Two Tents: Thoughts for Parashat Bemidbar

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bemidbar

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"And the Lord spoke unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they came out of the land of Egypt…" (Bemidbar 1:1).

The Torah refers often to the "tent of meeting" (*ohel mo'ed*) as the place where God communicates with Moses. But where exactly was this tent located?

It seems that the *ohel mo'ed* was another name for the *mishkan*—the sanctuary that was constructed in the center of the Israelite encampments while in the wilderness. The Torah goes to great length describing the exact measurements and materials in the construction of the *mishkan*. It specifies the clothing that the cohanim must wear, and the details of what kind of offerings are to be sacrificed. The *ohel mo'ed/mishkan* was the physical and spiritual center of the Israelites.

But Shemot 33:7, in a scene prior to the construction of the *mishkan*, informs us that Moses took the tent and pitched it outside the camp, "far off from the camp; and he called it the tent of meeting, that was outside the camp."

Commentators and scholars offer various suggestions attempting to understand these two frameworks for the *ohel mo'ed*—one at the center of the camp and one outside the camp. Perhaps the Torah is teaching us something essential about the proper functioning of religious life…and of civilization in general.

The *ohel mo'ed* at the center of the camp represents orderliness, organizational integrity, ritual propriety. All the tribes of Israel were arranged around the *ohel mo'ed.* This reminded the Israelites that their physical and spiritual core was God-centered. The *ohel mo'ed* symbolized a structured pattern of religious and communal life.

The *ohel mo'ed* outside the camp was a counter-force. If the tent at the center of the camp represented orderliness and organization, the tent outside the camp represented an unpredictable source of divine truth. It was a challenge and corrective to the central tent. Yes, religion and civilization require a structured central framework…but they also need an outside voice that doesn't allow them to become

complacent. Orderliness and ritual—while vital to society's wellbeing—cannot be allowed to become stultified. An outside prophetic voice must constantly inject new insights and new approaches; it must inspire the central tent to stay alive and receptive to the needs of the people. Spiritual friction—while not always welcome or appreciated—is vital to the overall wellbeing of society.

In his novel, *The Lost World*, Michael Crichton offers a wise observation. "Complex systems tend to locate themselves at a place we call 'the edge of chaos.' We imagine the edge of chaos as a place where there is enough innovation to keep a living system vibrant, and enough stability to keep it from collapsing into anarchy….Too much change is as destructive as too little. Only at the edge of chaos can complex systems flourish."

The two tents of meeting were, in a sense, keeping the community at the "edge of chaos," a spiritual condition that required balancing stability and innovation, orderliness and spontaneity. "Organized religion" provides vital structure. But the voice from outside the camp prods innovation, creativity, re-evaluation. It challenges stagnation.

We need a strong and stable spiritual center. And we also need prophetic voices from outside the camp. The "edge of chaos" keeps religion alive and awake. It is challenging to stay on balance…but very dangerous to slip off the edge into chaos.