



Let Us Not Long for the Desert: Reflections on the Pillar of Cloud

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The pillar of cloud first appears in our *parashah*:

שמות יג, כ"א–כ"ב

וה' הלך לפניָהם יומם בעמוד עָנָן, לְנַחֲתָם הַדֶּרֶךְ, וְלַיְלָה בְּעַמּוּד אֵשׁ, לְהַאִיר לָהֶם--לְלֶכֶת, יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה. לֹא-יָמִישׁ עַמּוּד הָעָנָן, יוֹמָם, וְעַמּוּד הָאֵשׁ, לַיְלָה--לְפָנֵי, הָעָם

Shemot 13:21-22

²¹God went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they might travel day and night.

²²The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

What is the nature of this cloud that appears in the desert? How does it manifest in this first appearance and how is it characterized in general? What can we learn from what constitutes this miraculous cloud about our contemporary reality, beyond the desert and without this pillar of cloud?

First and foremost the pillar of cloud represents God's presence: "God went before them in a pillar of cloud by day" (v. 21). At the outset, this presence serves a mostly practical

purpose, “to guide them along the way.” The cloud delineates the journey of the Israelites in two ways: it shows them where they are going and how long they will stay where they are: “And whenever the cloud lifted from the Tent, the Israelites would set out accordingly” (Bemidbar 9:17). Indeed, as the Israelites journey longer and longer in the desert, this presence takes on more significance and begins to represent God’s presence even while they are stationary: “When the cloud lingered over the mishkan many days, the Israelites observed God’s mandate and did not journey on” (v. 19).

Additionally, the description of the cloud concludes with the Torah’s telling us that the presence of God which is maintained through the presence of the pillar of cloud, is a stable presence, which will not move.

But there is a dichotomy present in the pillar of cloud, for at the same time that it represents God’s immanence and presence it also acts as a blockade, a barrier between people and God. God does descend, but He does so in a pillar of cloud (see Bemidbar 12:5). God doesn’t manifest Himself directly or transparently. Instead God is enveloped or veiled, only appearing through the appearance of something else, the cloud. This dynamic, that the cloud conceals as it reveals and closes as it opens is underscored by the fact that it is positioned, almost like a sentry, by the opening to the tent of meeting: “God appeared in the Tent, in a pillar of cloud, the pillar of cloud having come to rest at the entrance of the tent” (Devarim 31:15). What the people actually see is the cloud, not God (see Shemot 31).

So also during war, as described in our parashah: “God looked down upon the Egyptian army from a pillar of fire and cloud” (Shemot 14:24). God doesn’t look at the war and the attackers directly, but rather always through the pillar of cloud. This verse reveals something fascinating: Not only do the people come to encounter and investigate God through the cloud, but this is also how God looks at humanity.

It is specifically in this military context that we can see the way in which part of the cloud's role is to separate. This is true not only between Israel and their God, but also on the human level, as it separates between people. When the Egyptians were chasing after Israel before the splitting of the Red Sea: "the pillar of cloud shifted from in front of them and took up a place behind them" (v. 19). The cloud is like a blockade or a shield that buffers and protects the fleeing slaves from their Egyptian pursuers.

The pillar of cloud is a constant and a symbol of their interstitial time in the desert as well as a symbol of the special connection Israel had with their God in the desert

So we see that the pillar of cloud is complex and contains an internal tension. It represents the living, constant presence of God among the people. It stays among the people and serves as a means for communication between people and God. However, simultaneously, it serves as a barrier, a separation, something which blocks a direct and immediate connection between people and God.

These two distinct aspects of the pillar of cloud are mixed in the Rabbinic exegetical imagination. The cloud is described as going before the Israelite camp in the following way:

תוספתא סוטה פ"ד הלכה ב

ועמוד ענן שהיה מקדים לפניהם הורג נחשים ועקרבים ושורף סירים וקוצים ואטם משפיל להם את הגבוה ומגביה להם את השפל ועושה להן את הדרך מיושר

Tosefta Sotah 4:2

And the pillar of cloud that preceded them would kill snakes and scorpions and burn thorns, thickets, and brambles. It would flatten the high places and raise the low and straighten the path for them.

Thanks to the cloud, reality as a whole becomes smooth. However this easing of the way is

only possible because the cloud serves as a buffer which in a certain way separates the Israelites from reality.

Moreover, the protection of the cloud is complex and it is difficult to figure out the way in which the cloud acts as protection. Does it stem from its presence and closeness or rather from its ability to separate? It appears to be both. Its protection seems to come simultaneously from its (representing) of Divine presence and its acting as a barrier. It protects through this dual character.

The agadic description concludes with pointing out another fundamental aspect of the pillar of cloud: “they would use it for all forty years that they were in the desert.” The pillar of cloud is a constant and a symbol of their interstitial time in the desert as well as a symbol of the special connection Israel had with their God in the desert: strong, constant, guiding, protecting, if not direct. This is a total and unidirectional dependence. Israel is not at all responsible for themselves and possibly unable to be. They don’t kill the snakes and scorpions on their own, they don’t flatten out the path on their own, they don’t handle any changes in topography, and they don’t even decide when they are to travel and when they are to rest.

What does this pillar tell us about our current lives post this desert existence? The time in the desert was one of complete dependence on God and indirect connection to Him. The post-desert moment is one where we are forced to take responsibility and also one that affords us, perhaps, an opportunity for a more direct connection to God, and a more direct interaction with reality. Outside of the desert, there is no cloud that guides and we get to decide for ourselves when to go and when to stay. In certain historical moments this independence has led to sovereignty. For those who live beyond the desert, it is appropriate to recognize the power and responsibility latent in this kind of existence. While the desert dependence was characterized by a cloud of divine protection, now, we bear the

responsibility of protection that is decided upon by ourselves and our leaders. We must evaluate and take them to task for the practical and moral consequences of what they are defining as protection. We need to clarify what the criteria are for making decisions about defense, and regarding the use of force.

This post-desert reality is not temporary. Therefore we need to act with a long-ranging vision, out of the assumption that our reality is real and enduring. How do we want to live? How do we want to exist in a land as a sovereign state? How do we want to conduct ourselves in all of the different ways we are powerful agents as communities and individuals? Now, outside of the desert, there is no cloud mapping out a paved road. On the contrary, we have to be full-partners in constructing the straight path. What will we do when faced with snakes and scorpions? How will we determine who or what is truly a threat? Will we flatten the mountains or choose to climb them?

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These are the questions of a direct encounter with reality, with real people who are created in the image of God. We can not allow ourselves to be brought into a defensive, reactionary stance. We can't allow ourselves to be governed by fear or the illusion of temporariness. Outside of the desert we have an opportunity for creativity and courage, for participating in forging a better life in an active and ideal way, in a way that is connected to God and to the world in general, with hope and in partnership.

We may not allow ourselves to wallow in longing for the desert or for the pillar of cloud that represents it. We need to grab the golden opportunity that leaving the desert awards us and demands from us as Jews, as a sovereign people, and as global citizens.