



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. *sefer* 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 *sefer* 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 normative 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 Eli Aharon Dessler suggests that social and 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. Every one 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 ease with disorder can better tolerate ambiguity.

Additional 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