

FINDING OUR VOICES BY FRAMING OUR PLACES

Rabbi Isaiah Rothstein, Jewish Federations of North America

Our sages teach us that Torah reading is meant to be read *b'zman*, at its set time. For example, there's a reason the Torah reading for Passover includes topics related to Passover. There is a reason why before Purim we read about Haman's ancestor, Amalek.

Nachmonides and other commentators share that each parsha reflects what is happening *b'zman*, in this moment in time, too.

So what does the Torah tell us about what has been happening in this time? Throughout the book of Bamidbar, the book of Numbers, the wondering and wandering Israelite nation of the desert reaches adolescence and new maturity. But how did they get there? What helped them survive the desert experiences? **How did they find their voice (*dibbur*) in the desert (*midbar*)?**

The book of Bamidbar opens describing the physical positioning of the *shvatim*, the tribes, in their camp. They position themselves *l'mishpichotam, l'beit avotam*, according to their families and according to their houses.

“Each of us is able to keep our voice intact in the desert once we frame our place in society.”

Rav Soloveitchik suggests that each of us is able to keep our voice intact in the desert once we frame our place in society. **In the vastness of the desert, we find our positions and our identities based on our backgrounds, on our families, and on our ancestors.**

My ancestors include Carole Robertson, my cousin who was killed with three other girls in the Birmingham Church bombing of 1963, and Charles McGruder, a stud who was used for slave breeding. I have thousands of black (and white) cousins from his seed all with the last name McGruder.

While I grew up in the Jewish community in Monsey, reconciling my mixed-race identity has certainly played a part in defining my position in the wilderness that is the world. But it's not my responsibility more than anyone else's to address racial justice.

Each and every citizen has a role in fighting racial injustice and dismantling racism and bigotry in this country. Addressing the killing of black people in America is all of our responsibility not only because we should see this as a civil rights issue or a race issue, but because injustice and discrimination based on the color of skin is a human rights issue.

One lesson we can take from Bamidbar and the Torah portions we read in this book is to **look at who we are, where we come from, and how that shapes who we want to be.**

