Navigating Faith Without Visible Signs



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You have probably used the phrase "I'm waiting for a sign" without irony. Maybe it was about a job offer that never came, or a moment in shul when the words felt hollow and you wondered whether anyone was listening on the other end. The longing underneath that phrase is ancient and serious, a craving for direction that removes all ambiguity.

Parshat Behaalotcha describes a world where that sign was real. A pillar of cloud descended on the *Mishkan* each day, and at night it took on the appearance of fire. When the cloud lifted, the Israelites traveled. When it settled, they stopped. God's presence was visible, physical, and unmistakable, and the parsha reveals that even this was insufficient to produce the durable faith we imagine it would. Within a few chapters, the people with the clearest divine direction in human history will exhaust themselves waiting for it to move, beg a human guide for help, and weep for the garlic they ate as slaves in Egypt. The real spiritual work began when the sky went quiet.

1. The Exhaustion of Unpredictable Guidance

You romanticize certainty until you actually get it on someone else's terms. Anyone who has had a boss upend their schedule without warning, demanding an immediate pivot without explanation, knows the particular anxiety of surrendered autonomy. Now scale that to 40 years in a desert, where the boss is God and the project is your entire life.

Bamidbar 9:22 describes the Israelites' situation in language so repetitive it borders on hypnotic. Whether the cloud lingered for two days, a month, or a year, the people remained encamped. The text loops through this five times in four verses, hammering the same point until the reader can feel the monotony. Sforno reads the repetition as the Torah underscoring the test's severity, since waiting indefinitely without a schedule strained the Israelites' patience to its limit. Human beings can endure almost anything if they know when it will end, and God refused to provide that information.

Ramban complicates this picture by noting that the people often hated where they were camped and desperately wanted to leave, yet had to suppress that desire out of reverence for God. They could see the exit and feel the pull toward movement, yet they had to sit with the discomfort of God's silence about when, if ever, the cloud would lift again. Ramban presents this as a genuine psychological tension, and the repetitive language of the text mirrors that grinding experience of waiting without information.

Oliver Burkeman argues in *Four Thousand Weeks* that the modern obsession with time management is really an obsession with control. The Israelites faced the purest version of that anxiety, because they had zero control over their schedule and no ability to plan even a day ahead.

Samuel Lebens explored the philosophical dimensions of living with epistemological uncertainty, arguing that the inability to know what comes next is central to mature religious life, because certainty would short-circuit the relationship that faith requires. If God handed you a spreadsheet of your future, faith would become redundant, and the posture of trust that prayer and mitzvot cultivate would collapse into mere compliance.

An honest objection surfaces here, though. If the cloud was supposed to build trust, why did it apparently fail? The people who endured this training would, within a chapter, collapse into complaint. The answer may be that the cloud was never meant to be the final model for the Divine-human relationship, but an incubator for a nation fresh out of slavery. The exhaustion the text describes was the growing pain of a people learning to carry uncertainty, and the capacity they developed would prove essential once the cloud disappeared.

2. Finding Illumination in the Dark

The cloud covered the *Mishkan* during the day, and at night it appeared as fire. You might read past this as a logistical detail, a divine nightlight for a desert camp. But the commentators saw something more deliberate in the shift. The fire served a practical function that went beyond symbolism, because God was offering visible reassurance during the terrifying vulnerability of desert nights, when predators and enemy nations posed real threats. The fire addressed fear, the specific emotion that darkness amplifies beyond all proportion.

Rashi stresses that God's presence over the Mishkan was continuous and perpetual, never interrupted. What changed from day to night was how that presence appeared. During the day, God's presence took the form of a cloud, gentle and ambient. At night, the same presence intensified into fire, warm and impossible to ignore. The shift was entirely perceptual, a change in how the presence registered on human senses rather than a change in the presence itself.

Anyone who has gone through a period of spiritual darkness will recognize this distinction, because the temptation during those periods is to conclude that God has left. Rachelle Fraenkel speaks about finding God's presence in the aftermath of trauma, in the worst moments a person can endure. Her testimony pushed back against the assumption that divine connection requires clarity or comfort, suggesting that some dimensions of that connection only become accessible when normal life's assumptions have been stripped away.

Lisa Miller, a clinical psychologist at Columbia University, argues in *The Awakened Brain* that depression, crisis, and spiritual struggle frequently activate the same neural pathways that produce heightened spiritual awareness. Her neuroscience provides an empirical framework for what the fire of Numbers 9:16 suggests symbolically, that darkness is the condition under which a different kind of perception becomes possible.

This idea has caused real harm when misapplied. Some people in crisis have been told their suffering is a spiritual gift, and that framing has caused some of them to struggle by making the sufferer responsible for extracting meaning from pain they did not choose. The text does not say suffering should be sought out. It says something more limited—that when the daylight of certainty disappears, the presence has not departed but has changed form, and the encounters with meaning that crisis sometimes produces may illuminate things ordinary daylight never could.

3. The Necessary Pivot to Human Agency

Rabbanit Fraenkel's testimony rests on active participation in the relationship with God, and the text pushes that principle further. After chapters describing God's absolute authority over the Israelites' movements, Moshe turns to his father-in-law Hovav (known elsewhere in the Torah as Yitro, or Jethro in English) and begs him to stay. "Please do not leave us," Moshe says, "inasmuch as you know our encampments in the wilderness, and you will be as eyes for us." The prophet who spoke with God face to face is pleading with a Midianite to remain at his side.

The commentators try to soften the implications of that request, but the harder reading keeps surfacing. Rashi explains that Moshe wanted Hovav to serve as a witness before the nations, so that no one could claim the Israelites wandered blindly. Ramban presses past Rashi's diplomatic explanation, highlighting the striking fact that Moshe, despite receiving God's direct guidance, still wants a human companion who had walked this terrain as a mortal. Moshe never doubts God's omniscience, but he recognizes that the shared vulnerability of another mortal, someone who navigates the same uncertain ground without foreknowledge, fills a need that even divine direction does not address.

That recognition has a psychological dimension Erich Fromm mapped at the civilizational level. In *Escape from Freedom*, the psychoanalyst and social philosopher argues that human beings instinctively flee autonomous decision-making toward authoritarian structures, whether political or theological, because freedom demands responsibility for outcomes we cannot control. Moshe's plea to Hovav is the Torah's refusal to let that dependence become permanent, even while God's visible presence remained overhead.

The trajectory Fromm describes at the psychological level played out across Jewish intellectual history. Ari Lamm discusses how Judaism moved from direct prophetic revelation toward human interpretation and rabbinic reasoning. The Talmud crystallizes this shift in Bava Metzia 59b, when Rabbi Yehoshua rejects a heavenly voice in favor of human legal reasoning, declaring that the Torah "is not in heaven." Moshe keeping a human companion alongside God's visible presence anticipates that principle by generations, and the Torah's willingness to record the request suggests that needing human partnership was never a failure of faith.

You may feel this transition in your own religious development if you grew up in a home or school where the answers came pre-packaged, where a rabbi or teacher functioned as the authority you followed without question. The day you realized you needed to think for yourself was disorienting and frightening, but on this reading, that disorientation was not a departure from the system but its intended destination, because the tradition always anticipated a world in which human beings would have to make their own judgments.

4. Moving Forward Without a Map

The tradition anticipated that shift from divine guidance to human judgment, but anticipating a transition and living through one are fundamentally different experiences. The departure from Sinai is where the Israelites have to do the living. Bamidbar 10:33 describes the Ark of the Covenant traveling three days ahead of the camp, carried on poles by the Kohathites, one of the Levitical clans assigned to carry the *Mishkan*'s most sacred objects. Rashi reads this as God, through the Ark, clearing the path and preparing safe ground. But the people still had to walk forward, and no amount of prepared terrain could substitute for the willingness to step into what they could not see.

That willingness is what psychologist Pehr Granqvist would call secure attachment. In *Attachment in Religion and Spirituality*, he argues that a child who has internalized security from a caregiver can explore unfamiliar environments with confidence. Granqvist applies this model to adult believers, arguing that an internalized divine relationship allows people to venture into the unknown without paralysis. The disorientation does not create the relationship with God, but it can strip away the distractions that kept you from noticing a presence that was never absent, because as the Kotzker Rebbe taught, God dwells wherever you let Him in.

Granqvist's framework explains the mechanism, but the internalized relationship does not appear on its own. Rabbi David Aaron explores how modern believers must deliberately cultivate a relationship with God, moving beyond passive reception to the initiating work of seeking the Divine. That framework works for people who already have the internalized relationship, but the questioning reader may not. Someone in that position may keep Shabbat every week and feel nothing, or may have struggled with Shabbat observance because the structure felt hollow. The tradition's response is that practice builds the relationship, that you observe first and let the closeness develop over time. The *Sefer HaChinuch* states the principle directly, that a person is shaped by their actions and the heart follows what the hands do.

A skeptic would call this self-conditioning, and the objection is too legitimate to dismiss. The distinction the tradition draws is between repetition that closes the mind and repetition that opens a new capacity, the way a musician practices scales for years before the music becomes expressive. The skeptic claims halachic practice works like propaganda, producing belief by eliminating alternatives. Some readers will recognize themselves in both descriptions simultaneously, and the disagreement may not be resolvable from the outside, because the resolution requires years of lived practice.

The text shows that the Israelites were not uniform, as some followed with internalized trust while others followed because they had nowhere else to go. The person standing at the base of the ladder, willing to step onto the first rung by re-engaging with even a single practice of the kind the *Sefer HaChinuch* describes, is in a fundamentally different position from the person with no ladder in sight, because that first step puts you back into the process through which the relationship can develop. Whether it will develop is not guaranteed. But the text does not leave re-engagement as an abstraction, because the very next passage shows what happened when even the faithful collapsed into complaint over the food they ate as slaves.

5. The Paradox of Complaining Under the Cloud

Bamidbar 11:1-4 identifies the instigators as the *asafsuf* (the mixed multitude), a less committed subset whose discontent spread until the broader community wept along with them, longing for the fish, cucumbers, and garlic of Egypt, not the freedom or comfort, but the condiments, even while manna still fell and God's presence remained visible overhead.

The surface absurdity of complaining about garlic while eating bread from the sky points to something Ramban recognizes as a deeper psychological reality. He explains the breakdown as exhaustion rather than ingratitude. The journey's overwhelming demands had ground the people down until the complaints became symptoms of a depletion that no miracle could address. The manna, which would have astonished them in the first week, had become so routine that they could no longer perceive it as God's provision. They were surrounded by evidence of God's presence and had stopped being able to see it.

That inability to see is the Kotzker Rebbe's corollary in action. When you stop looking for God, the signs look like coincidence, and God is absent not because He left but because you stopped looking. Dr. Aaron Segal pushes this insight further. The demand for proof operates on a different register than the experience of faith, and even overwhelming evidence fails to resolve the questions that drive religious commitment. The Israelites had every form of proof available and still wept for garlic.

If external signs cannot sustain faith, the question becomes what can. Dovid Bashevkin argues in *Sin-a-gogue* that enduring religious life must account for human failure and dissatisfaction, because even God's visible presence cannot override the tendency to normalize and hunger for something else. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in *Halakhic Man*, proposes a model built for exactly this limitation. The halachic personality finds God within the normative structure of daily obligation, encountering the Divine through the discipline of Shabbat, the architecture of prayer, and the texture of learning, without needing the sky to catch fire. After Bamidbar 11, that model lands with particular force, because the text has just demonstrated that the sky catching fire did not work.

If you are waiting for a sign before you commit to a religious life, or to deepening one, the text says the sign will not help, because a sign requires the same openness that practice builds. What sustains religious commitment over decades is the accumulated habit of practice—showing up to daven on a cold Tuesday morning when you feel nothing at all—because that discipline builds the capacity to perceive what was always there. The visible presence of God was the beginning of the Israelites' relationship with the Divine, but the law is how that relationship survives once the visible presence is gone. You too live after the cloud has lifted, and the question is whether you will keep showing up—not because you have proof, but because showing up is itself the practice through which you learn to see.

Questions for Reflection

1. **If you reflect honestly on your darkest spiritual periods, did any form of insight or connection become available to you that was invisible during easier times?**
2. **Where in your religious life are you still waiting for God to tell you what to do, and what would it look like to start making those judgments yourself?**
3. **How would your daily practice change if you accepted that no external sign, no matter how dramatic, can do the internal work that faith requires?**

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