

Shabbat Ekev 5784
Responding To Elliot Meyers-Kane

Elliot, your d'var Torah demonstrates a wisdom that exceeds your years. Perhaps it's from your recent direct experience in the wilderness, which our tradition understands to be a place of raw reckoning, a place where we encounter G d, truth, and yes wisdom. In Hebrew wilderness is midbar, but our Rabbis say it should be read medaber, speaking, as in the wilderness is the place where we can hear G d speaking.

As you said, wilderness is often overwhelming, disorienting, and can leave you unsure about meeting basic needs. You compared wilderness to the immigrant experience, the experience of exile and of foreignness. You compared wilderness to the experience of immersion in a new language, whether as a newcomer to this country like your great great grandparents or as a second grader in Spanish class – that feeling of not knowing, not understanding, lacking reference points or ease of navigation. And you compared wilderness to our experience as Jews in recent years and most especially this last year, as we face the unsettling rise in antisemitism in a place we've come to feel is home, suddenly looking around wondering whether the familiar landmarks and neighbors are actually safe for us, are actually where we belong.

This week a Brooklyn bookstore, Powerhouse Books in Dumbo, canceled at the very last minute a book event with Yale professor Joshua Leifer and the former senior rabbi of our congregation, Andy Bachman. They were scheduled to be in conversation about Leifer's new book, *Shattered Tablets*, about the future of American Jews in this complex time, but the bookstore canceled because Rabbi Bachman is a Zionist. Like me, Rabbi Bachman believes that the Jewish people need and deserve a safe place in the world, a home in Israel, and that the Palestinian people also need and deserve a safe place in the world, a home in that same land. He believes that the land needs to be shared and both Israelis and Palestinians deserve self-determination.

This decision was nothing short of antisemitism. How many people have spoken at that bookstore who believe that Israel has a right to exist but don't happen to be rabbis or Jewish. It's not about his beliefs. It's about the fact that he's a visible Jew with those beliefs. The conversation was likely to raise many of the questions that the pro-Palestine movement wants raised, and it will raise those questions, as we host the very conversation that was canceled at our Center for New Jewish Culture on Monday night.

This one example gets to the very heart of what you are teaching us, Elliot. The wilderness experience lasts much much longer than we want it to. And if we're honest we know that the wilderness never ends. The wilderness is life itself. The people in our parasha are standing at the edge of the Promised Land, waiting to enter. After the Torah ends they will enter the land, but they will never fully arrive. They will struggle and fail to live according to G d's wishes. They will face challenge after challenge – foreign and domestic – and eventually they will experience exile and wander in the wilderness all over again, and then come home and then be exiled again. In our people's long history we see that whether at home or on the way, every day we live in a world that is unpredictable, rapidly changing, and often disorienting. There is actually no such thing as having fully arrived. The history of the modern state of Israel attests to this truth.

We want so badly to arrive. We want so badly to have everything be settled and complete and resolved and known. But that is not the way of the world. That is not what life is like. Instead of yearning for such a fantasy moment of arrival, we must acknowledge that we are always to some extent in the unknown. Acknowledging that we are in the wilderness enables us to make use of its *matanah* – its gift. To recognize the ways that wilderness makes us stronger. To recognize that “a human being does not live on bread alone.” that the life force in us is sustained every day by more than our food – by the Source of our lives, by G d, by our faith, by our hope, by love, by the light of each new day.

And... if we look at the remarkable events of the last month in this country, we see that in the midst of the unknown, in the midst of frightening circumstances, in the midst of difficulty and challenge, one of the most important sources of sustenance is joy. We have just witnessed that joy has transformative power. Regardless of one's politics or policy or party, we have all just seen and maybe even felt how joy gives people hope, it gives people the boost they need, even in the midst of heartache and brokenness, to take on the challenges of the world. Allowing ourselves to be uplifted is not about turning away from or ignoring the problems we face, quite the opposite. When we celebrate what is good, we suddenly believe in possibility. And that gives us the power to shape the future.

This is old Jewish wisdom. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav knew this. Rebbe Nahman, a Hasidic master who lived in the late 18th century and suffered from lifelong depression, taught that joy is a mitzvah, a commandment, an obligation. He taught this despite all of his personal difficulties and all of the difficulties Jews experienced in Breslov in the late 18th century. He said this of joy:

A person must gather all their resources to be constantly joyful. As a result of day-to-day problems, human nature tends toward depression. Everyone has problems.

A person has to work very hard to force themselves to be constantly joyful and to do whatever they can to make themselves joyful—even with silly things.

It is true that a broken heart is very good. But that is only for a limited amount of time.

A person should set aside a certain amount of time every day to break their heart and speak to God in their own words. But for the rest of the day, they must be joyful.

(Likutei Moharan II, 24)

We are living in a precarious time. Israel is facing profound brokenness and danger. This country is awash in a raw antisemitism many of us thought

was over. We don't know what will happen next, in Israel or here. We never know what the future will hold.

But we do know that we come from a people who have traversed wilderness, danger, hardship and fear, again and again. We come from a people who have faced down the unknown and listened right in its midst for wisdom, purpose, and direction. People who, against all odds, practiced the spiritual discipline not only of a broken heart, but also of joy.

In these times, we could decide that instead of worrying and waiting and wallowing in brokenness, we're going to practice the spiritual discipline of joy. That instead of wringing our hands we're going to roll up our sleeves. That starting tomorrow we're going to get up each day and draw upon what is beautiful and good and worthy, and fill ourselves with the light of the world. So that we summon that boost and that buoyancy, so that we gather all of our resources, all of our energy right now to bring about the future that our people and our country so desperately need.

Shabbat Shalom.