

Living BaMidbar - Yom Kippur 5782

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The journey was never going to be quick--or easy. God knew that the short route from Egypt to Canaan was not the right way - even though it was more direct. They would confront the Philistines who were known to be fierce and foreboding. Seeing them right out of Egypt would've caused the Israelites to lose hope. They would've turned around and would've gone right back to Egypt. A longer route would allow the Israelites to develop qualities needed to conquer and settle the Promised Land; as the Talmud says, "There is a long way which is short and a short way which is long," (B.T. Eruv. 53b).

So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness - Va'Ya'sev Elohim Et Ha-Am Derekh HaMidbar. Including a stop at Sinai to get the 10 commandments, a bunch of other mitzvot and time to build the Tabernacle, the journey was to take... about a year, maybe a little more. But then there were hiccups. The people didn't follow the rules. Even with all the evidence - a divine voice, thunder, lightning, manna - they still built a Golden Calf. They kvetched, they rebelled. Putting the pieces back together after these hiccups added time, at least six months.

Then, 2 years in, just as they were on the precipice of the Promised Land, just as they could taste a sense of freedom, things got worse. Moses sent 12 spies, one from each tribe, to scout the land of Canaan. When they returned, they carried a cluster of grapes so large, it had to be borne between 2 poles. This land truly flowed with milk and honey. But 10 of the spies weren't convinced. They spread calumnies among the people, they sewed distrust, the people despaired. The consequences were severe. They would wander in the wilderness, BaMidbar, for 40 years. They would wander until every person who had known slavery was no more. Those

who would enter the Promised Land would be those born living under God's covenant, for whom the wilderness was their classroom. What everyone thought was going to be a short journey turned into something much, much longer. But then, as the Talmud says, "There is a long way which is short and a short way which is long." When something comes too easily or too quickly, we don't always appreciate it.

The word *midbar*, often translated as wilderness, occurs nearly 300 times in the Bible. It is a formative word in our communal narrative, mixing experiences of wild landscape, of searching for a promised land, and of encounters with God. The wilderness is a locale for intense experience - of stark need for food and water satiated by manna and quails; of isolation - as experienced by Moses atop Sinai; of danger and divine deliverance - such as the trial of Hagar and Ishmael; of renewal and encounters with God - like Moses at the Burning Bush. There is a psychology as well as a geography of wilderness, a finding oneself in a place cut off from the pings and rings of a connected life. The word *Midbar* can be vocalized differently to become *me'da'ber* meaning, "a place of speaking." It is often in the wilderness, in that space for reflection where we can hear ourselves, where we can hear others, where we can hear God and where we can say what needs to be said. Of course, the wilderness - at least the outdoor part of it - isn't for everyone.

About 20 years ago, the Central Conference of American Rabbis held its annual convention in Monterey, California, right on the Pacific Ocean. Rabbi Howard Jaffe and I flew to San Jose. There we rented a car and drove west. He drove. I navigated. When we reached highway 1, that thin strip of pavement hugging the Pacific coast, I said, "Turn left." Had we turned right, we would've been at the hotel in minutes. These were the days before GPS and Google Maps. We drove... for a long time. Eventually, we realized we had gone the wrong way.

But all the while I kept saying, “This is great!” With the ocean to my right, untouched hills to our left and a full moon overhead, I was in a space where I felt totally alive. What I didn’t realize was that Howard, his hands gripping the steering wheel, was having a hard time. Raised in Queens and living his whole life in the Northeast he kept thinking, “Great!? Where are all the buildings?”

For some, the *midbar* and its openness serves as a liberating place. For others, its expansiveness and lack of boundaries can overwhelm, debilitate. In some cases, the same person can experience both reactions.

I imagine that for some of us, being in what now feels like a never ending wilderness is exhausting, even frightening. It is for me. We don’t know when this will end. We don’t know what is around the next corner. The on again, off again masking is exhausting, the undulating graph lines of covid surges are disconcerting. Prescriptions for anti-depressant and anxiety medications are way up. My therapist friends are still busier than ever. Like our Israelite ancestors, we might already be romanticizing the “before times,” even if they weren’t really better. Even the vaccines of the day - Manna, quail and the visual presence of God - while initially giving a high degree of confidence seemed to wane over time. The truth is that, for many of our Israelite ancestors, the wilderness was a place of disequilibrium.

For others though, and for many of us, the wilderness can be a place of opportunity for serious growth, a new landscape and a new territory that disrupts our typical patterns.

In January 2019, I participated in a week-long Outward Bound program. It was personally transformative. Designed by German Jewish educator Kurt Hahn - who had fled Nazi Germany to Britain - the program was designed to train young merchant marines how to survive in harsh conditions. Knowing how precious time was, Hahn made the outdoors his classroom. It

wasn't that he wanted people to know how to thrive in the outdoors - although that is certainly a benefit - Hahn wanted people to be able to thrive, period. He viewed the wilderness as an accelerant for disruptive change because for most people, it is an unfamiliar place. When I went on Outward Bound, I thought it was all going to be about the physical challenge. Over time, I realized that the purpose of the program was to put the participants into a place of discomfort to teach us many things. The first is, "There is more to us than we know. If we can be made to see it, perhaps for the rest of our lives, we will be unwilling to settle for less." The theory behind this is that people can only learn best when they are uncomfortable. If you are in your comfort zone, in a place where everything is known, you're not growing, you're not learning. If you're in a place of panic, of fight or flight, there is no learning either. The premise of Outward Bound is to take people out of what is comfortable and known to them while keeping them away from panicking and freaking out. That is where the greatest learning takes place.

In many ways, the origin story of our people follows a similar pattern. Our story begins in bondage, in servitude in Egypt. It is both a place of deep discomfort and of comfort. The Hebrew word for Egypt, Mitzrayim, means a narrow strait. It's a place where it feels like the walls are pressing in. All you are doing is just trying to survive. At the same time, Egypt was a place that was known. In our servitude we had grown complacent. The sages teach that one reason we were enslaved for 430 years is because we had become resigned to our lot. Even if we could, we lacked the will to change our situation, no matter how horrible it was. In both the place of deep discomfort and overwhelming comfort, one cannot learn. Instead of taking us the short way, by way of the Philistines, God took us BaMidbar, into the wilderness because, as the Talmud teaches, "there is a long way which is short and a short way which is long." God was the first Outward Bound instructor, making us feel safe, seen and loved - giving us food, drink,

shelter and a route to follow. And in that place of Midbar, of wilderness, we could learn, we could grow, we could become the best version of ourselves. We needed to take the long way.

Now that we are still in this wilderness - and let's be honest, we are in it longer than any of us anticipated, none of us are comfortable. It's a fair guess that on some days, with all this uncertainty, we might be on the outer edge of the learning coming precariously close to panicking. We are also at a place where we can ask ourselves, how will we use this experience to really learn, to reflect on where we are and who we want to be? Yom Kippur is a perfect day to begin this process for yourself. Can you take time today for a solo walk, for journaling? Can you ask yourself how you want to show up in the world, how you can be more present, more compassionate and empathetic? As my therapist friend Betsy Stone keeps asking, "What will be your Covid Keepers?" This sacred community can be a perfect place to process some of these wilderness experiences, even as we are in it. To do so, we will offer this year, on a monthly basis, a chance to explore the virtues of humility, generosity, equanimity and how we can practice them. It's a Jewish practice called Mussar. I will also offer it for our 10th graders - who need it as much as anyone, if not more. And Cantor Cooperman, along with a trained lay facilitator, will offer a series of sessions to come together, to process what this wilderness experience has taught us and to think about who and what we want to be once we emerge. Discomfort and adversity are the greatest teachers. This moment provides us with an opportunity pregnant with possibility.

The other thing Kurt Hahn taught is that we need each other. No person is an island.

If Covid has taught us anything, it's that we are really dependent on one another. We may be on different ships but we are in the same storm. We need each other. We know this. Academic studies on loneliness during this pandemic bear that out. The key to easing pain, to

avoiding the downward spiral into loneliness and depression is a robust social network. This is at the heart of what synagogue is all about. I often think about the founders of this congregation who understood the importance of community, so much so that they put it in the name.

One of the ways the Israelites sustained themselves in the wilderness was by caring for one another. We are told that the women, the elderly and the disabled marched at the back in order to be protected from oncoming armies. When they camped, each tribe camped around the Tabernacle in such a way that they could see another tribe. They made sure that no one felt isolated or alone. Everyone mattered. The census taken in the Book of Numbers states that there were 603,500 men of fighting age. The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the modern Hasidic movement, commented that this number equals the numbers of letters in a Torah scroll. He goes on to note that the Jewish people are like a living Torah scroll, and every individual Jew is a letter within it. If a single letter is damaged or missing or incorrectly drawn, a Torah scroll is considered invalid. So too, in Judaism, each individual is considered a crucial part of the people, without whom the entire religion would suffer. Everyone matters. No one is left behind. Each person, and their story, is as relevant as everyone else's.

Everyone here matters. We want to support you, we want to hear how covid and this long time in the wilderness has changed you and how, going forward, this community can continue to play a significant role in your life, especially when we emerge from this wilderness. This is why, in addition to what I shared earlier, we are launching a new initiative called "CSR BaMidbar." Over the next weeks and months, we hope to host a number of meetings - most likely on Zoom - to bring small groups of congregants together or in 1 on 1 conversations to mark and make sense of these past months. As we wander as a community, it is important to take stock. We want to know how you have been challenged and what you've learned about yourself and our world,

what wisdom you want to carry forward, and if anything surprised you. And we hope to incorporate what we will learn into strengthening and enriching the Temple's activities and programming. Right now we are gathering and training facilitators. When the invitation for a CSR BaMidbar conversation lands in your inbox, I hope you will sign up. You might be thinking, "this isn't for me. All I want from this synagogue is a place for the high holidays, a place to say kaddish and a member of the clergy when I have a need." You, in fact, are exactly the ones we want to hear from. The community will benefit from your wisdom and we hope you will too. All we are asking is for 1 hour of your time and an opportunity to reflect and to learn. As Marshall Ganz of Harvard once said, "By learning to tell a **story of my calling**, I can communicate my values to others. By attending to the stories of others, and those we share with them, I can communicate values we share — a **story of us**."

I end with a parable attributed to the 19th century master, Rabbi Hayyim of Zans: A man had been wandering about in the wilderness for several days, not knowing which was the right way out. Suddenly he saw a person approaching him. His heart was filled with joy. "*Now I shall certainly find out which is the right way,*" he thought to himself. When they neared one another, he asked: "*Brother, tell me which is the right way. I have been wandering about in this wilderness for several days.*" Said the other to him, "Brother, I do not know the way out either. For I too have been wandering about here for many, many days. But *this* I can tell you: do not take the way I have been taking, for that will lead you astray. And now let us look for a new way out together."

We will emerge from this wilderness. Of that I am sure. Let us take the learnings of this wilderness experience to determine how we want to show up in the world. And let us do so, together.