

Living with Uncertainty: Personally, and Collectively

Both at the end of Exodus and in Numbers 9, a particular feature of the Israelites' wilderness wanderings is described: a cloud descending over the *mishkan*, the tabernacle, appearing as fire by night. This cloud serves both to dedicate the mishkan as a site of holiness, and to dictate when the Israelites move and when they stay where they are. As Exodus 40, verses 36-37 teach, "When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out, on their various journeys; but if the cloud did not lift, they would not set out until such time as it did lift." Imagine how it may have felt to be an Israelite, not knowing when or where they would be going next, not feeling any power to determine their own course.

While I certainly do not have a cloud hovering over the sanctuary or my home, I find myself acutely empathizing with the uncertainty of our ancestors. Like them, I am not entirely sure how long I will be encamped here, at Temple Beth Israel in Eugene, OR. Like them, the choice of when or where I leave is not (entirely) in my hands. And for many of you in this community, I know that the uncertainty about how long I will be staying is just as uncomfortable as it is for me.

The teaching of the cloud and the fire reminds me of a few truths. One is that these moments of uncertainty are holy. We are taught the God's presence was in that cloud, at the very center of that inscrutable mess. We truly never know the future, but in the moments when we are aware of how much is out of our control, we may have the capacity to be more vulnerable, more sensitive, more open to the possibilities of the moment. It's uncomfortable, but it's not a bad thing. The other is that the Israelites were *present* while the cloud rested. So as long as I am here, I am committed to being present here, to showing up as your rabbi, to actively and ongoingly creating this community with you.

As in our mythic past, so now: we can face our uncertainties with our commitment to presence with each other. And should my cloud lift and I move on soon, like the ancient Israelites, I trust that this community will mobilize together to greet the next moment.