

Rosh Hashanah Evening 5779
An Odyssey of Awe: Into the Wilderness

This past year, we finished reading the last of the Harry Potter series to our older daughter. And by we, I mean mostly Julia. We were adults when this story came out, and we followed it religiously as part of our own dive into pop culture as this magical world unfolded, and had the gift of reliving it through the eyes of our child.

One of the sweet parts of parenting is the rereading and reliving favorite stories with our children, who will hopefully delight in the characters and tales that have formed our own landscapes. Another particularly sweet part of my role as both a parent and a rabbi was being able to spend a week at Camp Havaya in the Poconos, one of our Reconstructionist Movement's two summer camps. Amidst a week of painting prayers on butcher paper, zumba, teaching middot/Jewish experiential education, and b'nai mitzvah practice, I taught the camp staff over lunch. My topic:

"Why are all our stories the same? Connecting Harry Potter, Star Wars, the Wizard of Oz, and Torah"

We have read the Harry Potter series together, watched all of the movies in the Star Wars saga (in the correct order, starting with Episode 4), and seen the Wizard of Oz onstage and on film.

Full Disclosure: as a family, we've never done this with the Torah. And I'm guessing most of you haven't either.

Why not? Despite the fact that we read the Torah every year, over and over, we don't know it nearly as well as the others. But all the same, we revere it. It never gets shelved completely.

The worlds of JK Rowling or L Frank Baum or George Lucas aren't nearly as old or as weighty as Torah, but in one narrative essence, they're the same story. Dr. Joseph Campbell, American professor of comparative mythology and religion, whose magnum work, The Hero With a Thousand Faces traces the thread of the archetypal hero across mythologies. Campbell's thesis is that all of these stories are essentially the same, and they teach us not about a particular culture or story, but about the more universal nature of seeking.

Briefly, Campbell's theory is that the hero is born to challenging circumstances, and through no effort of their own, receives the call to adventure, and becomes the one to lead the larger community to defeat the common enemy. The hero will do this by gathering an unlikely band of colleagues, finding a mentor, embarking on a road of trials, and setting off to parts unexplored. The originally doubting hero will ultimately rise to the challenge and redeem the entire community.

Dorothy, Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter... and Moses. Dorothy, who lives in Black and White, will gather the Scarecrow, the TinMan and the Lion to battle the Wicked Witch. Luke is an orphan who lives on a humidity farm, gathers Han, 3PO, Chewbacca and Leia to defeat Darth Vader across the Galaxy Far Far Away. Harry, growing up in a closet amongst evil relatives, accompanied by Ron, Hermione and Neville, will defeat Voldemort at Hogwarts. The mentors, Glinda, ObiWan and Yoda, and Dumbledore, reflect and guide and shape their experiences.

For us, our Torah fits the same mold. Moses is born a slave in poverty, is adopted and raised by his adoptive mother where he is complicit in enslavement, leaves his home and receives the call at the Burning Bush, gathers Aaron and Miriam to his side, is mentored by Yitro and battles Pharaoh and the other enemies throughout the desert to ultimately lead the Israelites - us - through the wilderness to the promised land.

Every year, as I sit to write these sermons, I look for good background to keep my juices flowing. Sometimes (often) it's a continuous rerun of the West Wing that loops as I write. The music of Nava Tehila of Jerusalem has accompanied me, and recently, thanks to JRC member Nina Lynn, so has a podcast called Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, in which two divinity school students apply biblical scholarship techniques to Harry Potter. I love it.

Tonight we begin our trek through the Yamim Nora'im. Who is the hero? What is the quest? Who are our band of misfits? Where are we going? Over the next 10 days, the Odyssey begins.

WHO IS OUR HERO?

As Reconstructionists, we are not seeking one voice at the top to lead us where we are going - we are all Moses. Or, as Joan Baez once wrote, we are the hero of our own story. All of us are Moses, Dorothy, Harry and Luke. Consider this the call.

Some of us prepared for our journey a week ago in the dark with Selichot, and some of us are settling in now reacclimating ourselves to the feeling of the pews under our bodies in this room. Some of us began our preparations by packing boxes, unfurling the drapes and hanging signs. Some of us have been singing the strains of the holiday music for months as we prepare to lead this community in prayer and song. Some of us made brisket. It is certain that many of us do not consider ourselves coming from dangerous or meager circumstances, but in the grand scheme of the universe, we are but a speck. The Hineni prayer says,

“Hineni he’ani mima’at...” Here am I, poor in deed, rattled and afraid in awe of God who sits in wait for the praises of Israel, standing to plead before Adonai... though I am not fit or worthy for the task. In the majestic construct of the High Holidays, we remind ourselves of just how small we are.

Solomon An Ski, poet of the *Haskalah* period wrote, “Whatever place a person stands and looks toward heaven is the holiest of places. Every day throughout one’s life is a day of atonement, and every person is a kohen gadol, and every word a person utters in a state of holiness is a name of God.”

WHAT IS OUR QUEST?

The call of the High Holidays is *Heshbon Hanefesh*, the accounting of our souls. The work that happens in these holy days is to go back through our year, month by month, experience by experience, relationship by relationship and account for what we have done. We don’t merely apologize when we get to *Ashamnu* next week on Yom Kippur; if we choose to embark on this quest, the task is enormous.

Is this quest an escape from reality? Does this quest imply we are leaving everything behind? Or are we escaping in order to frame and re-engage with reality in a meaningful way. The escape can fill us with the much needed space to renew. In the escape, we find the revelation.

This is a quest, an epic search. We are not merely sitting here as passive observers. The shofarot all around this room is a wakeup alarm. We will get out of our prayers as much as we are willing to put in to them. We cannot merely say the words *Hineni* continues, as the speaker sings:

*Pray do not convict others of my sins
or obligate them for my transgressions,
for I am a sinner and wrongdoer.
Let others not be disgraced for my crimes
and let others not be ashamed of me—
and let me not be ashamed of them.*

This is the heart of the prayer, and of the entire communal exercise of repentance. No one is really pure enough. We all have work to do. What have we done? Really... what have we done? What can be repaired? What is our responsibility to initiate? What do we need to let go of? Acknowledge. Apologize. Action for change. We will dig into the trenches of our hearts and our minds and our souls and take the hard look. We will be a mirror for each other, which is painful and bold. The hero is us.

WHO DO WE GO WITH?

As Campbell notes, and as we can see tonight, this is not a solitary quest. Our ritual of redemption, of teshuvah, is not us alone in the mountains or desert. It’s here in the crowd.

We don't leave behind everything, rather this is where we pack up everything we have. We hold it on our backs and in the pits of our stomach. Our baggage is all carry-on, stuffed with zippers bursting to carry all the things we've done, all the things we've accumulated. We carry our stories and hopes. The things we can't let go of, the resentments and anger. We carry the ancestors on whose shoulders we are standing. Our Jewish journey into the wilderness is not a journey we could possibly take alone.

Now, this is not comfortable for everyone. Sometimes there's too many around us. Some of us are looking for solitary space, but the wilderness is expansive - it even has a balcony, and a courtyard. Some of these folks are not the people we imagined that we would be taking this trip with. Some of them we've chosen, many of them we have not. Some of them are coming on this journey willingly and others are along for the ride. Some of them we have to carry because they're too small or too whiny or they haven't figured out where to go yet. We will feed each other. We don't have a choice.

SO WHERE DO WE GO?

Wilderness is the place our hero goes when the oppression of home becomes too much. Sometimes it is by choice, as it is all too easy for Harry to leave the cupboard for a castle. Sometimes by disaster, or by force and eviction, when the conditions both outer and inner leave us with no other choice. Something HAS to change. The landscape is unexplored territory, and while the omniscient reader has the advantage of knowing the potential that lies there, the hero wanders and is ready - or not - for the surprises that come her way. Some will challenge us and leave us open-mouthed, astonished. Some will be beautiful, welcome surprises.

When we go into the wilderness, we suspend reality, which directs the rhythm of our lives and responsibilities. But if we let it, if we can give ourselves permission to leave the daily and put down our phones and our to do lists, our hands open up to hold something bigger.

We need to escape, to head a space where we have some distance. Whether it is a fantasy novel, a few hours in a dark theater, a castle with passageways, yellow brick roads, or a wandering in the desert with bushes that burn, the escape clears away the ordinary and can open up space for reflection and revelation.

The wilderness is the place you go when you become disenchanted with reality or it becomes disenchanted with you. Tonight, we enter into our wilderness. One of the beautiful elements of praying in our church is precisely that we don't pray in it every week. It's a once-a-year sanctuary for us, both familiar and exotic. As the candles were lit tonight, we moved from *chol* - the mundane - into the *kodesh* - the sacred destination.

Because in Judaism, the wilderness is where all the good stuff happens. The wilderness is that place of discovery, of noticing. It the place in which we are faced with the most difficult versions of ourselves. It is the place where all of our story really takes place, the place of discovery and learning. Wilderness is the place of possibility.

Not to create a story spoiler alert on the first page of the holidays, but when we end this book with Simchat Torah, we will have spent 4/5ths of the Torah in the wilderness. The majority of our story is not in the destination but on the road, which some say starts with Eve, not just Moses. We will wander from the edge of Egypt to the edge of the Promised Land. And here's the not-so-spoiler: We never leave.

Our story will end on the wilderness side of the Promised Land. We get to the edge, we are listening to Moses, ready to wade into the Jordan River. And then Moses will die, and we will proclaim his legacy of leadership, and then we will chant in the same breath, "*Bereshit, bara Elohim.*" We start from Creation all over again, and we never really get there. We live in the wilderness always.

It's not so different from everything we needed being in our own backyard, or the realization that we've always had the power within us. The wilderness is always here for us to access. But without the push or the oft-repeated journey, we'd never have gained enough self-knowledge to believe we had it in us all along. The High Holidays gives us the structure we need to push us out the door and fly.

Joseph Campbell wrote, "We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. And where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world."

Tonight we are Harry and Dorothy and Luke and Moses. We are fighting Voldemort and Vader and Pharaoh - perhaps not an external enemy or perhaps one we can name, perhaps seeing our own faces in the one we are fighting. Does it diminish the power of Torah as holy when we put it in the same category as pop culture, or is it sacrilegious to elevate Harry Potter and Star Wars to sacred text?

I don't think so. Yes they are fundamentally different texts and we treat them differently in our rituals, but tonight we are on a quest for meaning. We might think that some of the sentences or scenes in Hogwarts or Oz are too mundane to be full of meaning, or in the case of Torah, too outdated or arcane or patriarchal or aggressive or mysterious to be able to find meaning. So how do we derive it? The meaning doesn't come from the text itself. This is not what has enabled Torah survive as a bedrock of the Jewish people for 3,000 years. The meaning has to come from us. The text becomes a vehicle through which we understand ourselves, our community, and the world. In Pirkei Avot, 5:22 - the Sage Ben Ben Bag teaches, *Hafoch ba, hafoch ba, d'cholah bah*. Turn it, turn it, for everything is in it. Search in these teachings, for all is contained within them. This is not about Torah per se. It is about us.

Turn it, turn it, for everything is in it. Turn us, turn us, look deep and then look from another angle, for everything is in us. This is not in anyway my advocating that we switch our weekly chart reading to a weekly podcast with Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings, although *lectio divina* - the reading of a text as sacred - would make a great school elective or adult ed class. But what is essential is that even in the most arcane or disturbing of passages, it is us who gives it the meaning. It is us, and the legacy of Jews, a legacy of a people who 5,779 years ago decided that telling the story of who we are and how we live is what holds us together. This is not only the story of how we came to be as individuals, but how we came to be a WE, how we became a collective, gives us a context to find meaning.

This Rosh Hashanah, we turn ourselves turn inward, turn outward, and turn ourselves over again. Tonight we are all heroes. We look around this wilderness into which we have stepped with fear, with questions, with regrets and with hope. We look around with open eyes and ears, we see our fellow travelers. Our hearts are wide open to the creation of our story for another year.

Lectio Divina - may we read it with the eyes of God.

Rabbi Rachel Weiss
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5779
September 9, 2018