Shabbat Shalom.

As we end this week, we have more reasons than usual for delighting in rest on Shabbat. Another week has passed, in which we've faced an avalanche of painful and terrifying headlines, executive orders, and government shakeups. And without repeating all of them here…it's safe to say that we are exhausted. And we deserve a break.

Earlier this week, I spoke with a CBE member about how current events were impacting her and she said, "I'm really glad to be Jewish right now." I kind of just stared at her, unsure of exactly where she was going next. And she said, "you know, we suffer. And then we don't. And then we talk about it forever." And I said, "my work here is done."

There's more to say, of course, and I will, but I think that most of us know she was right. Ours is a tradition that gives us tools for getting through difficult times: Prayers. Community. Shabbat rest. But also a story of resilience and hope, wandering through a wilderness and somehow coming out better for it. This week in our Torah cycle, we read the beginning of that wandering. And so, too, the beginning of that wisdom.

Right at the start of Parashat Beshallach, we read: *Vayhi Beshalach Paro et Ha'am*, when Pharaoh let the people go, v*'lo nacham Elohim derech eretz Plishtim, ki karov hu*, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, though that was closer.

It doesn't take an advanced degree to realize that Egypt and the land of Israel are not that far apart. And inevitably we might wonder why it took them 40 years to make the trek. But as if to preempt our question as to why God would lead the people through a circuitous path toward a *nearby* destination, the text continues that God said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see *war*, and return to Egypt." *V'yasev Elohim et Ha'am derech hamidbar, Yam Suf*. So God let the People go round about, by way of the wilderness at the Red Sea.

A plain reading of the verse insists that the people's more difficult path was actually the safer one. It was the path that would protect them from returning to the place of their bondage. And indeed, later in this parsha, at the moment when things get hard for the people in their wandering, they freak out and yearn to go back to Egypt. But according to the text, God didn't give them that option.

Medieval sages will tell us that the people needed to wander in the desert for 40 years to re-educate them in the ways of God. Or, varyingly, to root out the slave mentality to which they'd grown accustomed and to learn to respect themselves again as a people. Commentaries abound on what precisely the people were supposed to learn from their wandering. But the throughline remains: if the Israelites were going to live out a grand drama that included receiving the Torah, and one day reaching a Promised Land, they had to take the difficult, less obvious path ahead of them.

I think of this text all the time when I consider making a choice that I know will be hard, but which I think might pan out in the long run. I share it with artists who take on ambitious projects over which they neurose and struggle, with the faint hope that maybe it'll turn out to be something great. I've offered it to grad students, unsure if they really want to go through the gauntlet of further schooling, but are hopeful nonetheless that they'll come out on the other side with deeper meaning in their professional lives. And I share it also with activists, who could just as easily *not* pursue the painstaking efforts of making change, but without whose arduous and long struggles, change would never come. I milk this Torah for all it's worth, because it's good. And true. And it's pretty central to our story.

These days, when all of us are struggling in some way, wandering in a wilderness that seems more chaotic by the moment, I choose to believe that on the other side of this journey, we will find something better. I have no idea what we will learn during this time, and I refuse to believe that any news cycle or current events are part of a divine plan. But I'm certain we will learn things, and that those things will inform our task of *building* something better, on the other side.

In the meantime, unfortunately we know we will witness injustice and indignities. And don't mistake me, some people will be actively harmed (and already have been) by the path this country is taking. And yet, what choice do we have, but to live in this world, and on this path, putting one foot in front of the other, and trying our best? We are entering the wilderness, yet again, and if it feels at times like we're walking in circles, our task is to not allow ourselves to get dizzy.

The Midrash Rabbah asks about the Torah's language, "V'yasev Elohim et Ha'am," meaning, God led the people in a roundabout way. Why does text use the verb v'yasev, like *sevivon*, a spinning top, to explain God's action? The midrash then cleverly explains the verb to mean that God was *encircling* the people when God mapped out a challenging journey for them. Though they complained about the tsuris of wandering for so long, what they didn't realize, says the midrash, was that God was all around them. Enveloping them. Loving them and guiding them, in mysterious ways ultimately toward Torah. Or learning.

Even if we're not willing to believe that God brought about this moment for some purpose, we know that there is no way *around* this moment, and it is possible that God, or maybe simply truth, is hiding somewhere on this path for us to find it. We will find our way, trudging through the mud amidst troubled waters IF we keep grounding ourselves in goodness, remaining vigilant amidst the deluge of falsehoods, and believing in a redemption however far off.

The men who seek to reshape this country in their image, are banking on us getting tired. Getting anxious from all the chaos that they sow, and looking the other way. And I know it's really hard not to just curl up in a ball of exhaustion.

We feel inadequate, impotent, directionless because in some ways we are, right now. But we will not always be. And so we learn. We meditate. We observe Shabbat. We deepen relationships to each other and to institutions

– like our families, schools, and synagogues – believing that somewhere on this path, if we hold onto our highest ideals, we will eventually figure out what to do.

This week's parsha finds us right in between two painful moments in Israelite history. It is the bridge, as it were, between slavery in Egypt and wandering in the desert for 40 years. They have come from degradation and they are headed toward decades of desolation. But for a moment, they give themselves some hope. And they sing.

On this Shabbat Shira, when we read the song they sang, when we also call to mind Debbie Friedman, our beloved patron Jew of song, we remember the verse of Exodus that she imprinted on the hearts of American Jews by way of her music: and the women, dancing with their timbrels, followed Miriam as she sang her song.

It's right there in the Torah. She had a tof, a hand-drum or timbrel, in her hand. But, a close reader might ask: where did she get that timbrel? Where did the Israelites get their tambourines and flutes, amidst the chaos of fleeing Egypt? The midrash explains that when the people were still enslaved in Egypt, a few Israelites had the courage to believe that maybe there would one day be a need to celebrate, and so they crafted timbrels.

Tonight, as we end this week, with the exhaustion of all that we've read and heard, we may not feel like singing. We may not feel like dancing. But in this moment, we can give ourselves the space or the time to believe that one day, we will feel joyous again. As we walk this path, we will also pay close attention to those who seek quiet destruction, and we will take them to task. We will check in on and take care of those who are most affected by whatever comes next. And, without sinking into despair about the world's future, we must remember that there will come a time when we rejoice again. And as we do that, we might as well make some timbrels and tambourines for when that time finally comes.

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