

Being Ivrim, Migration ours and others', and Justice

Some of you know that this August I went to the Arizona/Mexico border as part of Faith Floods the Desert, a gathering of clergy and faith leaders from around the country to support and participate in the work of an organization called No More Deaths. They are a humanitarian organization that provides water and other lifesaving aid for migrants crossing the desert. Over the past year, their volunteers have been charged with crimes for attempting to save lives. We joined them, hiking gallons of water into the desert, to affirm that providing lifesaving aid cannot be a crime.

When my friend and I left the motel room before 5am in the small desert town of Ajo, Arizona, the sun was just rising over the mountains spread out in front of us. It was already warm enough to be comfortable in a T shirt. With a slight breeze, the desert air felt magnificent. Though my whole body was anxious to keep moving, to get through the actions of the coming day, I wanted to linger in that beautiful moment and enjoy it with my friend. This was how I knew the desert was awe-inspiring, moving, spiritually compelling, not just deadly hot.

Among the 60 clergy present, there were five rabbis. None of us had been to this desert before, but the connections between this desert experience and Jewish sacred stories about Israelite experience in the desert were palpable for all of us. On our way to Ajo, with the heat over 110 degrees and desert spreading out to the distance in all directions, one rabbi exclaimed, "you know how a cloud followed the Israelites in the desert during the day? If I were wandering through the desert, and a cloud were following me and providing shade, I would definitely believe in God!"

Before our day of hiking to drop water in the desert, we had a day of training. We learned about the history of the area and its residents- people of Mexican descent, Spanish descent, white Americans, Native Americans, plus "snow birds" who winter in the area. In addition, now there are significant numbers of people participating in the border enforcement industry. We learned how people have been migrating through this area for hundreds of years, and the borders have shifted.

The word "migrant" came up frequently, and it wasn't a word I have used a lot before. I had been much more familiar with the word "immigrant," mainly in the context of Jewish communal history of immigration to this country or in the context of supporting immigrant communities in Boston. The guides' use of "migration" helped me see this movement across borders as a fact of human existence. People have been moving themselves and their families to safety and security forever. Some people's migration feels familiar and unremarkable to many of us, like moving across the country to find a better job, to be closer to family. Whether the borders we need to cross look like informational road signs or walled, visa-requiring, militarized points of entry is an accident of birth and circumstances.

The humanness of migration was also underscored for me through the physical experience of bringing water to the desert. To give you a sense of how hot it was, we felt the heat hit our bodies the moment we turned off the AC in the car- not the moment we opened the

door. I was anxious about spending over an hour in that heat, and we had loads of resources at our disposal to make sure we all returned safely from the desert. Those migrating through the desert have bodies made of the same stuff as mine. If I felt this vulnerable in the desert heat, I cannot even imagine how hard it is on those who are compelled to spend days out there.

Indeed, we learned that the night before we arrived in Ajo, the dead body of a man had been found near the outskirts of the town. Unlike many other bodies found, he was identified; he had lived in the US for decades, with a wife and children here. After being deported recently, he was trying to return to them, and this desert crossing was the only way he knew. We heard this news through the tears of one of our facilitators. We gathered money to offset the cost of his burial.

As the word “migrant” was repeated again and again, I realized this too brought me back to Jewish sacred history. In Hebrew, Israelites are *ivrim*, related to the word for the Hebrew language, which is *ivrit*. The root of this word- la’avor- is to cross. The Israelites crossed the desert to become a people in their own land. On Passover, Jews say “we were slaves in Egypt,” metaphorically taking on the Israelite experience of leaving the constriction of slavery and crossing through the sea to freedom as our own story. Essentially, the core story of the Jewish people, *Ivrim*, is a story that centers a migrant experience as our own. This is not at all to equate my own experience as a white, American Jew with that of a migrant Guatemalan crossing the Mexican- American border. Rather, if I identify as *ivri*, I ought to be sensitized to migrant suffering. I cannot ignore how Jewish heritage and identity is so full of similarly perilous migration stories, both ancient and contemporary.

With these thoughts in mind, the opening words of Kol Nidre caught my attention. The liturgy opens:

בִּישׁוּבָהּ שֶׁל מַעְלָה וּבִישׁוּבָהּ שֶׁל מַטָּה
עַל דְּעַת הַמָּקוֹם וְעַל דְּעַת הַקֶּהֶל
אָנוּ מִתִּירִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל עִם הָעֹבְרִינִים

By the authority of the court on high and by the authority of this court below,
With divine consent and with the consent of this congregation,
We grant permission to pray with the *avaryanim-sinners*.

These words state the premise of gathering for Yom Kippur services together. This premise is that we all have permission to be here and seek forgiveness- no matter what guilt weighs us down as we enter, no matter what lines we have crossed. In the Hebrew, when we say that we have permission to pray with sinners, the root of *avaryanim*, sinners, transgressors, is the same as *ivrim*, Israelites, crossers. We have all crossed lines this year that we shouldn't have- this is the essence of why we're here today. We know that, and we want to do better.

As we reflect on our actions and experiences, perhaps the whole t'shuvah process could be understood as an exploration of our own behavior in relation to boundaries we encounter as we travel. I'd like to think the goal is to follow rules we deem just, and to call out and cross rules that are unjust. For example, I do believe in following traffic laws for public safety and working with the 10 commandments as baseline ethics. On the other hand, I do not want to acquiesce to laws or social customs that lift some and oppress others. When I was in Arizona to participate in leaving water for migrants, I knew that our whole group ran the risk of being ticketed for "abandonment of property" in a wilderness refuge. Should we be charged- and it still could happen- we intend to fight the tickets, standing up for the right to provide humanitarian aid. I hate the idea of littering in the wilderness, but I hate the idea of people needlessly dying of exposure in the desert more- especially when other volunteers will be returning to collect the used water bottles.

When we see humanitarian aid criminalized by agents of the American government, where it seems like a tactic of intimidation to keep us from seeing and serving the humanity of migrants, these opening lines that call on both the "court on high" and "this court below" feels particularly poignant. I don't imagine a God literally judging a court somewhere in heaven. But, when justice is clearly perverted through human systems, I do hold dearly to the sense that we have access to our conscience for good reason. The concept of heavenly justice means that we can hold ourselves to a sense of greater purpose than what might be required by existing human systems. It suggests the possibility that we can and should work to make our human justice systems actually reflect true justice to the best of our abilities.

The metaphor of divine justice, more perfect than any human legal system, does more than help us imagine more equitable human systems. Awareness of the yeshiva shel ma'ala- the higher court- gives us the space to do the personal work of t'shuvah. Without a sense that we could do better, that there are ideals that we can strive towards, how would we even begin our work of turning and returning to our better selves?

This year, as I think about my t'shuvah work, this larger metaphor of navigating borders feels relevant on many levels. It seems that living as a human involves crossing and upholding boundaries continuously- whether in personal relationships or societal structures, by choice and by necessity, navigating norms and boundaries that are both just and unjust.

How we understand and respond to boundary crossing in ourselves and others is a huge t'shuva project.

Sometimes we need to do t'shuvah for ourselves, as we assess what lines we have crossed and why, to what effect. Sometimes we need to do t'shuvah for our society and community, as we assess how those social lines separate and judge, lifting some people up, holding others back. Sometimes we need to recognize that the wrong is not in the border crosser but in the border itself. Our awareness of the heavenly court can help us discern the difference.

Tonight we heard, “anu matirin l’hitpalel im ha’avaryanim” - We are all here together tonight, permitted to pray with the explicit purpose of addressing that we have all crossed boundaries. When I think of any aspect of my t’shuva work, whether personal or communal, I can feel comforted that I’m probably not alone in that work.

I would never have gone to Arizona this summer if it hadn’t been for clergy relationships built around immigration work here in Boston. I was motivated through those relationships to learn more, to take a bigger risk, because of issues we all cared about and wanted to work on together. At CDT, being part of this community can mean having partners in this work. Communally, our tikkun olam efforts similarly bring lots of people together to do t’shuva for our treatment of the earth, for allowing our neighbors to be hungry, for the sins of racism and white supremacy through appalling, unjust incarceration and immigration policies. Each step we take can teach us something, and can strengthen us to do a bit more. That said, we need each other’s support to keep going.

In Arizona, one of the guides said to me that she had stopped volunteering as frequently because the emotional weight of all the deaths was getting to be too much. It wasn’t just that people were dying in the desert, she felt another level of confused pain around caring so much, when these were people she had barely met, and she knew the losses are much greater for their families and loved ones. I had somehow imagined that the regular volunteers got used to this work. She reminded me that as human beings, not only are we all motivated to move by similar needs, and vulnerable to the same environmental factors, we’re all also so very vulnerable to same losses. I was reminded that we came as much to do the work of distributing water as to show national support for the No More Deaths volunteers, and they in turn supported us as teachers, hike leaders and medics.

As we reflect on our paths this past year, my prayer for myself, and for all of us, brings me back to magnificent moments of dawn in the desert, with trusted companions. As we move on our way, whatever boundaries and obstacles we encounter, may we remember the breeze at dawn and the support of our companions. In our day of focus on t’shuvah, my prayer is that we are able to remember and access the experiences, relationships, joys that ground us as we move, providing the energy and hope to keep going.

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