

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld
ASBI Congregation
Beshallah 5778

God Seeks the Pursued

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way..

As you know, I did not write those lines. They were written by Charles Dickens and he was referring to the French Revolution and not the *Dor HaMidbar*, the generation that left Egypt. But - the contradictory extremes of Dickens writing - perhaps the most famous opening of any novel in the English language - could certainly be used to summarize our experience traveling through the desert for forty years.

During those forty years we lived in intimate relationship with God. We were sustained, as it were, out of God's own hand, as water and food were provided to us by miracle in the midst of an empty desert. Centuries later, God recounts those years as a time of love and romance, in the words of Jeremiah:

זָכַרְתִּי לָךְ חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲהַבַת כָּל־וַלְתֶּיךָ לְכַתֵּךְ אַחֲרַי בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה:

“I accounted to your favor The devotion of your youth, Your love as a bride— How you followed Me in the wilderness, In a land not sown.”

And, yet it was a time of constant rebellion and dissatisfaction. There were complaints and grumbling and faithlessness from the first moment we stepped out of the dry seabed onto the hard ground of the desert. The Torah reading forces us to remember this each year when *Shirat HaYam*, the triumphant song of the sea leads directly to the people's first complaints when they are thirsty and hungry. It's all in the same aliyah. We don't pause between the exalted triumph and the mundane complaint. Instead we read straight through so that the moment of greatest religious clarity and exultation leads directly to petty grumbling.

Summing up the experience of the desert, Psalm 95 describes the entire forty year period of the desert as an unmitigated reign of provocation and tension:

אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה | אֶקְוֶה בְּדוֹר וְאֹמַר עִם תַּעֲי לִבָּב הֵם וְהֵם לֹא יִדְעוּ דַרְכֵי: אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי בְּאֶפְרַי אִם־יָבִיאוּ
אֶל־מְנוּחָתִי:

Forty years I was provoked by that generation; I thought, “They are a senseless people; they would not know My ways.” Concerning them I swore in anger, “They shall never come to My resting-place!”

So what was the Dor HaMidbar? What was the meaning of the desert sojourn of freed Israelites? Was it the best of times or was it the worst of times? Was it the age of wisdom or the age of foolishness? Was it a time of belief or a time of incredulity?

The answer is “yes.”

The *Dor HaMidbar*, that first generation of freed men and freed women were a fearful and doubting generation. They had not learned how to trust God and they had not learned how to trust themselves and stand on their own. They provoked and they challenged and they rebelled throughout the decades that they lived in the wilderness.

But the *Dor HaMidbar* was beloved by God. Alone in the desert, without the need or ability to earn a living or farm or travel, our lives transpired in quiet intimacy with God which both we and God can look back upon with nostalgia as a time of love.

There was another source of Divine favor as we ran into the desert and that is the fact that we ran to the desert because we were pursued by an Egyptian army with murderous plans and murderous intentions. *Vayikera Rabbah* expresses a profoundly Jewish theology of Divine favor that can explain our victory over the pursuing Egyptian army and our spiritual triumph over two thousand years of exile.

והאלהים יבקש את נרדף (קהלת ג): ר' הונא בשם רב יוסף אמר: לעולם, והאלהים יבקש את נרדף. אתה מוצא צדיק רודף צדיק, והאלהים יבקש את נרדף. רשע רודף צדיק והאלהים יבקש את נרדף. רשע רודף רשע והאלהים יבקש את נרדף. מפיל צדיק רודף רשע, והאלהים יבקש את נרדף. מכל מקום והאלהים יבקש את נרדף.

“God seeks the pursued.” Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rav Yosef: God always seeks the pursued. If you find a righteous person pursuing a righteous person, God seeks the pursued. If a wicked person pursues a righteous person, God seeks the pursued. והאלהים יבקש את נרדף If a wicked person pursues a wicked person, והאלהים יבקש את נרדף God seeks the pursued. If a righteous person pursues a wicked person, והאלהים יבקש את נרדף - God still seeks the pursued. In every instance God seeks the pursued.

Rav Yosef presents a theology of Divine compassion and Divine sympathy that is not dependent on what we deserve but is dependent on our dependence on God's compassion. Those who are vulnerable and those who are being chased and persecuted are the objects of Divine favor. It's as though God's role in human history is to provide compassion and mercy to those who need it most.

We needed that compassion when we were in the desert. The *Dor HaMidbar* represented the romantic newlywed bride, not because it was pious and faithful - because it was neither of those things. The *Dor HaMidbar* was in danger and was vulnerable and was needy, and that low state aroused God's love. והאלהים יבקש את נרדף God seeks the pursued.

The danger, of course, in being pursued, is that sometimes one gets caught. In the twentieth century, the Jewish people decided that the cost of being persecuted and pursued forever was too great. But that decision to stand and defend ourselves, to take ourselves out of the victimhood olympics was not taken likely. Speaking in 1959 Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik reflected on the significance of the first generation of Jews with power in two thousand years:

“Now that we have a Jewish state, will we act ethically? We are the master now. Will we act like masters? Will we acknowledge that Judaism does not recognize a morality of master and slave, powerful and powerless, victor and vanquished...If the state does not live up to our ethical values then the entire past 2000 years, the entirety of Jewish history will be reinterpreted in a different light. It will prove to the world that Jews are not better and only did not act wickedly because they did not have a chance.”

We can never return to powerlessness. The risks are too great. There are vulnerable people who need us to protect them. There are dangerous people whose evil plans need to be stopped. But we must never forget that strength and power place us in opposition to God's inherent sympathy and solidarity with the pursued and vulnerable. We need to cultivate our strength while maintaining our own solidarity with the most vulnerable.

For this reason, it was so inspiring to read this week about the El Al pilots who have publicly stated that they will not participate in the deportation of African asylum seekers who fled to Israel to escape murder and genocide in their countries of origin. El Al pilots are all veterans of the Israeli Air-force. They are the elite of

the elite of Zionism and Israeli patriotism. And they understand that the honor of their nation is tied up with the treatment of refugees. The International Convention on Refugees was written in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the State of Israel was one of the first countries to sign the treaty. The treaty does not call for open-borders, that would be impossible for any nation, let alone a small country like Israel. But the treaty obligates each nation to investigate those who claim asylum to verify the claim and it forbids the deportation of refugees back to a country where their lives will be in danger.

How encouraging and inspiring that pilots who fly airplanes with a six-pointed *magen david* on the tail fins understand that those airplanes must never be used to transport people against their will into a circumstance where they will be placed in great danger.

Our generation of Jews are also living in the best of times and the worst of times. There is more Torah scholarship and more ignorance than at any time in Jewish history. Jewish children are being raised by loving parents in vibrant communities (as we celebrated this morning), and millions of Jewish children are being raised without any Jewish identity whatsoever or in another religious tradition. There is Jewish power and Jewish vulnerability together. We are pious and irreverent. We are a source of blessing for the world, earning nobel prizes and sending delegations to respond to disasters around the world, and we pursue our own goals with callous indifference to the suffering of others. Maybe it will take us forty years to navigate these circumstances. To reach the promised land we will need to balance self-reliance with trust in God, and standing up for ourselves with perennial solidarity with history's victims.