

Coming Undone
Parashat Korach;
June 20, 2014

Towards the beginning of the book of Jeremiah we read: “*zacharti lach chesed ne’urayich...lechtech acharai bamidbar*; I remember now, the devotion of your youth, how you followed after Me in the Wilderness.” And again, later in the book: “*Koa mar A’: matza chein bamidbar*; thus spoke the Eternal [of] a people who found favor in the desert.”

Such yearning for the Wilderness! Such memories of an intimate, mutual relationship between God and the Jewish people in the aftermath of our escape from Egypt.

Oh, really? What was Jeremiah drinking? Or, to put the matter more mildly, as does Biblical scholar Baruch Levine in his Anchor Bible introduction to the Book of Numbers, “such positive resonances of Israel’s wilderness experience contrast not only with Jeremiah’s normally critical posture, but with a great part of the biblical tradition.” In fact, the book of Numbers is filled with abundant examples of the opposite kind of behavior: rebellion and resistance and dissonance and dissent.

But such is the way it often works. As a t-shirt I once saw accurately proclaimed: “Nostalgia isn’t what it used to be.” At least – I think that’s what it said! We look back, but what we see may be wildly at variance with what we went through at the time. We may mis-remember details. On the other hand, we may also, with the benefit of growth, maturity and experience... occasionally, we may also have a broader perspective.

[It is hard to say what is accurate when it comes to past versus present, but what lasts is some combination of the sensory experience at the time, along with how we remember it later.]

There are two things that have stayed on my mind over the past month or so, which I have been thinking about a great deal. They are different – although all aspects of these events are 50-years old, which is why I may have thought of them together, especially since, when these things happened, we were in the middle of the period of counting the Omer, a Jewish tradition of counting up towards the number 50. One is a Jewish matter, and the other an American one. One is an argument, and the other is an anniversary. But even though these two issues are unrelated on the surface, when I think about them both in light of this book of the Torah we find ourselves reading during this period of time, I emerge with a single, and, I hope, important message.

The argument first. The attention of those connected with and concerned about Israel has been diverted, in recent days, by the terrorist kidnapping of three teens – but over the past few months we were actually engaged in a more internal fight. Some of you may have followed the bitter words in the Jewish world these past few months over J-Street, and the Celebrate Israel Parade in New York. First, some prominent right-wing activists involved in the planned 50th-annual Celebrate Israel Parade in New York, which was held on June 1st, announced that they would boycott the event if the liberal-leaning lobby group J-Street or the social justice network

the New Israel Fund were allowed to participate. On the heels of that outrage – this from folks who keep talking about solidarity and Jewish peoplehood – the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations last month voted against the admission of J-Street into its ranks. The Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative movements and all of its represented auxiliaries who are members of the Conference almost all voted with the minority, for admission. But the majority of the 52 members of the, well, yes, this 50-year old organization, formed to represent the voices of the American Jewish public, voted against.

The point of the Conference was never that unanimous agreement on important issues was a prerequisite to coming to the table – otherwise we wouldn't be in different organizations with differing perspectives in the first place! The point was to find a way to speak with one voice *after* sharing with each other our differences. The purpose was to be representative! Last month, it proved itself to be anything but that. The fate of the Conference, its future, its relevance, even our Reform movement's participation in it, are in question now as never before.

Of more interest to me for my point tonight, though, is my sadness – and shock, over all the shouting back and forth. Just read some of the letters in the Washington Jewish Week. Or see some of the comments posted in the response section on online articles – who lets this stuff through editorial filters, anyway? We should be ashamed that anyone in our community would use such language, would have such hate! For the rhetoric around this issue of

inclusion versus exclusion, the shouting, the fighting, the bitterness... the accusations of naiveté, dishonesty and even treason leveled by the right against the left are as bad as anything I have ever seen before. Just this week I received a comment on my blog, posted in reaction to my tribute to Pete Seeger, calling Seeger a vicious anti-Semite and any praise of him a shanda, a disgrace. It is getting as bitter, it is getting as bad as, well, as the rivalry in this week's Torah portion. Maybe the earth hasn't literally opened up to swallow one side or the other yet. But the ground on which we stand is increasingly unstable.

Another marking of time, from 50 years ago. This month is the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act. Last month was considered the 50th anniversary of the Great Society. There was a long article in the Washington Post a few weeks ago, an elaborate tribute to President Johnson. And this was, for me, a new perspective on LBJ. Growing up in Washington, my parents had always given cultural credit to the Kennedys; it was Jackie, they said, who turned what my folks called "a sleepy southern town" into a world-class cultural capital worthy of a great nation. The Kennedy Center, they claimed, was an appropriately-named cultural venue.

Now, I don't know how many hidden biases or other unfairness there might have been in that comment about a sleepy southern town. But I can see, of course, how skewed the impressions of President Kennedy's successor have been, by the not-insignificant matter of a military action far away. LBJ

simply did not get the credit he deserved... not only for a domestic legislative agenda... but as a shaper of culture and a patron of the arts. For under his watch – and explicitly related to his social justice agenda in his mind – we saw the birth of the Hirshhorn, the Renwick, the AFI, the NEA, the NEH, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and NPR and what a Washington Post writer called “a host of other agencies and organizations.” And this was part of, not apart from, Johnson’s vision: exposure to culture, to human craftsmanship and creativity, to that which is “other” to us... will open us up to the “other” in our midst, will bridge differences and illuminate a sense of our shared humanity. It is worth remembering that vision today: that the arts and culture may need to be privately-supported for the most part...but they are public goods, and part of the communal mission of an intentional and values-based civilization.

So, now. Intensely partisan politics, and ambitious, agenda-driven cultural construction. J-Street and Johnson. What does all this have to do with the Torah? This month I had one of those experiences that Jews have had throughout our history. It is when what is on our mind, and what is going on around us today, filters itself, as it were, through the lens of ancient words, through the eternal cycle of the Scriptural readings.

Last month we began, and we remain now in the middle of, the book of Numbers. In Hebrew the book as a whole, is named after the first significant word in the portion. For the book of Numbers that word is “*Bamidbar*.” In the Wilderness.

The Wilderness. An iconic place, partly, perhaps, an imagined one. Precious in our memory, even as it was hard in actual reality. But it is a place of nature, over culture, and even civilization. It is a place of silence, over screams and shouting.

Silence. Even as the word “*mid’bar*” may be related to “*middabeir*,” which means speaking, the voices we hear come from inside, or at least not from the screeches and scree of city life. Think of how many traditions feature stories of someone stepping into the Wilderness, or being alone, before receiving wisdom.

In our everyday lives we try... we try to impose our will on the world. We do it through art, and culture, and creativity. And we do it through power, and politics and passion.

But there is a place... where there is sun, and sand, and an ongoing search for water. Survivor: the Jewish Version. There is a place where we do not impose our will on the world, but we can let the world work on us. A place where we set aside drive, and ambition, and certainty. The light is intense

during the day, the stars sparkle and the cool breeze blows and the darkness inky inspiration at night. The sun bleaches away haughtiness and excess. The veneer falls. And we come face to face with our truest selves.

If there was a place, long ago, now, there is a time. Instead of the literal desert, we have an oasis in time. We think of Shabbat as a luxury of celebration, but it is also a time of setting aside, of leaving behind that which drives us during the week, that which we make in favor of just who we are.

Let go for a stay, let go for a day. It will all be waiting for us when we wake back up to the world. All the ambition and the arguments, all that we create and debate.

Bamidbar. Step into the Wilderness for awhile. Now maybe it wasn't actually that way originally. But it can be that way now, in our minds and our lives: a place of undoing, and stripping bare, of renewal and rebirth. A place of silent speaking, and authentic being. An uncovering that leads to recovery, and discovery, and life.

Shabbat Shalom.