

Bamidbar: The Paradox of Jewish Time

Much of the Torah portion this week describes the arrangement of each of the Tribes of Israel in their encampments around the *mishkan* – the Tabernacle. The Tribe of Levi had been designated to take over the responsibility of the daily offerings from the firstborn (Numbers 3:11-12) and to look after the holy utensils and the *mishkan* itself (*ibid.* 6-8). They therefore encamped in the centre next to the *mishkan*. Since Joseph's sons Ephraim and Menasseh formed two of the remaining tribes, there were still twelve tribes which surrounded the *mishkan* in groups of three tribes, arranged to the East, South, West, and North.

The Torah describes the eastern group led by Judah as קְדָמָה מִזְרָחָה – *keidmah mizracha*, the “front” of the camp, towards the east (*ibid.* 2:3). This makes sense given the general easterly direction that the Jewish people would have to travel in order to reach the Land of Canaan. But there is much more to this phrase than meets the eye. The root ק.ד.מ which is associated with the concept of preceding, advancing or moving forwards (קדימה – *Kadima*) as well as the easterly direction of travel (קדם – *kedem*, see Genesis 2:8 and 11:2 as well as many other examples), even though מִזְרָח also relates to the shining (זרה) of the dawning sun in the east.

However, the root is also connected to the concept of looking back such as the phrase עוֹרֵי כִּימֵי קֶדֶם “awaken like the days of old” (Isaiah 51:9), the word קודם meaning “before” and קדמה meaning “origin”. This is what grammarians refer to as a contranym – a word that means its opposite. English examples include ‘to cleave’ (both meaning to cut and to bind) or ‘to dust’ which could mean to remove dust or sprinkle a dusty substance.

In Hebrew however, there are no coincidences; there must be a deeper connection between the *kedem* which means to advance forwards and the *kedem* which denotes looking back.

The journey of the Jewish people began when we left Egypt as the fledgling Israelite nation. With the Revelation at Sinai, we were constituted as a people and then continued our journey throughout the forty years we spent travelling through the desert. However, our journey did not end when we entered the Promised Land. It continued, through the stories of the prophets, into exile and up to this very day, with each and every one of us.

The verb *kedem* encapsulates the paradox of Jewish time. On the one hand, we must advance forwards – eastwards towards the rising sun and away from the darkness of exile. Yet we must simultaneously remember our origin – the days of old which, like the rays of the rising sun, enlighten, inspire, and enthuse us to as we travel forwards to our ultimate destination. Without our ethical and religious anchor in the past, we lose our way. The Jewish journey is therefore one that is simultaneously focussed on the future while rooted firmly in the past. And when we arrive at our destination, we will not only have found Redemption, but חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ פְּקֻדָּם – will have ultimately “renewed our days of old” (Lamentations 5:21).

A version of this article first appeared in *Daf HaShvua* published by the Rabbinical Council of the United Synagogue.

If you have enjoyed this article and would like to donate to help the Mah Shetashiv team, please use your smartphone to scan the QR code, or visit our website at:

<https://mahshetashiv.com/donate-to-mah-shetashiv/>

© Mah Shetashiv 2023

