

Parashat B'shallach: Facing the Wildernes

Today we're going to start at the end. Meaning, instead of focusing on the many rich details of this week's parashah, on the beautiful song of the sea we just read, on our ancestors' courageous final escape from bondage.... We're going to zoom in on the very last verse of the 7th aliyah that we read this week.

That verse, Exodus 16 verse 10, goes like this:

וַיְהִי כַּדְבָּר אֲהֲרֹן אֶל-כָּל-עַדְת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּפְּנוּ אֶל-הַמִּדְבָּר
וַהֲיָה כְבוֹד יְהוָה נִרְאָה בְּעָנָן: {פ}

And so it was, as Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, that they turned toward the wilderness, and there, in a cloud, appeared the Presence of יהוה in a cloud

The Hebrew word “וַיִּפְּנוּ”, translated here as “turned”, more accurately translates as “faced”. That is to say that after seemingly endless years of suffering and abuse, after being lied to, taken advantage of, mistreated, and having loved ones

murdered, after being chased across the sand, witnessing an incomprehensible miracle at the splitting of the sea, and then cathartically singing their wonder and praise to the skies...

After all of this, the Israelites turned, and truly faced the wilderness, the vast and daunting expanse in front of them, and there they found God.

Now, the wilderness, that is, the world beyond the life they knew in Egypt, existed long before that moment, of course. But they never had to face it before. They never had to face the potential that comes with freedom, the choices that come with the power of not being controlled by someone else. It was in that moment, with Pharaoh and the plagues and splitting sea behind them, that the enormity of the unknown in front of them, the enormity of their unwritten future, became real for the Israelites. There was no going back to who they were before-- there was only moving forward, into the future.

There is a rabbinic saying, Kol hat'halot kashot - all beginnings are difficult.

And this new beginning must have been scary and overwhelming for the Israelites. For generations, all they had known was slavery in Egypt. They had grown up as slaves, raised children as slaves, buried elders as slaves, and all of a sudden they were not only being told that another way of life was possible, but actually seeing that other possibility rolling out in front of them, miles and miles of sand and rock and open space.

A common metaphor for both an individual person's life or even the history of an entire people is to liken the years or eras we live through to chapters in a novel, experienced one after another, with twists and turns and ultimately, a conclusion whose specifics we can't be sure of until it happens. Though perhaps overly simplistic, this metaphor can also be useful, especially for those tasked with writing history books and eulogies.

It's also a valuable thought experiment to employ this metaphor and analyze who we have become, how we got where we are, and where we want to go as individuals and communities. With the power of hindsight, we can look back

across our lives and divide our experiences into logical sequences, able to explain with the clarity of retrospect which occurrences inspired which changes, which events were truly connected, and which moments that might have seemed significant at the time, in reality, weren't that important after all.

We can also, sometimes, identify the moments where we ceased being one version of ourselves, and became who we now are.

At the end of our reading today, B'nai Yisrael stood at one of those significant moments. A seismic shift of identity and experience was pulsing through them. The literal waters had settled behind them, but the metaphorical ones were still roiling.

All of us have experienced major changes like this in our lives. Sometimes, these moments of seismic shift are on a societal level and out of our individual control. None of us knew, for example, five years ago, that we were about to all experience a significant global pandemic. Our lives changed almost

overnight, and the shared experiences and painful lessons we have learned from lockdown, isolation, and social distancing bound us together in ways most of us had never considered before, because we never had to. These were lessons of loneliness, of self-care, of community care, and of patience. They were valuable-- but we had no real warning beforehand that we were going to have to learn them. And I can pretty much guarantee that for all of us old enough to remember, there is now a “before time” and “after time” in terms of how we think about the time before and after we ever heard the name “Covid-19”.

But a life-chapter ending can also be intensely personal. The day almost a decade ago when I spoke on the phone to the Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and decided to become a rabbi, my life changed more than I ever could have imagined. Who I was and how the world would react to me changed that day, for the rest of my life, and I didn't even realize it, as I happily made plans and bought airplane tickets and packed my bags for California.

But now, looking back, it is crystal clear to me: something permanent and significant happened, then. A chapter ended. That will never be undone, and because of that change, I will never be the same. One part of my life was ending, and another was beginning.

The same is true when we work towards any goal, towards a graduation, towards the day of a marriage, towards a job promotion, towards, say, becoming a bat mitzvah-- the process is immense, and it changes us. There are so many unknowns in the beginning, so many things to learn, many unanswered questions about what will happen and how we will feel, that even though we know that that moment is coming, even though we prepare and prepare for it, there's no way to know until afterwards how the experience was going to change us, and what significance it would ultimately have in the bigger picture of our lives.

(And Mia, by the way, I would love to hear your thoughts in a few months about what it's like, looking back, to have gone through this process and achieved this amazing goal of becoming bat mitzvah.) Sometimes looking at things in

retrospect opens our eyes to new truths about our experiences.

Because one of those truths is that arriving at a goal, finishing a chapter in that novel of life, actually means arriving at the beginning of the next goal, the beginning of the next chapter. As much as we all love to relax and unwind, the human heart doesn't do well without a challenge and without something to wonder and dream about. Even the mystery of the final chapter in all of our lives-- the chapter of death-- is imagined by pretty much every civilization as being another adventure, another journey, another opportunity for growth-- and that growth comes from facing the unknown, and learning from it.

For B'nai Yisrael, for our ancestors standing on the far side of the sea, with Egypt behind them, there was no way of knowing that their next chapter, OUR next chapter as a people, would span four decades of wandering and wondering, decades punctuated by battles, famine, infighting, teamwork and collaboration, and endless sacred learning and exploration. There was no way for them to know, as they turned to face the wilderness, what that wilderness would

hold-- and that must have been a little scary. But they knew, when they faced that wilderness, that God was there, waiting for them, always accompanying them. And that faith, ultimately, is what gave them the strength to move forward into the desert.

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כְּבוֹד יְהוָה נִרְאָה בְּעָנָן: {פ}

And as Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they turned toward the wilderness, and there, in a cloud, appeared the Presence of יהוה.

The Israelites had to turn and make the choice to see that God would be there with them in the wilderness; to face the unknown, to accept its questions, to choose to embrace their faith in the larger process at work, something that they were still smack-dab in the middle of.

They had arrived at the end of part of their journey, but the greater journey was still very much ongoing.

The same is true for the more modern portion of our novel as a people.

In 1948, the founding of the modern State of Israel seemed to many Jews to be a miraculous capstone following years of horrific persecution. Directly on the heels of the Holocaust, the establishment of a Jewish state in the Holy Land was, in many ways, both the creation of a safe haven for a traumatized people, and the fulfillment of a yearning that had followed countless generations of our ancestors.

The Israeli National Anthem, HaTikvah, speaks to this ancient longing to return to this land, saying,

Ode lo avdah tikvatenu Hatikvah bat shnot alpayim:

Our hope is still not lost-- our two-thousand-year-old hope.

For as long as we had been a people, we had yearned for that moment, yearned to return, held onto that goal that stretched beyond individual lifetimes and became a core part of our identity.

And so, it is understandable that the birth of the modern State of Israel in some ways felt like having arrived at the fulfillment of that hope, the fulfillment of that dream, like having arrived at the finish line of an arduous race. It felt like reaching the end of an important, painful journey.

But as with any goal we work towards, as with any dream that drives us, arriving at the fulfillment of that dream didn't actually mean that we were done growing and working on ourselves as a people or that our journey was over.

We know now, with 75 more years of Israeli history behind us, that while the founding of the modern State of Israel was indeed the end of one chapter, it immediately began a new one, which we are still very much in the throes of: Seven and a half decades of the growth pangs of a new nation, a nation still struggling to come to terms with its own identity within and with its role in the world around it, trying not just to survive but to thrive with neighbors that are often hostile, and a world that has not always been welcoming.

I find great comfort from a specific phrase in the prayer for the State of Israel that we recite each week. The prayer for the state of Israel asks of God, to please, Barech et medinat Yisrael, Reshit zmichat geulatenu.

Bless the state of Israel, the beginning of the sprout of our redemption.

It doesn't say Bless the state of Israel, which is the fulfillment of our redemption. It asks God to please bless the beginning of the sprout of our redemption.

To me, that prayer whispers to us that we are still on the way towards redemption... and that that's ok. That prayer reminds us that working towards being the best version of who we can be is a process, and that the process itself is sacred, too. The process is its own wilderness, and God is there in the wilderness with us.

Truly facing the complexity of the wilderness we are in, as a people, doesn't mean giving up or saying we have failed. To the contrary: accepting the reality of where we are can give us

the strength to move forward, just like it did for B'nai Yisrael, standing on the other side of the sea.

We can feel it in our hearts, since October 7th, that we are now living through a significant and painful chapter for the Jewish people, and that is hard. Really, really hard. But it is also a privilege to live in times such as these, a privilege to have the opportunity to speak and make our voices and hearts known, even while they break, and to know that what we do and what we say matters. I wish we did not have to live in time such as these, but we do. And the question is: are we facing this wilderness?

We don't know what's going to happen, and we don't know what the future holds for us. We don't know if it will be another forty years of metaphorical wandering. But we do have a choice in how we rise up to meet the times that have been given to us.

I imagine that that's kind of what B'nai Yisrael felt like, that day so long ago, standing there at the edge of the wilderness, searching for the strength to move forward. And I imagine

that they found great strength both in the presence of God and in knowing that when they stood there, on the edge of that wilderness, that they were not standing there alone, but surrounded by loved ones.

If we look left and right today, and see all of the people in this room, and feel all of the love here, yes, there is a scary world out there, but we are not alone as we face it.

Like B'nai Yisrael, caught in the liminal space between slavery and the desert, we too are actually smack-dab in the middle of the road, still very much in the process of moving and growing towards who we will become as people and as a nation. And like B'nai Yisrael, our only way forward is to truly turn and FACE the metaphorical wilderness that is around us, and to see it for all that it is,

Like B'nai Yisrael, as we move through this wilderness, even when it's scary, the key is to remember that we aren't going through it alone. And like B'nai Yisrael, we have to remember to open our eyes and our hearts and see that God is also there in the wilderness, waiting for us, ready to accompany

us, through whatEVER comes in life's next chapter. And we are here for each other, too.

Shabbat Shalom.