



Order and Disorder • Parshat Bamidbar

Parshat Bamidbar begins with a comprehensive counting of the Israelites. This is followed by a detailed description of their encampments, their traveling formation, and how each part of the Tabernacle was transported by specific families. The tenor of the verses, writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “is all about creating a sense of order within the camp.” Social order is essential for a functioning society.

Personal growth also requires the character trait of order: *seder*. Rabbi Aharon Kotler looks at the beginning of *Bamidbar* as a paradigmatic framework for future generations; divine service and holy pursuits require establishing personal order. Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv likens all of a person’s positive qualities to precious pearls. A clasp is required to hold and display the pearls. Ennobled character traits require the “clasp” of *seder* to hold them together. Without internal or external order, all other virtues could haphazardly scatter.

Social psychologist Kathleen Vohs and her collaborators summarize research on the impact of order, writing that “environmental disorder impels bad or even destructive behavior, whereas cleanliness supports normatively good and moral outcomes.” In their own studies, they found that people who make decisions in well-organized rooms tended to choose healthier snacks and donated more to charity, in contrast to those in cluttered and messy rooms.

When establishing order amongst disparate

groups, our need for external structure is insufficient. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler suggests that social, spiritual pursuits are enhanced by order that revolves around a unified goal. There needs to be a teleological purpose, a superordinate goal that inspires the group.

This higher calling is emblematic of the Israelites in the desert. Despite their separate tribal banners and individualized strengths, they rallied around the ultimate goal of pursuing *sheleimut* - personal, communal, and national wholeness. In Rabbi Sacks’ formulation, the modeling of order in *Parshat Bamidbar* demonstrated to the Israelites that, “Each person has his or her place within the family, the tribe and the nation. Everyone has been counted and each person counts. Preserve and protect this order, for without it you cannot enter the land, fight its battles and create a just society.”

Later in *Sefer Bamidbar* we read about the wandering sojourns of the Israelites in the wilderness. They journeyed based on the movement of the Clouds of Glory. They did not know whether the encampment would be for a day, a few days, a month, or even a year. That lack of predictability, writes Nahmanides, could be physically and psychologically taxing. The ability to function amidst the chaos, adds Rabbi Dessler, was an essential trait for the Israelites to inculcate. The value of flourishing through order needs to be counterbalanced with the skill of being resilient when confronting chaos. Vohs points to research that suggests that those who are at more ease with disorder can better tolerate ambiguity.

Additionally, exposure to clutter can lead to creativity.

In his book *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz*, professor of management and jazz musician, Frank J. Barrett uses the unstructured dynamics of jazz to demonstrate the benefits and beauty that can emerge from the disorganized aspects of life. Yet even jazz requires some structure. Based on the notion of complex adaptive systems he suggests that

“systems are most creative when they operate with a combination of order and chaos.”

Bamidbar proposes a balance between order and chaos, between structure and unpredictability, between social uniformity and individual differences. Capitalizing on the virtuous elements of these values enables us to flourish as individuals, and as a nation unified in pursuit of a higher-order goal to create a more spiritual and moral society.

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Character Challenge: For this Sunday, a day often left unstructured, create a detailed schedule filled with meaningful activities. Be conscience of the possibility that it won't go exactly as planned and adapt to the chaos with flexibility and creativity.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l: “When Moshe came down the mountain he saw the people “running wild, for Aharon had let them run beyond control and become a laughing stock to their enemies.” This is a portrait of chaos. Order had completely broken down. The people had allowed themselves to be swept up, first by fear, then by Dionysiac celebration. The *tikkun* for chaos is order. The Tabernacle, with its precisely delineated dimensions and materials, put together from the voluntary contributions of the people, fashioned by a craftsman under divine inspiration, was just that: a microcosm of pure order” (“The Blessed Power of Order,” *Covenant & Conversation*).