

What We Learn Along the Way

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It's one of the most boring passages in the Torah: "The Israelites set out from Rameses and encamped at Succoth. They set out from Succoth and encamped at Etham, which is on the edge of the wilderness. They set out from Etham and turned about toward Pi-hahiroth, which faces Baal-zephon, and they encamped before Migdol. They set out from Pene-hahiroth and passed through the sea into the wilderness; and they made a three-days' journey in the wilderness of Etham and encamped at Marah."ⁱ Only the Book of Numbers could treat the parting of the Sea as an afterthought in a rote travelogue! And it goes on like that for nearly forty-five verses!

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev provides an explanation for why we get this rote recitation of all the places the Israelites encamped. "All of Israel's travels in the great and awesome wilderness were directed by God in order that they might cull the divine sparks that had fallen into husks there; to remove that which had been swallowed by them. This is the reason that Israel would camp in one place for an extended period, while in another for a short time. That is, their encampment was according to the work required to cull the sparks in that place."ⁱⁱ

I suspect that most of us would reject a theology that "everything happens for a reason," which is the basis for Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's commentary. Still, he has a point, and one that is relevant to our lives, particularly in this moment. As Rabbi Alex Kress points out: "[T]he Israelite journey from slavery to the Land of Israel reminds us that there are many chapters that shape who we become... These... stages remind us that life often leads us down an unpredictable and often circuitous path. Sometimes we fail in ways that inflict moral injury and pull us to an unimaginable low. In other moments we reach heights that soar past our wildest imagination. Most of the time, we forget to find holiness in the mundane steps of our journey or offer gratitude for whichever stage we find ourselves in."ⁱⁱⁱ

The Children of Israel, their spirits broken by slavery, constantly rebel against God and Moses, indicating by their actions that they are by no means ready to live in fidelity to God's will in the Promised Land. They must endure hardships, experience the "husks" of life, and then remove those husks to find sparks of holiness.

Similarly, each of us endures hard times in our lives. Sometimes, tragedy and misfortune befall us. At others, our own actions get us into trouble. Looking back on a low time in my own life, I recognize years later what I could not see at the time: I needed to remain “encamped,” as it were, in that awful place, not just for a week or a month, but for a year or two, in order to learn hard lessons and emerge healthier. Removing the “husks” to reveal the holy sparks took time.

None of us is responsible for the pandemic from which, until recently, we thought we were emerging. And my theology is not that God wanted us to “encamp” in this surreal situation for—well, we don’t know how long—to achieve any particular goal. Still, I suspect that we are all learning a great deal from a time for which we would not have wished. The “husk” of our too-busy lives gave way to reveal the holiness we could experience by moving more slowly.

We learned, or we reminded ourselves, what is most important. We protected our health at the expense of enjoying our lives as we usually do. We noticed what we missed most: Yes, we longed to eat out or get on an airplane; but what bothered us most was not seeing loved ones for extended periods of time. The “husk” of our typical distractions gave way to focus on holiness.

We learned to be patient in ways we might never have expected. People who are constantly on the go were suddenly staying home, acclimating to a slower pace of life, using less gas and spending less money. We learned, often to our frustration, that we do not have as much control over our lives as we might have thought or would like. The “husk” of being a “control freak,” a tendency I suspect I share with many of you, slowly gave way to reveal holy nuggets of acceptance.

We also learned how to do things in ways we never had previously. I have often said, “If you had told me in late 2019 that my thirtieth year in the rabbinate would force me to do things differently than I ever have before, I would have opted out.” Nevertheless, I found myself energized by our congregation’s stunning success at gathering remotely, praying and studying together, and realizing that we want to take many of the benefits technology offers us into the future.

Rabbi Kress observes: “It is easy to downplay all the little moments that make us who we are. We like to act as if life is linear, predictably moving toward a given destination along a predetermined path.”^{iv} With the pandemic, we all hoped, oh, way back a week ago, that we were headed inexorably toward more and more in-person interaction, “back to normal.” Now, like Israelites wandering in the desert, we have been turned around and sent the wrong way. Or perhaps we have been commanded to remain encamped—not by God or by our government, but by

our commitment to keeping our community safe, our fidelity to the Jewish value of *pikuach nefesh*, of saving lives.

This week, we complete our annual reading of the Book of Numbers. When we conclude a book of Torah, we say, *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek*, which Dan Nichols translates in song, “Be Strong, and let us strengthen one another.” Every stop along life’s journey requires the strength to recognize what we can learn—from the high moments and from our gravest misdeeds. Every stage in our lives presents us with “husks” we must remove in order to reveal the holy sparks.

Next week, we begin reading Deuteronomy, which may best be described as a recapitulation of the Book of Numbers. How fitting for this moment of having to turn back to pandemic living. Yet, Deuteronomy tells each story at least a little bit differently. Something has been learned along the way.

For you and me, as we journey into a new phase of the pandemic, where progress is not linear as we expected or would like, we may tell the story differently now. Earlier this week, I said, “We can pivot to Zoom. We know how to do that well.” Our worship services by Zoom may be a metaphor for what we’ve learned during the pandemic. With creativity, with patience, and with commitment to our values, we may journey onward, together, strengthening one another, revealing sparks of holiness.

Amen.

ⁱ Numbers 33:5-8.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, commentary to Numbers 33:2, translated by Rabbi Jonathan Slater, *A Partner in Holiness*, Jewish Lights, 2014. Text provided to me by Rabbi Rick Kellner.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Alex Kress, “Finding Holiness in Hugs, Home & Hoagies,” *ReformJudaism.org*, July 5, 2022.

^{iv} Kress.