

Shavuot/BeMidbar 5779

Shabbat Shalom.

Today we begin reading from the Book of Numbers, or in Hebrew, Sefer BeMidbar, which means “In the Wilderness.” The book begins, “Now THE LORD spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai...”

And I’m going to actually end the quotation right there, because the subject of my d’var is precisely the **meaning**, or **meanings**, of **Wilderness** in Torah. We are going to take a journey that explores the idea of Wilderness itself, and our complicated and evolving relationship with Wilderness from the beginning, and in the present day.

The Hebrew word that we translate as “Wilderness” is Midbar. The root is Dalet Bet Resh. These are the root letters of the word “d’var,” which means “a word or a thing.” The prefix “mi” is actually a contraction of the proposition “min,” which means “out from.” I think of Midbar as therefore meaning: “the place where the Word comes out from.” And in case you think I am going too far with that interpretation, the first definition of Midbar in the standard lexicon of Biblical Hebrew, is “**mouth;**” which is, literally, the place where the word comes out from. (This meaning is found in the Song of Songs.)

So, Wilderness is a place that speaks. And it is often, as in this morning’s Parsha, the place from which God speaks.

What is it about Wilderness that extends itself toward the human being; that reaches out to us, that takes hold of our attention; that makes the first move to engage us in communication and relationship?

David Abram wrote an incandescently insightful book on the subject, called *The Spell of the Sensuous*, in which he explains that “all phenomena ... actively solicit the participation of our senses. The sensing body is a kind of open circuit that completes itself only in the world.” He describes “an expressive, gesturing, landscape... a world that *speaks*.” (paraphrased pp. 81-82 DA SOS) We are beings destined for relationship. In Wilderness, we complete the circuit in a world untouched by the work of our own hands; a world uniquely the unedited and expressive handiwork of God.

In Torah, Wilderness brings sacred relationships into existence: “I found him in a desert land.” It is a place of love, protection, guidance, and, significantly, of redemption.

It is also a place of rebuke, exile, and total undoing.

In today’s Haftorah, which is from the book of Hosea, we find all of these contrasting moods on vivid display.

The imagery is of relationship. Marriage, but a sad marriage. The husband rebukes the unfaithful wife. He threatens to abandon her and her children and leave them destitute. He says he will make her “like a wilderness, render her like a desert land.” She will pursue her lovers, but find nothing but desolation. This metaphoric couple represents God as the husband, and Israel, as the wife.

God threatens to lay waste to the sources of abundance, the grain, the wine, the wool, the linen, the vines and the fig trees, which the wife had mistakenly thought were owed to her for performing the services of a prostitute for the ba’alim.

But then her divine partner entices her to follow him into the Wilderness, and speaks tenderly to her there. He proceeds to make even the most desolate wastelands fertile and generous again. She returns to him, and significantly no longer calls him “ba’al,” or master, but “ish,” husband, connoting a relationship of reciprocity and love, rather than of ownership and exploitation.

It’s all in there – the courtship in the wilderness, the education that takes place there, and finally redemption, which comes in the form of restoration of the land’s fertility and abundance. The reciprocity of relationship between God and Israel is embodied as, what else? A generous and nurturing landscape.

A commentary on this verse is found in Talmud. (Berakhot 7a:22)

And Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the name of Rabbi Yosei: A single regret or pang of guilt in one's heart is preferable to many lashes administered by others that cause only physical pain, as it is stated: "And she chases her lovers, but she does not overtake them; she seeks them, but she will not find them; and she will say 'I will go and return to my first husband; for it was better for me then than now'" (Hosea 2:9). Remorse is more effective than any externally imposed punishment ... (Hosea 2:11–19).

The rabbis use this verse to teach that it is better – and **more effective** - to change one's ways as a result of remorse and understanding, than through punishment.

I'd like to go just a little bit deeper into the redemptive quality of Wilderness – or perhaps the **necessity** of Wilderness to bring about a certain type of redemption.

There are many beautiful, or terrifying, or fascinating invocations of Wilderness in Torah, but one of the most **mysterious** is found in Leviticus, Chapter 16, when on Yom Kippur, two identical goats are wrestled into the presence of the High Priest at the Temple. We all probably remember this: one of them is slaughtered in the normal way, its blood daubed on the horns of the altar. The other goat remains alive; this is the "goat for Azazel."

"Aaron lays his hands on it and confesses over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, even all their sins; and he

shall put them upon the head of the goat and shall send him away by the hand of an appointed man into the Wilderness.” Leviticus 16: 19

The great 20th Century Leviticus scholar and interpreter, Jacob Milgrom, explains that the sacrifice of the goat *that is slaughtered* purges the sins that were the result of the **inadvertent** wrongdoings of the people. However, “rebellious acts,” committed by those who “act defiantly and revile Adonai,” cannot be purged in this way. Hence this mysterious ritual of the “goat for Azazel.”

Milgrom goes on to state that even then, “only a limited amount of deliberate sin will be tolerated. There is a point of no return. One day, purgation will no longer avail; the accumulated rebellious acts of the community will rise beyond a set limit; at that point God’s endurance of his people’s impurities will end; at that point he will forsake his earthly abode to abandon it and his people to destruction.”

Whereas “The pagans believed that impurity was caused by personified demonic forces intent on driving out their patron god from his sanctuary....” In Israel, “Humanity has replaced the demon. People have the ultimate power to obey or resist God. If they choose to rebel, ..., they will pollute the sanctuary to the point that God will no longer abide in it...” (p. 147 JM Lev)

This brings me to the central point that I want to make today, which is that there is a conception of Wilderness in Judaism is **not a location** somehow just outside of human habitation and domesticity; this is the Wilderness that can pursue us into the confines of our simple lives.

What do I mean by this? We repeat it in Torah and in our liturgy; it's written on our doorposts. Some of us bind it to our arms and to our foreheads. Many of us recite it when we rise up and when we lie down to go to sleep, when we are traveling and when we are at home. It's the second paragraph of the Sh'ma, which is from Deuteronomy, but is essentially a recapitulation of the warning issued in last week's Parsha, Behukkotai.

It is obviously very very important that we remember and never forget that *we* ourselves can bring about a state of the land that is incompatible with civilization, incompatible with life; that the good land that we enjoy and feel that we are somehow entitled to, that we have somehow earned, can be transformed into a howling Wilderness; we are warned and warn ourselves repeatedly that we can disappear from the good land that we have been given.

- This spring, 200 million people in India experienced temperatures of 120 F.
- A million species face extinction.
- The earth's oceans could rise 6.5 feet by the end of the century.
- Global carbon levels are higher now than at any time in the past 3 million years. By mid-century, if trends continue, our atmosphere will resemble that of the Eocene, a time 50 million years ago when "palms and crocodiles inhabited the Canadian Arctic." (Climate Central)

Tonight, we begin a two-day long celebration of the Holiday of Shavuot – also known as Hag HaBikkurim, the pilgrimage festival of First Fruits.

This holiday has a double layer of meaning. On the one hand, we remember it as the day on which we received Torah in the Wilderness, and entered into a covenantal relationship – a marriage, if you will – with God.

It is also the Festival of First Fruits, in which we openly acknowledge and give voice to our gratitude to God for the gift of the produce of the land, the fruit, the grain, the abundance that makes life good. With this festival, we demonstrate our understanding that the source of all that we enjoy is God.

(Notice that we have a beautiful huppah here on the Bimah, which we will decorate this evening and use during our Shavuot celebrations.)

But we would do well to ask ourselves, individually and as a community, before we enact this drama, are we entering into this marriage contract in good faith and with a clean conscience? Do we intend to uphold our end? Or are we already bargaining to be allowed to maintain our comfortable relationship with our ba'alim?

I want to return to the theme of Wilderness and redemption.

If I don't cry first, I'm going to quote from a story by Marybeth Holleman, about an encounter she had with whales in the waters off a tiny island off the coast of the Tongass National Forest in Alaska.

“Still, through my hard-beating heart, what I feel more than anything is safe. Safe in this wilderness where we’re put into proper scale. Here in the bay in the fog with the cruise ship out of sight, in our small yellow kayaks on a still and foggy sea, with whales around us, here is where I feel a safety of scale. Like the surf scoters or the marbled murrelets, we are small and held, held in the place, our human concerns and transgressions shrunk down to size, as if there’s still a place where we can go and be forgiven.”

(What We Talk About When We Talk About Wilderness: Marybeth Holleman)

That **need** to tap into the language of forgiveness; of redemption, is no longer limited to people of faith. We are living in a time when the urgent call to Tshuvah, and to Redemption is speaking now, in every voice, in every earthly language. Remember the voice of the mother orca who lost her calf, and for two weeks held her dead baby above the water, a drama that was heard and understood by anyone who saw her or heard her story, in every language.

Amitav Ghosh, the Indian author, wrote a work of nonfiction called *The Great Derangement*, in which he explains how our modes of thought have rendered climate change unthinkable. He has words for us, the importance of communities like ours, communities of faith:

“Organizations with religious affiliations possess the ability to mobilize people in far greater numbers than any others. Moreover, religious worldviews acknowledge intergenerational, long-term responsibility. They

are capable of imagining nonlinear change – catastrophe, in other words. Finally, it is impossible to see any way out of this crisis without an acceptance of limits, and this is intimately related to the idea of the sacred, however one may wish to conceive of it. (Pp. 160-161 AG TGD)

Sometimes, quite honestly, I am **afraid**, afraid that our collective transgression may be so great that it will cause the spirit of God to depart from the earthly abode forever.

I am afraid that short of this, we will be chastised with a period of exile such as we read about last week in Parshat Behukkotai, stalked by a desolating experience of Wilderness proportionate to the damage we are causing, defiantly, as it were, since we have no excuse for failing to understand either cause or consequence.

I am, however, comforted by my faith, not that God will take care of all of this for us. That isn't the Torah I know, or the history I know.

Rather, I am comforted by this idea, expressed by Adin Steinsaltz in *The Thirteen Petaled Rose*, on the subject of Repentance:

“Repentance is lies beyond the correction of sinful deeds; it is reached when the change and the correction penetrate the very essence of the sins once committed and, as the sages say, create the condition in which a man's **transgressions become his merits**: This level of Tikkun is reached when a person uses the knowledge of the sin of the past and transforms it

into such an extraordinary thirst for good that it becomes a divine force.”
(pp. 93 – 101 AD TPR)

May we, through sincere, immediate, transformational repentance, as individuals, and in our sacred community, seek to enter into a relationship of true reciprocity and love with God and Creation.

And may we learn through repentance, regret, and understanding, rather than severe rebuke, to transform our sins into such an extraordinary thirst for good that it becomes a divine force.

Shabbat Shalom