made them “in His image,” namely freedom, the ability to obey or break the law. Almost immediately the result was chaos, the breakdown of order. The first command to the first humans led to the first disobedience. The first religious act, in which the first human children, Cain and Abel, offered sacrifices to God, led to the first murder. Within a remarkably short time, the Torah tells us that the world was “filled with violence” (Gen. 6:11) and God “regretted that He had made man on earth” (6:6). To be sure, God could deprive humans of freedom, but without freedom they would cease to be human, to be, as it were, God’s “other.”

Freedom and order were the essential elements in God’s creation of the universe. Can they coexist in the universes human beings create, namely societies? That is the central question of the Torah. It offers us a vivid example of *freedom without order*: the violence of the world before the Flood. Likewise, it shows us an example of *order without freedom*: the Egypt that enslaves the Israelites. Is there a third alternative, a society in which people freely sustain a social order in which there is justice, compassion, respect for human dignity, and reverence for the sanctity of life? That is the challenge of the covenant, most eloquently set out in the speeches of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy.

Numbers: Then and Now

Numbers is precisely structured to dramatise, in a way unique in Torah, the counterpoint between order and chaos. It is divided into three sections. The first, chapters 1–10, as the Israelites prepare to begin the second half of their journey, is a remarkable portrayal of order within the camp. The tribes are numbered. They are encamped, in precise formation, around the Sanctuary, each with their distinctive banners. The Levites are likewise divided into groups, each with their carefully designated tasks. There is a series of laws designed to maintain the purity of the camp and ward off potential threats to its peace (from husbands who suspect their wives of adultery or non-priests who wish to adopt a priest-like standard of holiness by becoming Nazirites). There is a lengthy account of the offerings brought by the tribes at the inauguration of the Sanctuary, each stated in the same words as if to avoid any favouritism. It is almost as if the Torah were describing the Israelites the way it describes the cosmos in the first chapter of Genesis, everything in its due proportion and proper place.

Then, in chapters 11–25, comes the chaos: dissension in the camp, complaints about the food, and finally Moses' own brother and sister criticising him. The attempt to prepare the people for entry into the land by sending spies ends in disaster. The people panic and rebel. Caleb and Joshua attempt to calm them and fail. Moses prays and saves the people from disaster, but only just. Next comes the story of the Korah rebellion, a tale of the chaos¹⁶ that results when authority – that of Moses and Aaron – is challenged and ceases to command respect. Worse still, in the next episode, when the people need water after the death of Miriam, Moses and Aaron are themselves guilty of disrespect, both towards the people and towards God. Finally, after the story of how the pagan prophet Balaam, hired to curse Israel, was forced by God to bless them, comes the absolute nadir, when the Israelite men bring disaster

16. The Korah narrative is deliberately structured to convey a sense of chaos. There are three different factions among the rebels: Levites from Moses' own clan, that of Kehat; Reubenites; and 250 leaders from other tribes – each with their own specific grievance. To them are later added “the assembly,” other Israelites outraged at the way Moses has handled the challenge. Biblical scholars who separate the text into different narratives miss the point of the story and its literary function in conveying the sense of chaos, a theme that runs through the central chapters of Numbers.

on themselves by acts of immorality and idolatry, seduced by the local Moabite and Midianite women. Complete chaos reigns in the camp, ended only by an act of violent zealotry on the part of Pinhas.

After this stark contrast between order and chaos comes part 3, chapters 26–36, in which a new beginning is made, starting symbolically with a new census and a new generation. From here on, there are no rebellions. Order prevails. There are provisions for the sacrifices to be brought at their appointed times. The land is apportioned between the tribes. Levitical towns and cities of refuge are designated. Claims such as those of Tzlofhad's daughters (ch. 27) and the heads of their tribe (ch. 36) are resolved peaceably, as is a potential conflict between the rest of the people and the Reubenites and Gadites who wish to settle east of the Jordan. There is an orderly transition from Moses' leadership to his successor Joshua. Battles are fought and won. The long journey is nearing its end, all its stages enumerated and recorded. For all the intervening chaos, order wins in the end.

Principle 6: Narrative and Law

This deliberately heightened contrast between chaos and order is the explanation for the stylistic feature of Numbers that has proved the most puzzling, making it seem at times like a jumble of disconnected parts, the constant juxtaposition of narrative and law. We see this in broad strokes in the following table:

Chapter: content	Subject matter
1–4: Narrative	The taking of a census; the arrangement of the camp.
5–6: Law	Purity of the camp; the wife suspected of adultery; the Nazirite; priestly blessings.
7: Narrative	The leaders of the tribes bring offerings at the dedication of the Tabernacle.
8–10: Law	Lighting of the lamps; inauguration of Levites; Passover in the desert; the trumpets.

Numbers: Then and Now

10–14: Narrative	The Israelites leave Sinai; the people complain; Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses; the spies.
15: Law	Supplementary offerings; offerings for unintentional sins; the Sabbath-breaker; fringes on garments.
16–17: Narrative	The Korah rebellion.
18–19: Law	Duties of priests and Levites, offerings from priests and Levites; the red heifer.
20–27: Narrative	Miriam dies; the people complain about lack of water; Aaron and Moses punished; Edom denies Israel passage; Aaron dies; Arad; the bronze snake; the journey to Moab; defeat of Sihon and Og; Balak and Balaam; Moab seduces Israel; second census; daughters of Tzlofhad; Joshua to succeed Moses.
28–30: Law	Daily, Sabbath, and festival offerings; vows.
31–34: Narrative	Vengeance on the Midianites; the Transjordan tribes; stages in Israel’s journey; boundaries of the land; new leadership; Levitical cities.
35–36: Law	Cities of refuge; murder; intermarriage between tribes.

This mix of law and narrative is a feature of the Torah as a whole, especially in Exodus and Deuteronomy. In neither, though, is the juxtaposition as marked and seemingly random as in the book of Numbers. Why so? *Because the conflicting societal pressures of order and freedom can only be reconciled by law, freely accepted and collectively applied.* Law ensures that my freedom is not bought at the cost of yours. That is the difference between a society in which “everyone did what was right in his own eyes,” the biblical description of chaos,¹⁷ and one in which there is an agreed-upon moral code and thus a shared form of order. The narrative of Numbers focuses on the chaos. The legal sections constitute

17. Deut. 12:8; Judges 17:6; 21:25; Prov. 12:15.

in each case a *tikkun*, “repair,” or in more biblical terms, a *ge’ula*, “rescue and redemption” of the disorder.

This means that Numbers sets forth in heightened form an important feature of biblical law in general. In her book *What’s Divine About Divine Law?* Christine Hayes contrasts two very different conceptions of law, one that it represents the divine *will*, the other that it embodies divine *wisdom*.¹⁸ The first sees it as God’s command, the second as God’s instructions for human flourishing, given the nature of the universe He created. There is something to be said for each of these conceptions within the broad context of Tanakh as a whole. However, Numbers articulates a quite different approach, seeing law as emerging from the specifics of the nation’s history – what happened during the wilderness years, and what must happen in the future when the Israelites enter the land. Here *law is integrally related to narrative*. There is nothing arbitrary about the commands. They are directed against the dysfunctions that emerged as the Israelites journeyed from Sinai to the plains of Moab and which would, if left unchecked, lead to the disintegration of the nation.

Two scholars in different fields understood this connection well. One was the Nobel-prize-winning economist and philosopher Friedrich Hayek. In his book *The Constitution of Liberty*, Hayek argued for the importance of tradition – laws, codes, and customs that emerged in the course of a people’s history – in the maintenance of freedom.¹⁹ Coming from a different direction, Robert Cover, the Yale philosopher of law, argued in a famous article, “Nomos and Narrative,” that there is often an essential connection between law and the story of how it came to be: “For every constitution there is an epic, for each decalogue a scripture.”²⁰ Law, he argues, creates a “normative universe,” a world of right and wrong,

18. Christine Hayes, *What’s Divine About Divine Law?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

19. Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), ch. 4.

20. In Robert Cover and Martha Minow, *Narrative, Violence, and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2010), 109. See also Rémi Brague, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Chaya Halberstam, *Law and Truth in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

permitted and forbidden, that defines the social reality in which a community functions and finds meaning. It does this most effectively when there is a strong connection between its laws and its history. That is what Numbers is doing when it juxtaposes law and narrative.

In each case, we will find a precise connection between the two. So, for example, immediately after the episode of the spies come laws about offerings beginning with the words, “After you enter the land” (Num. 15:1–31), an assurance that the nation would eventually enter the land despite the forty-year delay. I show in one of the essays here²¹ that there is a precise connection, verbal and substantive, between the law of tzitzit, fringed garments, and the failure of the spies to interpret correctly what they saw. The laws relating to priests (18:1–32) follow the Korah rebellion which established beyond doubt the right of Aaron and his sons to that office.

The most striking case is that of the ritual of the red heifer. This seems both unintelligible in its own right and unconnected with the stories it interrupts, but the reverse is the case. The law precedes a notice of three deaths: the actual deaths of Miriam and Aaron and the announced death of Moses. These were the three leaders of the Israelites throughout the wilderness years, and there is no more vivid collective reminder of mortality than that which a people experiences when its leaders die. The ritual of the red heifer conveys the message that just as the ashes of death are dissolved in *mayim hayim*, the “waters of life,” so the death of individuals is mitigated by the ongoing life of the nation. Mortality dissolves into the eternity of God and the people of God.

Thus in Numbers, style and substance go hand in hand. Law is the shape of order, and it coexists with freedom when people understand that the law is not an arbitrary expression of the divine will. It arises from a specific history and from the way the community remembers that history.

Principle 7: The Anti-Heroic Narrative

Finally, we miss fundamental aspects of the Torah’s project if we fail to understand that much of it is a *polemic against myth*. This is its real iconoclasm, and it is not always obvious on the surface.

21. “Law and Narrative: Believing and Seeing.”

Read the whole of Genesis, for example, and you will not find a single explicit statement about monotheism or even one denunciation of idolatry – what we would expect if this were a conventional theological document. The monotheism is there, set at the beginning of the book, and it consists in the creation account of Genesis 1:1–2:3. We can only fully understand this text if we understand its context: a plethora of mythic, cosmological accounts from ancient surrounding cultures telling of how things were at the beginning of time, accounts which are universally about clashes between the various elements personified as gods. The serene account of Genesis – “And God said, ‘Let there be ...’ and there was ... and God saw that it was good” – in which the universe emerges stage by stage harmoniously from a single creative mind, and is seven times pronounced “good,” is not a myth but what I call an *anti-myth*. The German nineteenth-century sociologist Max Weber was right to see this as the birth of Western rationality. He saw it as what he called the “disenchantment” – what we would call de-mythologisation – of the world.²²

Likewise, at the beginning of Exodus, we read of the birth of Moses. This is not simply the story of a birth. As I pointed out in my Haggada,²³ it is a polemic against a well-known myth, what Otto Rank, Freud’s most brilliant disciple, called “the myth of the birth of the hero.”²⁴ Rank and Freud noted – though they misinterpreted – one salient fact about it. It is not, as they thought, an example of the myth – told about Sargon, Cyrus, Oedipus, Romulus, and others – but rather, a protest against it. In standard versions of the myth, a ruler receives a warning about a child about to be born to him. The ruler takes steps to kill the child or let him die. The child is saved, often by being placed in a basket and floated down a river, and raised by people of humble birth. Only later does he learn that he has royal blood.

The Moses story is the precise opposite. He is found and raised by royalty – an Egyptian princess, Pharaoh’s daughter – and learns that

22. See Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963); Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

23. *Pesah Haggada* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), 19–26.

24. Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Exploration of Myth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

he is in fact not royalty but a member of what has become, in Egyptian eyes, a pariah people. The point is immeasurably heightened once we realise that the name of the pharaoh, Ramses, means “child of the sun god, Ra,” while the child’s name, Mose or Moses, is an Egyptian word that means, simply, “child.” The Moses story is a subtle and brilliant assault on the concept, central to all polytheistic religions, of a human hierarchy, in which rulers are marked from the outset by royal blood. Moses is the representative of a people every member of whom has been adopted by God, a point made in the first words Moses is commanded to say to Pharaoh: “My child, my firstborn, Israel” (Ex. 4:22).

The book of Numbers is just such an anti-myth, a polemic against one of the world’s most widespread myths – recycled today in such stories as *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, and the like – of “the journey of the hero.”²⁵ The hero, often reluctantly, undertakes a journey in which he faces a series of trials as a result of which he develops extraordinary strength of character. He then returns, transformed.

The Torah as a whole represents just such a journey, but with three significant differences. First, the journey is undertaken not by an individual as in every other case but by an entire people. Second, the sequence of departure-initiation-return is spread across several centuries, from Joseph to Joshua. Third – and this is the story of Numbers – the people *fail* most of their trials. They are portrayed collectively as an antihero, not a hero. In a complete inversion of the myth, the Torah attributes the people’s successes to God and their failures to themselves. Why so?

Here we come to one of the most fundamental features of biblical monotheism. In virtually all ancient cultures, humans battle against implacable and overwhelming forces, external to themselves and indifferent to human suffering. That is the basis of the literary genre of *tragedy*. In modern times myth has been replaced by science, but the scenario remains the same, only this time the forces have to do with economic pressures (Marx), unconscious drives (Freud), natural selection (Darwin), or the human genome.

25. The most famous account is Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).

Monotheism, as Jack Miles has elegantly shown,²⁶ internalises the forces that are externalised in myth and science. The real battle lies within – within the human will. What makes humans different from all other life forms thus far known is our capacity to make a distinction between duty and desire, between “I want” and “I ought.” Philosophers call this *second-order evaluation*: I know what I desire but I can also ask: Ought I to satisfy this desire?²⁷ This is the drama played out in almost endless variations in Numbers, from the most rudimentary (wanting to eat meat in chapter 11, sexual gratification in chapter 25) to the most challenging (preferring security-with-slavery to freedom-with-responsibility in the episode of the spies). The message of Numbers is that the human will is weak, but not terminally so. There is no doctrine of original sin in the Torah. Humanity *can* achieve freedom-with-order, but it is hard and needs constantly to be fought for.

Monotheism thus inverts the basic thought structure common to both myth and science.²⁸ The real conflict to which Torah and the life of faith are addressed is not with external forces but internal ones. On this, Judaism and Freud agree: civilisation is the capacity to defer the gratification of instinct.²⁹ Curiously and paradoxically, then, by attributing its successes to God and its failures to itself, the Israel of the Bible knows that its fate is in its hands. It knows that the real battle is “in here” rather than “out there.” If it is victorious against its destructive and dysfunctional drives it will be victorious against its enemies. Had the people shown courage and faithfulness, the journey to the

26. Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 397–408.

27. The distinction is usually credited to Harry Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

28. By this, I do not mean the natural sciences – chemistry, physics, and biology – but rather the human and social sciences insofar as they assume some form of determinism.

29. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989). The most famous example of this in recent times is Walter Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test* (London: Bantam Press, 2014). Mischel showed that a four-year-old child’s capacity to resist eating a marshmallow for twenty minutes accurately predicted the child’s success in later life in virtually every field: academic achievement, career, and marriage. Many of the Torah’s laws, especially in relation to food and sexual relations, are a lifelong tutorial in the deferment of instinctual gratification.

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Promised Land might have taken only a short time. Instead it took forty years. A people that accepts responsibility for its failures is active, not passive – an agent, not a victim. It has no psychological space for the concept of tragedy.

Since Israel is cast in Numbers in the role of *antihero*, the question arises repeatedly when reading the book: Why, of all peoples on earth, did God choose one that complained, failed, and rebelled constantly? In the words of the famous jingle: “How odd / of God / to choose / the Jews.” Only by stepping back from the book and looking at it in the context of Tanakh as a whole do we discover the answer.

In one of the most revisionist utterances in the entire Hebrew Bible, Jeremiah says in the name of God:

I remember the devotion of your youth,
how as a bride you loved Me,
and followed Me through the wilderness,
through a land not sown. (Jer. 2:2)

This is not Israel the disobedient, the ungrateful, the fainthearted. This is the people who, like Abraham in an earlier age, had the courage – the love – to follow the call of God into an unknown, unsown land. Where, though, in the book of Numbers, with its almost uniformly depressing picture of the people, do we find even a hint of the love Jeremiah was talking about?

The answer lies in a passage that is otherwise almost inexplicable, namely the words of the pagan prophet Balaam, who is hired to curse Israel but instead blesses them three times. Listen to some of the language Balaam uses:

I see a people dwelling alone, not counting themselves among other nations.... Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the seed of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like theirs! (Num. 23:9–10)

No guilt is seen in Jacob, no sorrow observed in Israel. The Lord their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them. (23:21)

How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel! ...
May those who bless you be blessed, and those who curse you
be cursed! (24:5, 9)

This *is* the language of love. The entire Balaam story, with its talking donkey who sees the angel Balaam himself cannot see, repeatedly emphasises that the words Balaam uses are not his but God's. Therefore, this declaration of love is uttered by God – not directly nor through Moses, not even in the hearing of the Israelites themselves. *This is the obverse side of the wilderness years*, made explicit only centuries later by prophets such as Jeremiah.

Freedom as an Ongoing Task

In summary, we will understand Numbers if we remember to distinguish a journey-to from a journey-from, and an adaptive from a technical challenge. We will understand why Moses' reactions are different here from those in Exodus. Numbers tells us that time is an essential element in the long walk to freedom, and it may take more than one generation. The journey is not just a physical one. It is a psychological one, a rite of passage that requires liminal space: in the case of ancient Israel, the wilderness. The fundamental tension in the book is between freedom and order, dramatised in the fugue between narrative and law. Finally, the journey is a deliberate inversion of myth. There is no human "hero" in the story, not even Moses. To the contrary, it is a book about responsibility and failure, but it ends in order and hope. Freedom is never less than *avoda*, hard work, and it must be done by the people. No leader can do it on their behalf.

What was the result? Jean-Jacques Rousseau has a remarkable passage in which he describes the Israelites, escaping from Egypt, as "wretched fugitives" wandering "over the face of the earth without a single inch of ground to call their own." He continues:

Out of this wandering and servile horde, Moses had the audacity to create a body politic, a free people; and while they were wandering in the desert without a stone on which to lay their heads,

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he gave them that durable set of institutions, proof against time, fortune, and conquerors, which five thousand years have not been able to destroy or even to alter, and which even today still subsists in all its strength.³⁰

Numbers and the events it describes represents, quite simply, the greatest tutorial in freedom in history, and its message today is no less powerful. Freedom is not achieved merely by overthrowing tyrants. It is achieved only by a prolonged training in the responsibilities and restraints that freedom requires. “There is nothing more arduous,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville, “than the apprenticeship of liberty.” He added, “It is generally established with difficulty in the midst of storms.”³¹ That is Numbers.

Not only does this apply to parts of the world that have never known freedom; it applies also to those that have known it for centuries. It must be fought for in every generation or it will eventually disappear. As I write these words, I am mindful of the fact that for the past half century, there has been an assumption in the West that liberal democratic politics and market economics are self-sustaining. They are part of a linear, irreversible process that once achieved is never subsequently lost.

Nothing could be further than the truth. A free society is a moral achievement. Without a shared morality, a strong identity based on memory and narrative, without training in character, self-restraint, and the ability to defer the gratification of instinct, civilisation will eventually suffer a decline, as did Athens, Rome, and Italy of the Renaissance. A free society depends on habits of the heart, and without them it declines and falls.

Ultimately, a free society is a spiritual achievement. That is what John F. Kennedy meant when he said in his Inaugural Address that “the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.” The great developments in the seventeenth century that laid the foundations for the free societies of the contemporary West – social

30. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “The Government of Poland,” in *Political Writings* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 163.

31. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, abr. ed., introduction by Thomas Bender (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), 1:247.

covenant and contract, liberty of conscience and human rights – were articulated by thinkers in active dialogue with the Hebrew Bible: John Milton, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Benedict Spinoza.³² It is not clear that these ideas are sustainable in the long run without the religious foundations of Tanakh. Freedom is as challenging today as it was in the days of Moses. Numbers remains one of its classic texts.

32. See Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), who argues that Locke's thought on equality is inconceivable without its religious foundations. Nicholas Wolterstorff mounts a contemporary argument on similar lines in *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

Bemidbar

במדבר

The central theme of the book of Numbers is the second stage of the Israelites' journey, physically from Egypt to the Promised Land, mentally from slavery to freedom. This *parasha* and that of the following week are about the preparations for that journey, the first of which was to take a census. To inherit the land the Israelites would have to fight battles. Hence the census, specifically of men between the ages of twenty and sixty – that is, those eligible to serve in war. The Levites were counted separately because it was not their role to fight but to minister in the Sanctuary.

Instructions were given as to the layout of the camp, which was to be a square with the Sanctuary in the middle. Three tribes were to set up their tents and banners on each side, while the Levites formed an inner square. The order in which they encamped was also the order in which they journeyed.

The duties of the family of Kehat – which also included Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, who had other roles – were spelled out. It was their task to carry the most sacred objects, the Ark, Table, Menora, Altars, curtains, and holy vessels used in the sacrificial service, when the Israelites journeyed. This demanded special care.

The first of the following essays explores the theme of the book as a whole: the fourth act in the Torah's account of the human condition, suspended between order and freedom. The second is about the fact that the founding drama of the Israelites as a nation under the sovereignty of God is enacted *in the wilderness*, what anthropologists call "liminal space." The third looks at the connection between *midbar*, "wilderness," and *davar*, "word." Why did the revelation of God's will have to take place

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in the desert? The fourth spells out the consequences of the unique fact that the Israelites received the law before the land. The fifth is about the *haftara* and Hosea's revisionary reading of the wilderness years as the honeymoon between Israel and God.

The Human Story: Act 4

How are we to understand the book of Numbers in its entirety? It opens by taking up the story as we left it at the end of Exodus. At that point, the people had left Egypt and journeyed to Mount Sinai. There they received the Torah. There they made the Golden Calf. There they were forgiven after Moses' passionate plea, and there they made the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle. It was inaugurated "on the first day of the first month in the second year" (Ex. 40:17). The book of Numbers begins one month later, "on the first day of the second month of the second year" (Num. 1:1).¹ After a prolonged stay in the Sinai desert, the people were ready to start the second part of the journey, from the wilderness to the Promised Land.

1. Note that for a while in Numbers, time moves backwards. Chapter 9 begins, "The Lord spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert in the first month of the second year after they came out of Egypt." In other words, this takes place some time, possibly as much as a month, before the beginning of the book. This is one source for the principle that "there is no before and after in the Torah" (see Pesahim 6b; Rashi to Num. 9:1). Note also that time does not pass at all in the book of Leviticus. This is characteristic of the priestly voice in Torah, which is, in general, meta-historical. The priestly truths, unlike the prophetic ones, are timeless.

But Numbers does not start there. There is a long delay in the narrative. Ten chapters pass until the Israelites actually begin to travel (Num. 10:33). What was detaining them? Or rather, what was slowing down the story? Before we can join the people on their journey, we have to read about a census. Then comes an account of the arrangement of the tribes around the *Ohel Moed*, the Tent of Meeting. There is a long description of the Levites, their families, and respective roles. There are laws about the purity of the camp, restitution, a woman suspected of adultery, and the Nazirite. At inordinate length, we read about the gifts brought by the princes of the tribes at the inauguration of the Tabernacle. Then come further passages describing the final preparations for the journey. Only then does the journey begin. Why the delay? Why this long series of seeming digressions?

One feature of the Mosaic books that has tended to confuse secular Bible scholars for more than two centuries is that they constitute a unique genre. They are not history in the conventional sense, a mere recording of what happened. A prime example is the book of Numbers itself, which passes over in silence almost thirty-eight of the forty years in the wilderness.² Events are not recorded in the Torah simply because they happened. They are there because of what they teach us about the human condition under God.

Nor is the Torah a conventional kind of law book. There are substantive similarities between certain biblical laws and other ancient codes such as that of Hammurabi. But there is no similarity in literary form. The Torah moves from law to narrative to law again. It intersperses other kinds of material. In the case of Numbers, this includes census lists, an itinerary, some actual legal cases, battle reports, an Amorite victory song (Num. 21:27–30), and the oracles of a non-Israelite, Balaam. Though the Torah *contains* law codes, it does not look like any other law code.

Secular Bible scholars have therefore sought to understand the text by dismembering it, separating it into (usually) ever-smaller fragments and trying to understand each in isolation. This is wrong: it is

2. The only reference is the list of names of places in which the Israelites stopped, in Numbers 33.

precisely how *not* to read a book.³ You do not understand a symphony by disaggregating its musical themes. It is precisely the way the score holds them together, often in tension and with shifts of mood, that constitutes the symphony as an artistic unity. Likewise with the Torah – with at least this difference: we have nothing to compare it to, not only in ancient religious literature, but among the other books of Tanakh as well.

There is nothing accidental about the mix of law and narrative in the Torah, nor is there anything haphazard about the structure of Numbers as a book. *The Torah reflects the Israelite understanding of God as the unity beneath diversity.* If all you can see is the diversity, not the unity, you do not understand it at all.

The Torah offers a unique contrast to the way of thought we have come to regard as distinctively Western whose origins are in ancient Greece. It does three unusual things. First, it includes philosophy in the narrative mode. It teaches not truth as system but truth as story. Second, it portrays law not as it reflects the will or wisdom of the legislator, but rather as it emerges from history, as if to say: this is what went wrong in the past and this is how to avoid it in the future. Third, it regards history itself as an ongoing commentary on the human condition. The Torah is about *the truths that emerge through time.*

These are among the great differences between ancient Israel and ancient Greece. Ancient Greece sought truth by contemplating nature and reason. The first gave rise to science, the second to philosophy. Ancient Israel found truth in history, in events and what the Torah invites us to learn from them. Science is about nature; Judaism is about *human* nature – and there is a great difference between them.

Nature knows nothing of free will. Scientists often deny that it exists at all. But humanity is constituted by its freedom. We are what we choose to be. No planet chooses to be hospitable to life. No fish chooses to live in water. No peacock chooses to be vain. Humans do choose, and in that fact is born the drama to which the whole Torah is a commentary: *How can freedom coexist with order?* The drama is set on the stage of history, and it plays itself out through four acts, each with multiple scenes.

3. Clearly, this is a large subject, to be dealt with elsewhere.

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The basic shape of the narrative is roughly the same in all four cases. First God creates order. Then people create chaos. Terrible consequences follow. God begins again, sometimes deeply grieved but never losing His faith in the one life form on which He set His image and to which He gave the singular gift that made humanity God-like, namely freedom itself.

Act 1 is told in Genesis 1–11. In this version of the story, the subject is *humanity as a whole*. God creates an ordered universe and fashions human beings from the dust of the earth into which He breathes His own breath. But humans sin – first Adam and Eve, then Cain, then the generation of the Flood. The earth is filled with violence. God brings a flood and begins again, making a covenant with Noah. Humanity still does not learn the lesson. People sin again, this time not by being less than human (i.e., violent), but by seeking to be more than human by making a tower that will “reach heaven” (Gen. 11:4), and by imposing an artificial unity (“one language with uniform words,” Gen. 11:1) on human diversity.

So God begins again. Act 2 is told in Genesis 12–50. It is the story of *the covenantal family*: Abraham and Sarah and three generations of their children. The new order is based on family and fidelity, marriage and parenthood, love and trust, and educating children in “the way of the Lord” as it expresses itself in charity and justice (Gen. 18:19). But this too begins to unravel. There is tension between Esau and Jacob, between Jacob’s wives Leah and Rachel, and between their children. Ten of Jacob’s children sell the eleventh, Joseph, into slavery. This is an offence against freedom, and catastrophe follows – not a flood but a famine, as a result of which Jacob’s family goes into exile in Egypt, where the whole extended family is eventually enslaved.

Act 3, set out in the book of Exodus, is about *the Israelites as a nation in covenant with God*. It begins with God rescuing the Israelites from Egypt as He once rescued Noah from the Flood. His covenant with them at Mount Sinai is far more extensive than its two predecessors, God’s covenant first with Noah, then with Abraham. It is a blueprint for social order on the basis of law and justice, informed by the people’s memories of the way they were treated in Egypt. Their society will be different. They are not to inflict on others what was inflicted on

them. To be sure, it does not abolish slavery (that did not happen for three thousand years), nor does it put an end to war (that still has not happened). But it involves the people accepting God as their sovereign. Almost immediately it is badly damaged, when the Israelites make a Golden Calf a mere forty days after the great revelation. God threatens to destroy the entire nation, beginning again with Moses, as He did with Noah and Abraham (Ex. 32:10). Only Moses' passionate plea prevents this from happening. God then institutes a new order.

Act 4 is unprecedentedly long. It is about a *people with the Divine Presence in its midst*. God is no longer simply the distant, majestic Creator of the universe and intervener in history. He is also close, the *Shekhina*, God as immanent as well as transcendent: God-as-neighbour. This story begins at Exodus 35, continues through the whole of the book of Leviticus, and dominates the first ten chapters of Numbers. Its most tangible symbol is the Tabernacle in the centre of the camp. The building of the Tabernacle takes up the last third of Exodus. The Tabernacle itself represented a home for the Divine Presence on earth, and whoever sought to enter it had to be holy and pure. The laws of purity and holiness take up virtually the whole of Leviticus. As Numbers begins, we expect the Israelites to start the journey to the holy land. The first ten chapters are therefore unexpected, and hint at something that only becomes clear later on in the book.

If the Israelites are to become a free people in the land God promised their ancestors, they need to be capable of self-imposed order. Otherwise they will merely repeat the mistakes we have encountered three times already: the violence before the Flood, the divisions within the Abrahamic family, and the making of the Golden Calf. The first ten chapters of Numbers are all about creating a sense of order within the camp.

Hence the census and the detailed disposition of the tribes, and the lengthy account of the Levites, the tribe that mediated between the people and the Divine Presence. Hence, also, in the book's second *parasha*, three laws – about restitution, the *sota* (a woman suspected of adultery), and the Nazirite (a person who forswears wine) – directed at the three forces that always endanger social order: theft, infidelity, and alcohol. In these opening chapters, it is as if God is saying to the Israelites: This is what order looks like. Each person has his or her place

within the family, the tribe, and the nation. Everyone has been counted and each person counts. There is an order to the way the tribes are encamped around the Tabernacle, and to the way they proceed when travelling. Preserve and protect this order, for without it you cannot enter the land, fight its battles, and create a society that is both just and free.

Tragically, as Numbers unfolds, we see that the Israelites have not yet internalised this message. They complain about the food. Miriam and Aaron criticise Moses. Then comes the catastrophe: the episode of the spies. The people, demoralised, show that they are not yet ready for freedom. As before in the case of the Golden Calf, there is chaos in the camp. Again God threatens to destroy the nation and begin again with Moses (Num. 14:12). Again only Moses' powerful plea saves the day. God decides once more to begin again, this time with the next generation and a new leader. The book of Deuteronomy is Moses' prelude to Act 5, which takes place in the days of his successor, Joshua.

The Jewish story is a strange one. Time and again the Jewish people has split apart: in the days of the First Temple when the kingdom divided into two, in the late Second Temple period when it splintered into rival groups and sects, and in the modern age, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when it fragmented into religious and secular in Eastern Europe, Orthodox and others in the West. Those divisions have still not healed.

And so the Jewish people keeps repeating the story told five times in the Torah. God creates order. Humans create chaos. God represents unity. People create disunity. Bad things happen; God and Israel begin again. Will the story never end? One thing is sure. God never gives up. Nor does He cease speaking to us through the timeless words of the Written Torah, translated into time by the ongoing Oral Torah, reminding us that the central human challenge in every age is whether freedom can coexist with order. It can, when humans freely choose to follow God's laws, given universally to humanity after the Flood and in concrete particularity to Israel after the Exodus.

The alternative, ancient and modern, is the rule of power, in which, as Thucydides said, the strong do as they will and the weak suffer as they must. That is not freedom as the Torah understands it, nor is it a recipe

for justice and compassion. The Torah is God's call to create a freedom that honours order and a social order that honours human freedom, to respect both what is universal in our shared humanity and what is particular in our historical specificity. The challenge remains, and the stakes become higher every year.