



new london  
synagogue



### Order and chaos as we open the Book of BeMidbar/Numbers

BeMidbar, or the Book of Numbers, contains two very different kinds of material.

At its opening, the Book is resplendently ordered. Each adult male member of each Tribe is counted and arranged around the central Sanctuary. Specific roles are allocated for specific sub-groups, and everything feels ready for the grand departure from the foothills of Mount Sinai.

Then everything goes wrong. Dispute, grumbling, faithlessness, rebellion, blame-mongering and failure mark the second part of the Book.

It's a dynamic held, I think, in the relationship between the two names used to refer to the book – Numbers (or Sefer HaPikudim) – ordered, and BeMidbar (or Wilderness) – chaotic.

It's a dynamic at play, also, in our own community. Last Sunday, the Board of Deputies hosted a cross-communal rally to oppose antisemitism. Everyone was invited. What could possibly go wrong? Well, actually, not quite everyone was invited; there were lines drawn that included some and excluded others. There have been reports of assaults, booing, and placards being pulled away (which, of course, I condemn, but I want to make a different point). The attempt to perfectly organise a unity of humanity – any humanity, but certainly the Jewish subsection of humanity – will always be doomed to fail.

“Hell,” wrote Sartre in his 1944 play No Exit, “is other people.” Sartre's line arises from the impositions on personal freedom that arise in a ‘crowd’ of merely three characters. In our contemporary existence, as part of a world of billions of interconnected souls, it might be getting worse. We certainly seem increasingly resistant to the notion that deference should be paid to those who wish to cohere us into uniform blocks of collective identity. That, in many ways, is a good thing. But this resistance also threatens to increase atomisation, loneliness, jeering and setting ourselves against our fellows. These things are destroying the fabric of our society.

Saying we support tolerating ‘acceptable differences,’ while booing those differences we deem ‘unacceptable,’ is too thin a protestation. It's too easy to set the line between ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ difference wherever we feel comfortable, and we end up accepting no difference at all. One of my particular current concerns about the Jewish community is that we are attacking both each other and those with whom we should be building alliances.

Washing our hands of the whole messy business of attempting to stand together, in solidarity with different human beings, similarly may feel attractive, but it is ultimately unacceptable. “It is not upon you to complete the work,” warned Rabbi Tarfon (ultimately martyred as a result of Roman persecution) “but nor are you permitted to abstain from it.”

We have to learn to celebrate difference, admire those who take different views from our own and applaud people who see the world differently from us. We need to imagine other people's views from their perspective, not our own. The vision of the future we would all wish for is, of course, varied and multiple. We must support and model that desire with greater energy.

I have a tiny, delightful way to exercise that muscle to suggest for this Shabbat. It's Cheder Shabbat. Our younger members will be in providing their particular brand of slightly chaotic leadership. It won't be dreamily organised. It shouldn't be dreamily organised. It's a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the chaos of difference.

On the subject of delightful, the concert last Sunday – Sharqia – was exactly that. Actually it was stunning. Click here

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhJPcNoJjlo&list=RDAhJPcNoJjlo&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhJPcNoJjlo&list=RDAhJPcNoJjlo&start_radio=1) to enjoy Yoav and the band, led by Ofer Peled, perform Shabda'a Bak, made famous by Ofra Haza and here – literally here in the Shul – featuring a stunning Kanun solo.

Shabbat Shalom