

Wilderness and Hope Sermon

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As a rabbi you want to speak to eternal themes on the High Holidays, hope, suffering, and what it is to be Jewish. But you also must address the moment, whether it's a crisis in Israel or in America and our crisis is the COVID-19 pandemic. But with the arrival of vaccines, I had planned on this sermon being about what we had learned from our experience, the ways we had grown— a sermon of hope. Yet even before the Delta variant, one could feel something was afoot. The good news was once vaccinated, people flocked to see the family they had missed since March 2020. We also went to the homes of people we missed and trusted, and to restaurants, because, well, we love restaurants. But in May, when we resumed in person services here at TBI, the sanctuary was strangely quiet – not empty, but sparsely filled. By and large we were still going to services by Zoom, and when I asked after this I heard, “I'm just waiting to see how this all goes, I still don't feel comfortable”

It seemed to me we would not be ourselves as a congregation until something called to us to leave Zoom and be together at TBI and I concluded that something was food. Until we could socialize at an oneg or potluck, in person, life at TBI would not resume. I surmised the sermon that was called for was about how central food is in Jewish life and how that's a good thing. But that felt irrelevant as the Delta variant hit and our fabulous summer melted away, which brings us to a third theme, about how we are still in the wilderness that is COVID and how much Jewish tradition has to say about this.

Wilderness, *midbar*, is central to the Jewish story and is synonymous with the desert which is wild and desolate. It is where the Jewish people learned to grow free and where we came into covenant with God and the beauty of faith, values and tradition. Wednesday, we will read how when Abraham's junior wife Hagar is expelled into the wilderness God is revealed to her. So too, Moses flees into the wilderness of Midian and receives the call from God to lead the Israelites to freedom. But the wilderness also has moments of terror. The Israelites escape Egypt into the *midbar* and they are overcome with boredom, distress and fear. Unbelievably, they beg to return to the safety of Egypt, “we remember the cucumbers we used to eat for free.” (Numbers 11:5) Could anything be worse than returning to slavery? Some of us may ask, could anything be worse than returning to lockdown? Perhaps, but a return to the terrible illness and death of last winter doesn't sound so good either.

A wilderness story that captures this moment is that of the 12 Israelite spies or scouts. It's from the book of *B'midbar*, Numbers and you may know it. After two years of travel, the Israelites are on the southern border of the Land of Israel, NW of Eilat, and Moses is tasked by God to choose a leader from each tribe to scout the land. The 12 scouts come back from their journey and give two sets of reports. One is from Caleb and Joshua, who are confident the land is conquerable. The other is from the 10 spies who think their chance of success is nil because the land is filled with *Nephilim*, giants, and they report that “we look like grasshoppers to them.” The people panic and refuse to invade the land, consequently, God rages against them. In turn they invade Canaan in an attempt to regain God's favor, but now, without God's sanction, are defeated. The Israelites are consigned to wander in the wilderness for 38 more years until two generations can be raised as free people, capable of understanding what it means to take measured risks.

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I put this story before you, not to make the case that if only we would embrace more risk, life would return to normal, or that God will restore everything for us, or that we are doomed to 38 more years of wandering in the COVID wilderness. It is instead an illustration of what it is to feel the uncertainty of being in the wilderness, about wilderness as a place of that robs us of the familiar, in our case, of being able to be in public spaces without worry. To paraphrase Catherine Madsen, because fear and sorrow are closer to the surface of public life than modern Americans have known before.

I have read many calls to embrace the beauty of the wilderness. Rabbi Tracy Nathan writes

*The midbar is a place of daytime heat and nighttime cold, of dryness and disorientation...at the same time, it is a place of exquisite beauty, watering holes, and quiet solitude.*

But I don't think we're ready to embrace such beauty or that we feel its presence. It takes time before one knows the power and beauty of the wilderness, they are wandering in. Going to the desert when you know a verdant place awaits your return, is different from being in the wilderness without a sense of how it ends. One can feel this in the Israelite reaction to the report of the scouts. One can feel this today, as some of us are in the sanctuary, others on Zoom, and let us not forget, others simply absent. Many parts of our lives have been jumbled around and they will not land back where they were before. More than one person took me aside last year to say that they found High Holiday Zoom services to be more meaningful than being in the sanctuary because they were in the quiet, contemplative space of their home. Working from home was a revelation to many people. The opened-up world we will return to will not be the one we knew before the lockdown.

Just before the Israelites are about to cross into the Land of Israel Moses says to them, "*Remember the long way that the LORD your God has made you travel in the wilderness these past forty years*" Deut. 8:2. We do not know yet how this experience of the wilderness will shape us as Jews, as individuals, and as a society. What we can say is that resilience is as much a part of life as is tragedy, as much a fact. Before we can make sense of what our experience in this wilderness means, we need to embrace the experience of "the long way," that it is precisely the sense of disorientation and endlessness that makes wilderness journeys so profound.

I don't want to use the word gift for this experience. There has been too much suffering to ever call this past year a gift. But may our hearts and minds be open to the ways wilderness can transform us for the good, and may we be blessed in this New Year, 5782, to come together as a congregation, a community, and a nation, to help mitigate this suffering and hasten our journey out of the wilderness.