

Bewilderment and Faith

Rabbi Jonathan Kligler, Rosh Hashanah 5782/2021

After the Children of Israel are liberated from slavery in Egypt, the remainder of the Torah – almost four of the five books of Moses – takes place in the wilderness. The fourth book of the Torah, known in English as the Book of Numbers, is called in Hebrew *Bamidbar*, meaning “In the Wilderness.”

To reach the Promised Land, the Children of Israel must learn to navigate their way through the wilderness. This is an existential challenge, for the wilderness, by definition, is trackless. Wilderness is territory that has not been domesticated. That is, there are no familiar grids of streets, no city walls or boundary markers, no roads or roadmaps. How is one supposed to navigate uncharted territory?

The great Torah scholar Aviva Zornberg titles her book of commentary on *Bamidbar*, the Book of Numbers, *Bewilderments*. To be bewildered means to have lost one’s bearings. When we are bewildered, we are in the wilderness, a place where our past experience is insufficient to orient us. We become disoriented.

Thrust into this terrifying environment the Children of Israel panic. Again and again. They beg to go back to Egypt. They weep, they rebel, they rage. Of course you will recall that they do in fact have guidance: they are protected by a divine cloud by day and warmed by a pillar of fire at night. All they must do is follow the cloud of Divine Presence. They are fed by manna, a mysterious nourishment that appears on the ground every morning, without fail. All they must do is collect what they need to sustain themselves every day. But the daily certainty of guidance and care on this journey does not have physical manifestations in the way the daily certainty of slavery did: no storehouses of grain like the ones the Children of Israel built for Pharaoh, no taskmasters, no forced labor to organize the hours of the day. Every day the Children of Israel must now face the freedom to follow the guidance that is offered but not enforced. I sympathize with their constant backsliding.

I especially sympathize right now because, my friends, we find ourselves in a wilderness we do not know. We are increasingly bewildered and disoriented. The pandemic has upended our communal lives. Extremism threatens our civic and political structures. Technological advances outpace our capacity to control them responsibly. And perhaps most disorienting of all, the very rhythms of nature that have always been the bedrock of our lived experience are now fluctuating wildly, thanks, tragically, to our species’ collective inability to control our greed. We are in uncharted and dangerous territory that is ironically of our own making, and we are bewildered and terrified.

What can the Torah teach us about how to navigate our wilderness?

The key, insists the Torah, is the practice of *emunah*, faith. But what does faith mean? The term has acquired a variety of meanings in English that take us away from its original intent. A faith can now refer to an entire religion. Faith can also be defined as unquestioning allegiance, or as a rigid belief in outcomes that are beyond our actual ability to predict. These reductive understandings of faith obscure the deeper wisdom that I think we are meant to gain from practicing faith. Faith does not mean “certainty.” Faith derives from the Latin term for trust. Faith is not the practice of trusting in the future – the future is by definition unknown and uncertain. Faith is the practice of trusting that there is guidance for moving into the future embedded in the present, in this moment. This moment, filled with mystery, in which we can touch infinity, wonder, love and glory. The practice of faith is the undoing of numbness and despair, it is the antidote to anxiety – not because it guarantees outcomes, but because it trains us to enter each day privileging trust over anxiety. In cultivating this attitude we then make a better future possible. With this kind of faith we might actually reach our Promised Land.

The Torah explains that our decades of wandering in the wilderness were in order to train us in faith. It was our “spiritual boot camp.” The manna did not last overnight; the Children of Israel had to go to bed trusting that there would be food for them to gather in the morning. They had no fixed itinerary; rather they had to trust that the cloud of the Divine Presence would shelter them and lead them to where they needed to go next. This was radical training for a people who had never learned to trust, but only to fear.

How do we learn to live with faith? I think the roots of the Hebrew term for faith, *emunah*, can guide us to an answer. Hebrew root words are extraordinary in their depth and breadth of associations and meanings, and plumbing these meanings has always been a source of great insight. There is a reason why Jews love to play with words, it is actually a spiritual undertaking! The root of *emunah* is א-מ-ן. This combination will be familiar to all of us when vocalized a certain way: *amen* - אָמֵן. How would we then translate *amen*? Perhaps “That’s the truth!”

But Hebrew roots can be vocalized in numerous ways: an *oman* - אֹמֵן is an artist. And an *omenet* - אֹמֵנֶת is a nursemaid, one who suckles an infant. What is the link between *omenet* – nursemaid - and *emunah* – trust? An infant develops a foundation of trusting life by receiving care from a consistent and loving adult. The presence of the *omenet* is the foundation of the child’s *emunah*. I think this is the deep linguistic connection of the Hebrew.

The Children of Israel were raised by Pharaoh under fear and cruelty. They never had the opportunity to develop a relationship of trust. When Moses comes back to Egypt and tells the enslaved Israelites that Life Unfolding is going to free them and take them to be God’s own people, the Torah says, “The Israelites could not hear Moses’ message, for their spirits had been crushed by cruel bondage (Ex. 6:9).”

But even for those who never had the opportunity to be cared for by trustworthy adults, it is still truly possible to build *emunah* as we mature. That’s not to say that this is an easy path.

There's a reason the Children of Israel took 40 years before they were ready to claim their own land and lives. In modern psychological parlance we call this process "re-parenting," as we learn to give ourselves the loving care we had missed, and to heal ourselves. But the Torah, and all faiths, claim that we do not have to do this alone, that in fact the universe itself is always offering to be our *omenet*. We can learn to draw sustenance from and be in loving relationship with a never-failing source, the Source of Life. We can learn to trust where life leads us, and to be less afraid.

We typically think of God in the Torah as male, engaged in archetypically masculine activities such as judging, and doing battle, and reigning over the universe. But that lens of masculinity blocks out the many other ways that Divinity is represented in Torah. YHVH is also *Harachaman*. That means "the Compassionate One", but the root of *rachamim*, compassion, in Hebrew is *rechem*, which means womb. YHVH is the "womb-like" one, the source of mother-love. YHVH is *El Shaddai*, conventionally translated into English (for no apparent reason) as God Almighty, but more likely meaning "God of *Shaddayim* – Breasts. In the powerful poem *Haazinu* in Deuteronomy, it says "And God nursed [Israel] and suckled them with honey from the rock." God's love is the love of womb and breasts as equally as God's love is the love of discipline and rules. It is also telling that in the story of Exodus, as Pharaoh decrees that every baby boy be killed, God does not send an army to combat this abomination. God rather appoints midwives to protect these new lives as they enter the world. God may even be described as midwife, opening a birth canal through the Red Sea and bringing the Israelites through to freedom. I think that only with all of these qualities together – the unconditional love of nurturance and the guidance and discipline of teaching can a child grow up with trust in their environment. One of my purposes is to promote the rebalancing of these so-called masculine and feminine properties that is so needed if we are to fully realize our best selves.

So let us add to our quiver of Holy Names that of God as *omenet*, of the cosmos itself as a source of steady and trustworthy nurturance for our spirits.

Which brings me full circle to our bewildered condition and our need to practice faith and trust. Right here, right now, no matter how lost we might feel, we are not lost. The Great *Omenet*, the Great Mother is nurturing us, right now and always, if we allow ourselves to receive that nurture. We are attached to Life itself. Close your eyes and imagine, if you will, that we are suckling on the Great Mother's breast at this very moment – because we are! We are taking in the ever-present goodness and sustenance of life itself. And imagine now opening and lifting your eyes and feeling seen: by the trees, by the mountains, by the sky and the earth, by our favorite humans and animals, by the shimmering radiance that peeks out to us from everywhere. We are drinking in that goodness, always connected, never alone. As King David wrote in Psalm 121, "I lift up my eyes to the mountains, from where does my help come? My help comes from Life Unfolding, creator of heaven and earth." Now close your eyes once again, and take another deep drink of love and of life. If you have lost your bearings, do not panic; instead, rock your soul in the bosom of Abraham. You will no longer be lost, but rather you will

remember that you are exactly where you need to be – which is right here, right now, connected to all that is.

So, may we have *emunah*, have faith and be steadfast as we journey into the unknown territory ahead. May we regularly drink in the goodness that will sustain us on the dangerous journey. And from now on, when it is time to respond “Amen,” let it be a reminder to take that next sip of trust and goodness. Can I get an “Amen” to that?