

Wandering—Kol Nidre

I am often amazed by the way our lives mirror the wisdom in Torah.

Last Spring, with Passover approaching, I experienced a moment when Jewish time and our family situation were an eerie echo of each other.

It was hours before the Seder. We'd spent a good amount of time preparing for Pesach. The table was set for 24 and most of the food was ready. Aryeh and I were waiting to hear from his dermatologist. As each hour passed we became more and more impatient. We'd called three times to get the results of his biopsy but the doctor wasn't available to talk with us.

Weeks before, Aryeh had noticed what looked like a bruise on his head but we were away from home, so he couldn't see his doctor. And as the days passed, it seemed to be growing larger.

Since our return, he had been to two different doctors, searching to understand what this rapidly growing discoloration on his head was about. The doctors said it probably was a side effect of his

blood thinner or maybe he had bumped his head. Neither of these diagnoses felt right to him and a friend suggested he see a dermatologist. That's when this all became scary.

His dermatologist did a biopsy and then we waited, and waited, for what felt like forever.

When he went in for his appointment, the dermatologist told him that the biopsy results weren't in, but she did tell him what she thought it was. A very rare form of cancer-Angiosarcoma. She said she had not yet seen this in her practice and she **warned** him not to look it up on the internet. Well, that lasted a couple of hours...

When we couldn't stand it anymore, we went online...and wished we hadn't.

After quite a bit of tears, I said to Aryeh, maybe we should sell the house and downsize so it won't be so hard to manage things. Aryeh looked at me and said, "no, I think I'd like to die here". And I said, okay.

The diagnosis call finally came just hours before the first night of Passover. I didn't know how I would get through the Seder. But as we read the Haggadah and talked about the Exodus, I began thinking more about how our personal crisis related to this story. I have always looked for connections between Jewish time, or text and what I am experiencing in my own life. This helps me find meaning.

As we read through the Haggadah, I realized that what happened **after** the Exodus resonated more for me than the theme of redemption from slavery. The next steps of our sacred journey, what happens after the Exodus, were more poignant. I felt that in a sense, maybe Aryeh and I had been, and would continue, to wander in the wilderness of his cancer diagnosis-ok, hopefully not for 40 years...

The tears and uncertainty, worry about having what we needed to walk this path, concerns about the future...it felt like new territory. Our day to day routines were thrown off kilter. We

needed guidance. At least the Israelites had Moses, and God in the presence of a pillar of fire to guide them in their wandering. We were greatly relieved to learn that the cancer seemingly had not metastasized. Very quickly people helped us get the medical care we needed. Their support and guidance helped us cross the sea of confusion and chaos so that we could make plans to move forward. We felt some relief in knowing that we were in good hands. I say some relief, because we knew that it wasn't going to be simple.

Receiving this diagnoses and looking at / at least nine months of treatment was disorienting for our family. We had to face the uncertainty of how Aryeh would tolerate treatment.

Learning to live with this uncertainty has been a challenge and we've found that the best way to cope is to remember that this journey is one step at a time. It's important to stay focused on where we are in the process-not to get ahead of ourselves. We don't know how to answer the what ifs...we **do** know that the

treatment is working. If we let our fear take hold, we won't have the resilience we need to continue. It's natural to be worried about the future and potential side effects from the chemo, but I've found it best to note the fear and remind myself that all we know is what is true in this particular moment. We are grateful for the best medical care, we have the financial resources to manage this part of our lives, and we have a loving community, dayenu. We made a conscious decision to be open and honest with you, our TBE family. Having walked this path with some of you, I felt it was important to share our experience.

Just moments after the email message was sent, we started hearing from you. Every day there would be at least 5 or 6 cards. We received well over 100 emails and cards and Aryeh began reading some of them during treatment. As we travel through this new and uncertain time in our lives, knowing we are cared for matters. These messages of love and support remind us that we are not alone.

Isn't it human to be afraid when our lives are unpredictable? If we are given a choice, do we really want to wander in the wilderness, or would we rather reach that Promised Land?

I wondered if this was how our ancestors felt when they began their trek in the wilderness. Scared, vulnerable, cared for, determined, confused...

How did they find hope when they were afraid?

The story about the Golden Calf came to mind. Moses went up the mountain to commune with God. And the people waited so many days for Moses to return to them. They had trouble remembering that they could count on him as their leader and that God's presence would guide them. They were disoriented and confused. They craved something tangible, some reassurance that they would be cared for. And so, they built themselves an idol. Something they could touch, see, hold on to. It was familiar to them.

When our ancestors wandered, their fear of the unknown often manifested itself in complaining, rebellion and doubt. They worried about having enough water, enough food, the right kind of food...would God really take care of these basic needs? And they were reminded over and over again that they could rely on things working out. At first God and Moses were patient about the doubts but after some time, Moses and God began to lose patience with the people. How many reminders did they need? Wasn't the manna enough? Didn't they see the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day? Shouldn't this be enough?

When we face a crisis in our lives, what do we need to keep feeling cared for, supported, able to continue one day at a time, day after day?

As the Israelites continued their wandering, they asked Moses to send scouts to the Promised Land. Even though God assured them that they would be strong enough to take possession of the region, they weren't so sure. They wanted evidence, an eye witness report.

And when the scouts returned, 2 of them gave a positive report. But 10 of them were filled with doubt. They said that there were giants in the land and that not only did they see themselves as grasshoppers, but they assumed this is how the giants saw them. This task was just too big for their small, limited vision of their own capacity. The rest of the Israelites sided with these 10 scouts instead of the other 2. The years of slavery and wandering had taken their toll. They were unable to feel secure in God's promise, to trust the 2 scouts who tried to encourage them to have faith in the promise. So, they were forced to wander for 40 years. The new generation, not the ones who had been slaves, would go into the Promised Land.

I wonder if they hadn't gotten ahead of themselves, if they hadn't asked for this whole scouting expedition, would the story have a different outcome? If they had put one foot in front of the other, continued on their journey, what might have happened?

I'm not criticizing the people here. Living with uncertainty isn't easy. And that's what this journey through the wilderness is

teaching us. It's in the Torah for a reason. The manna, the giving of the 10 commandments, the parting of the sea are all supposed to reassure the people that in the face of their fears, dayenu-they had enough. Maybe God expected too much of the Israelites at a time when they were vulnerable and afraid. But maybe that's the point of the story.

We humans are asked to face our fears and find comfort in our trust that we aren't alone. That when we share our vulnerabilities and discover our faith, we can make peace with our circumstances. Maybe that's what it means to be part of a community, a people.

In his book, More Beautiful Than Before, Rabbi Steven Leder encourages us to, "Pray for the healing that comes when we make peace with what we cannot change." He writes about how suffering transforms us and may help us discover love and trust that we never knew before. It forces us to reach deep within and reach out to let others in.

The wilderness experience, with all of its challenges, can be a transformative time. It is also the place of revelation. Mt Sinai, the place where the people encounter God and receive Torah is in the wilderness. While the discomforts and exertions of wandering bring the people's character flaws to the surface, the wilderness is also where they hear the voice of God and begin to understand their national mission. The Hebrew word for wilderness is Midbar and it is closely related to the word m'daber-which means speaking. The wilderness can be understood as the place where we hear voices-our own, the Divine voice. The place where we work to silence the voices of worry and doubt and open ourselves up to the voices that provide us with guidance and hope.

During **our** wilderness journey, the voices of doctors, family, friends, have all helped us stay clear about not getting ahead of ourselves. These voices remind us to stay present. I can't claim to know what it felt like for the young ones who grew up in the wilderness and entered into the Promised Land, but I do know

that when Aryeh completes his 18th and final chemo treatment tomorrow, we may get a glimpse.