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B'haalot'cha: Navigating through the Wilderness

On the day the tabernacle was put up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, that is, the tent of the Pact; and in the evening, over the tabernacle was what appeared to be fire, which remained until morning.¹⁶ So the cloud always covered it, and it looked like fire at night.¹⁷ Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tent, the people of Israel continued their travels; and they camped wherever the cloud stopped.¹⁸ At the order of ADONAI, the people of Israel traveled; at the order of ADONAI, they camped; and as long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they stayed in camp.¹⁹ Even when the cloud remained on the tabernacle for a long time, the people of Israel did what ADONAI had charged them to do and did not travel.²⁰ Sometimes the cloud was a few days over the tabernacle; according to ADONAI's order, they remained in camp; and according to ADONAI's order, they traveled.²¹ Sometimes the cloud was there only from evening until morning; so that when the cloud was taken up in the morning, they traveled. Or even if it continued up both day and night, when the cloud was up, they traveled.²² Whether it was two days, a month or a year that the cloud remained over the tabernacle, staying on it, the people of Israel remained in camp and did not travel; but as soon as it was taken up, they traveled.²³ At ADONAI's order, they camped; and at ADONAI's order, they traveled — they did what ADONAI had charged them to do through Moshe. (Numbers 9:15-23)

If you ever wondered how our ancestors lived for 40 years in the desert, this is how. They traveled at the command of God; never knowing how long they would have at each specific camp site. When God's cloud moved on, so did the Israelites, no matter how comfortable they had become.

Spending 40 years in the desert doesn't sound like a cake walk in the first place, but living each day, not knowing what is going to come at any moment seems maddening.

We Jews like structure in our lives. Tonight we are praying from a siddur, our prayer book which literally means "order." Our Passover seder is an ordered festive meal. We know exactly which Torah portion to read on every Shabbat. There are 6 sederim, or orders of the mishnah and there are even orders to various life-cycle events, such as weddings and funerals.

Rabbi Stephen Cohen, one of my mentors, wrote, "We typically think of the mitzvot providing structure and order for our lives, a set of disciplines and rhythms that help us live a life of harmony and holiness." However, this journey that the ancient Israelites took and the one that we are on right now is characterized much more by "unpredictability and arrhythmia."

In a sense we are still in the wilderness, living each day in the present, not knowing what is going to come our way. We can't predict the forks or manholes in the road that lay ahead of us. And this can be frightening.

We need not look any further than 27 miles south of here. The news of the I-5 bridge collapse is shocking and terrifying. Thank God the situation isn't worse than it could have been. After an event like this, many of us likely breathed a sigh of relief that we were in one piece and not in the water.

Of course we can also look at the devastating and horrific tornado in Moore, Oklahoma. There are no words to explain this misfortune or bring solace to those in mourning. It is utter sadness. Homes and lives swept away into the void. Our hearts and prayers will be directed towards this community for a long time, even after the re-building process has ended. Life will never be the same for the survivors.

So, while we yearn for order in our lives, we know all too well that everything is really out of our hands. As the Yiddish saying goes, *Der mentsh trakht un got lakht*. Man plans and God laughs.

But, living a life in constant fear of some terrible disaster in the waiting is not a way to live. I recently spoke to someone who said they will never drive a car with electric windows because God-forbid she should find herself in a similar situation as our friends down south. Fear and anxiety can paralyze and blind us from the beauty this world shares with us every moment. Judaism, thus, stresses that we should embrace life in its entirety, offer blessings daily, and be struck with awe at the mysteriousness of our universe.

So how do we grapple with the unknown? How do we understand the randomness of it all? In Pirke Avot (4:15), we learn, "It is not in our power to explain either the prosperity of the wicked or the sufferings of the righteous." In other words, some events, and perhaps everything, is beyond our understanding. Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, wrote, "Expecting the world to treat you fairly because you are a good person is like expecting the bull not to charge you because you are a vegetarian." (Jewish Wisdom, 220)

I wish we had more answers. I wish I could look into the future. At times I wish life wasn't as random as it is. But, like the Israelites wandering in the desert, where life was not easy in the least bit, our lives are also unpredictable.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav wrote, "The whole world is but a narrow bridge. The most important thing is to not be afraid."

This Shabbat, let us first pledge to help those in need. Go to the URJ's website and do what you can to help with relief.

May we also be thankful for our lives and the lives of our loved ones. May we go forth in life, unafraid, and may the darkness that surrounds our friends and fellow citizens eventually turn to light once again.

Ken yehi ratzon, may this be God's will.

