

## SERMON - PARASHAT MATTOT-MASSEI

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### BORDERLANDS

From the time our people left Egypt until they crossed into the promised land, they wandered in the wilderness, a place neither here nor there, a place in-between, a liminal space. In Hebrew, there is a midrash that equate Egypt *Mitzrayim*, with the phrase *min ha-meitzar*, or from the narrow-places, from the abyss. In other words, to leave any form of bondage or oppression, we have to pass through a narrow place, through a wilderness, or what in simplest terms might mean “between a rock and a hard place.”

The wilderness is a place where we can't decide to go back, move forward, or just sit down and surrender. I think we have all been in those places. Can you think of one in your life? How did you finally decide to get out? Did you? Are you still in that wilderness?

Of course, to some degree, being in the wilderness is part of the human condition. Because we have these brains, we all live between knowing and not-knowing, aware of the past, unsure of the future. Our people's long wanderings in the wilderness reflect something profound about what it is to be a human being, whether alone or in a tribe. We live at some level always in a wilderness.

But I think most of us also sense that there is a direction we want to head, a direction that leads us at least closer to place we can call home, and that intuition, that yearning and pull is, I believe, also core to be human and lies at the heart of the spiritual being we are.

Right now, it feels as Americans, we are in a bit of a political wilderness. WE know we have left what we knew, and we aren't sure where we are heading, and right now, the signs all seem to point in confusing directions that are unsettling and scary.

Right now, at our border, thousands upon thousands of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers have left what they knew, a 'house of bondage and violence,' their Egypt, and have travelled at great cost and risk through a wilderness only to

arrive at the border and find it closed, or worse, a new and worse form of bondage.

In our Torah portion this week, our people, having wandered for 40 years, is at the border and preparing to cross over into what they hope will be a better home. Our sages teach us that the reason we had to wander in the desert was because our people could not get along, and they argued and broke into factions. To get to the promised land, they would need to find a way to work together across divides and jealousies.

*As we all know, that is not easy. It always sounds good to work with others until the other we are supposed to work with says something that strikes at one of our core beliefs and values.*

Perhaps the greatest human paradox is that we only survive through working and living in groups, and yet our individuality bristles and pushes against going along with a group. We are both cooperative by nature, and fiercely independent by nature. Finding a way to balance those is what wisdom is often seeking.

As we know, our people began fighting about as soon as they left Egypt, even before. They fought about food, heat, who got what, who was in charge – just about everything, and as a result, they remained in the wilderness.

I'm sure each group felt very sure of its position, quite sanctimonious in their certainty they were the moral agent in the conflict. Feeling righteous in the face of disagreement is another profound part of who we are. As Jonathan Haidt points out in his book, *THE RIGHTEOUS MIND*, there is something literally addictive about feeling right.

So here, at the end of the book of Numbers, at the border of the promised land, things almost go wrong all over again.

Two tribes, Reuben and Gad, announce that they don't really want to go to the promised land now, that they will stay on the other side of the Jordan to raise their herds. Thank you, Moses and everyone, but we are just going to stay here in the wilderness and turn it into home.

Moses says, 'no way'. And then something surprising happens. All on their own, the tribes of Reuben and Gad seem to realize the problem with their request, and

they make an amazing offer: they want to stay where they are, but to serve the group they will become the infantry of the army by which the other tribes will take over the promised land, and only once the group goal is realized, will they go to their new home that was their wilderness. Moses, who was furious, seems shocked at this offer and so announces, YES, with some minor amendments. The tribes can move forward together despite different goals.

Another group, the Daughters of Zelophechad, who had just fought for and won the right to inherit property, are now told that while they can choose any husbands they wish, a major step forward into agency for them, they can only choose those husbands from their tribe, so that the land they are inheriting will stay in the tribe. This way, the needs of the group are balanced with the needs of one family, five sisters.

These are not easy choices, but they are crucial change from the rebellions and civil wars and insurrections that characterized the years in the wilderness.

I know when I've been in a personal wilderness, I've been guilty of some rebellions, insurrections and frustrations of my own. I know I've looked for ways to assure myself that I was right and that it was not my fault that I ended up in the situation. But usually, the only way out of the wilderness is to look honestly at my own part in the dynamic that created it. And when I'm ready to make decisions that recognize my own needs but balance those with the needs of others in my life, only then can I get out of a wilderness with my family and friendships in tact.

We live in an age and a culture that tells us that what is best for us is best, and that certainly feels true, but Judaism teaches us that we must balance what is best for us with what is best for our family and our tribe. It is not nearly as satisfying as radical individualism, but I believe there is a profound truth in this need for balance, for finding compromises that satisfy our personal need but also take responsibility for the needs of others in our lives. It doesn't fit on a bumper sticker, but deeper truths just are not so simple.

This week's Torah portion gives us a glimpse into a more mature people Israel, where groups find ways to meet their own needs without undermining the needs and goals of the group. They learn not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

As for those in the wilderness at our borders, there is nothing they can do to change the situation here, in what, for them, is the promised land. I've been working all week with the Jewish leaders across the state to create a plan to raise funds for legal aid for these people and I will be sharing more with you soon about that. But these people have been on my mind as we have struggled to work together with others who share our concern because of areas of profound and fundamental disagreement.

But I want to offer another perspective: perhaps it is we, on this side of the border, that are actually being put into a new wilderness because we can't find a way to come together and do what is right for us and for them, whatever that might be. We are in the uncomfortable situation of finding that what was our home, our promised land, is more and more a wilderness of conflict, or uncompromising slogans, and of 'my group' verses 'your group.' In this wilderness we call home, it is upon us to find the same strength, the same willingness to balance competing goods, that the Tribe of Reuben and Gad found, and the Daughters of Zelophehad found. Only then can we cross the Jordan to enter, once again, a place we can truly call home.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon