

## **In the Wilderness**

**Rabbi Mona Alfi**

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### **Shabbat Bamidbar – Memorial Day Shabbat**

My parents died when I was in 1st grade. So from 1st grade through 12th grade, I lived in Laguna Beach with my grandparents. In so many ways I think of my life as “before” living there, or “afterwards.” While it is a time filled with some happy memories, I don’t think of it as a particularly happy time for me. It was a time of trying to figure out who I was, and who I wanted to be. A time consumed with grieving the past and anticipating a future that I prayed would be better than my present. And, yet so much of who I am was shaped by that time of my life.

While I was living at the beach, what it felt like was that I was in the middle of a wilderness, not a physical one, but certainly an emotional and spiritual one. When I felt overwhelmed by life I would go down to the ocean. There was a particular place that I loved to go to. Up on the bluffs above the beach there was a giant triangular monument with a bench wrapped around it’s base. I would sit there and read, or simply stare out at the endless ocean in front of me, finding comfort in the calming blue vastness, and I would daydream about would it be like when I finally could set down roots.

In Hebrew, the word for wilderness is “midbar.” This week’s Torah portion, and the Book of the Torah that we begin this Shabbat, are both known as “Bamidbar” meaning “In the wilderness.” While this book does not garner as much attention as the other four books of the Torah, most of the 40 years of the Israelites journey was spent in the timeframe that occurs during this book. The book begins “on the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from Egypt, God spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai...” and the book concludes with the Israelites beginning to prepare to enter the Land of Israel.

It’s in the wilderness that we become transformed. We entered the wilderness as slaves, but we left it stronger than we had been before, finally ready to build a nation that was to be established on justice and compassion.

So what happened in that space that transformed us, and enabled us to grow and to mature? The word “מדבר – midbar - wilderness” is written exactly the same as the word “מדבר - medabber – speaking.” It was when we were in the wilderness that we hear God speaking to us, and it was what we heard there that changed us forever. In the wilderness we heard Torah, and learned the laws that would shape us and inspire us. In the wilderness we learned what the purpose of our suffering was for. We suffered so that we would know empathy, and speak up for others who suffered. It was so that we would understand why there was an urgency to bringing justice and compassion into the world. One cannot leave the wilderness untouched by what they have experienced.

Whether talking about an individual or a society, it is in those “in between” places where we discover our weaknesses and our strengths.

The Book of Bamidbar begins with a military census, a reminder to us that we didn't just wander for 40 years, but we also had to fight for our survival as well. The census divides the tribes into battalions and lists the names of the tribal leaders and how many men from each tribe were enrolled to serve.

That monument above the ocean cliff where I loved to sit and think, is a veteran's memorial. The plaque that is on it reads:

THIS MODEST MONUMENT IS DEDICATED  
TO THE MEMORY OF THOSE WHO GAVE  
THEIR LIVES THAT OUR NATION MIGHT  
REMAIN FREE. OUR DEBT TO THEM  
CAN NEVER BE FULLY PAID. MAY THEIR  
SUPREME SACRIFICE GUIDE US, NOW  
AND FOREVERMORE.

AMERICAN LEGION POST 222  
MAY 30, 1959

I am sure that most, if not all, of those from American Legion Post 222 who created the moment in 1959 have long passed away themselves. I have always found it interesting that, unlike most veteran's memorials, they chose not to commemorate those who had died in a particular war, but rather all who had died in service to our country.

On Nov. 10th, 2001, American Legion Post 222 placed a second plaque on the monument. And while it was put up just months after the attack on 9/11, they again chose not to commemorate a particular event. Rather, on that plaque are the words:

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF  
ALL THE BRAVE MEN AND WOMEN  
WHO SERVED IN THE  
ARMED FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES  
DURING TIME OF WAR OR  
PERIODS OF NATIONAL EMERGENCY

NOVEMBER 10, 2001  
AMERICAN LEGION POST 222

This second plaque recognizes that there are times when our troops are called upon to step forward and risk their lives in ways other than in battle. This plaque honors not only those who have died during a war, but also when there are terrorist attacks, while responding to a natural disaster, fighting devastating forest fires, or responding to a deadly virus. There are so many times and different ways when our troops are put into a terrifying wilderness of the unknown where they risk their lives on our behalf.

Right now, we are still in the middle of a national emergency, unsure when the danger will finally pass. And while most of us were ordered to work from home and remain sheltered, our troops were called to step forward and fill the void in critical tasks. Right now more than 40,000 members of the National Guard are serving. This is the largest domestic deployment of the Guard since Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

These troops have been going to nursing homes to test patients and staff, they have worked with mortuaries that have been overwhelmed by the loss of life, and set helped to set up temporary field hospitals. They have worked at different testing sites, and have made sure that food and supplies get where they are needed most, they have provided medical information, and worked with civilian manufacturing companies to produce personal protective equipment, and have even helped state governments process unemployment claims.

So why did our ancestors feel that it was necessary to record a military census in our sacred text? Because to serve the greater good, to work for the well being and safety of one's community, is sacred work.

The census in the book of Numbers is like that monument that I loved to sit at. It is meant to be an eternal memorial, a modest tribute to all those who have lost their lives so that we and our nation might exist, a humble way of saying thank you.

Both the census in the Book of Numbers and memorials of brick and stone are tangible reminders that we do not exist in a vacuum, or are part of just one particular time. But rather, we owe something to the courage that is displayed by so many individuals in each and every generation. We truly stand on the shoulders of all who have come before us.

In some ways we are always in a wilderness, between what was and what might yet be, a place of not knowing, of transition, of hope and fear living side by side, never leaving the past fully behind us, never fully rooted where we are.

This time over the last few months has demanded that we rethink things, question our priorities, ask what and who really matters to us. As a society, we have a new understanding of what is essential, and what is not.

This wilderness that we are in right now has reminded us of how important it is to look for blessings every day, to practice delayed gratification, and to find joy in simple things like going grocery shopping

and daily walks, a new appreciation for things we too often took for granted, like sharing a meal with our loved ones or having a safe home to live in.

We have the opportunity to transform ourselves right now, like our Israelite ancestors did, to become more than what we once were. To break off the shackles of a society that too often seems to value us only for the work that we can do, and instead, become a society that values life itself.

On this Shabbat of Memorial Day weekend, let us take the time to honor and remember all those who have guarded us during our individual and collective journeys through a wilderness and fear, through wars, and during times of national emergencies. And with humility, we give thanks for all those who bravely gave their lives so that we might live in safety and in freedom. Zichronam livracha, may all of their memories forever be a blessing.