

## Bamidbar 5777 - The True Wilderness Journey

With this week's Torah portion we begin to get back on the move. Time and space became still at the foot of Mount Sinai but in this book the people will begin to travel. Bamidbar covers 39 years and a number of wilderness locations, those places that we sort-of-know but need to check in the map in the back of the humash – Hazerot, Paran, Kadesh, C'na'an, Tzin, Midyan and so on. Effectively Bamidbar is the final book of Torah – Devarim is recapitulation – and suitably enough, it ends with a record of all of the locations to which the people traveled, which even gets a special tune.

The Latin name for a human being is *homo sapiens*. I've heard teachers say that we are also *homo narratus*, the beings who tell ourselves stories. But also, I suggest, we are *homo itinerantus*, the beings who journey or wander. Bamidbar is the Torah's version of that wandering.

At the beginning of this month, for our final teen class of the year, we talked about journeys - I wanted to notice that two of our students, Emma Stern and Daniel Coman, are graduating and won't be back with us next year. I brought the class this quotation from Franz Kafka:

*I gave orders for my horse to be brought round from the stables. The servant did not understand me. I myself went to the stable, saddled my horse and mounted. In the distance I heard a bugle call, I asked him what this meant. He knew nothing and had heard nothing. At the gate he stopped me, asking: "Where are you riding to, master?" "I don't know," I said, "only away from here, away from here. Always away from here, only by doing so can I reach my destination." "And so you know your destination?" he asked. "Yes," I answered, "didn't I say so? Away-From-Here, that is my destination." "You have no provisions with you," he said. "I need none," I said, "the journey is so long that I must die of hunger if I don't get anything on the way. No provisions can save me. For it is, fortunately, a truly immense journey."*

- Franz Kafka

Exploring Kafka's words gave rise to a wonderful set of conversations and the sharing of some 'immense journeys.' Some talked about journeys that involved actual mileage – to Poland, to Israel; others had journeys which had nothing to do with geography. We ended the session by coming in here, opening the Ark and saying the traveler's prayer for all the journeys about to be undertaken.

What is it about a journey that makes it 'truly immense,' as Kafka would put it? Perhaps it is to do with the sense that there is a call that is intended only for you; the narrator's servant doesn't understand and doesn't seem to hear the bugle. Perhaps it is the lack of a destination - a journey that can't be planned or charted out in advance or quantified. Or perhaps it is the inexorability and inevitability of the journey taking place at all - there's something about the way the narrator tells it that makes it clear that staying put is not an option.

I'm sure that each of us can think of such journeys as well – a process we went through for which we could not plan or prepare, but which changed us and grew us in ways we could not possibly have imagined at the outset. And like the people of Israel, while we might have agreed with the idea in principle, we might not have particularly wanted to go in the first place. Unlike Kafka, we would have been happier to leave the horse in the stable. There's a lovely story Rabbi Ed Feinstein tells about two Israelites crossing the Red Sea who do nothing but complain about how muddy it is and how cold their feet are. Perhaps the amount of complaining we encounter in the book of Bamidbar - and there's a lot of it, Rabbi David Wolpe calls it 'The Book of Grievances,' has to do with a feeling of reluctance to be pulled out of the comfort of the familiar and into the unknown.

But go they must. And even though nearly the whole generation of the Exodus will indeed die on the way, the journey is not negotiable. The Torah cannot be complete without it.

There is an additional dimension that we should notice about the journey the people are about to undertake, and that is its location. Bamidbar is often translated as 'desert,' but more often it means 'wilderness'.

A wilderness is uncultivated, uninhabited and possibly inhospitable - in other words, not a tempting place for a journey. And yet it is wonderfully suited for truly immense journeys, as if the terrain outside is somehow a reflection of the inner journey that is taking place.

The wilderness is a place of chaos. The book of Bamidbar is chaotic in its construction and in its geography. There are no straight lines - rather there is wandering to and fro. Many scholars have written about how the narrative, also, is disorganized, sometimes repetitive, sometimes hard to understand.

The wilderness is also a place of silence. We are so surrounded by sound and noise that sometimes it is almost intimidating to be in a place where there are only natural sounds, or few, or none. There is a similar silence at the heart of the book of Bamidbar; it encompasses 38 years about which we know precisely nothing. Nothing about Moses or Aaron or Miriam; no plot developments; not even kvetching. The silence of the wilderness becomes the people's own silence.

The wilderness is a place of loss. In this book, Aaron, Miriam and all but two of the Exodus generation will die. I'm reminded of the words of Dr Paul Kalanithi, the brave neurosurgeon dead of lung cancer at the age of 37, who in his book charting his experience, *When Breath Becomes Air*, writes:

*"Standing at the crossroads where I should have been able to see and follow the footprints of the countless patients I had treated over the years, I saw instead only a blank, a harsh, vacant, gleaming white desert, as if a sandstorm had erased all trace of familiarity."*

And on our own immense journeys, we too have probably also encountered chaos as we struggle to make sense of what is happening; and silence, as we struggle for meaning but receive no reply; and loss. We might well have preferred not to be put through the experience.

Yet this book of the Torah seems to teach us that each of us, like our ancestors before us, must undertake the immense journey through the wilderness must be made. It is unavoidable.

The Rabbis note the similarity between the word for wilderness - *midbar* - and the word for speaking, *daber*. A wilderness journey - a true wilderness journey, one which may or may not involve a change in our geography but which always involves a change in our landscape - speaks to us. It transforms us.

Every year at this season, the Torah reminds us that because we are human, the immense journey must be undertaken; and that we must cross the wilderness; and that we will not know the destination; and that huge changes might happen on the way. But it is only a true wilderness journey that helps us to find out who we truly are.

Shabbat shalom.

Postscript -

Temporary homes during the journey of Bamidbar - the sukkot

Project is finally beginning!

And with it, our fundraiser: we will build a brick pathway to our expanded and refurbished Sukkah

We hope that every brick will mark some aspect of a journey made by someone in our community.

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