

Yasher Koach, Alex and Teddy. For your Torah and Haftarah chanting. And for teaching those words of Torah just now. You each had pretty different perspectives. But each of you brought your full selves to this parsha, and noted specific difficulties for us as modern Jews. Both of which deserve our attention this morning.

Teddy, I'll start with your teaching. In your drash, you exemplified the time-honored tradition among our people of taking God to task. Even questioning if God is really all that good. Pointing to commandments with harsh punishments, you asked: "what's the difference between having no choice under *Pharaoh* and having no choice under *God*?" If the people have to follow hundreds of rules, isn't that just a different kind of enslavement?

And this is, actually, a very fair question to ask. Unlike our American legal system that describes rights and freedoms, the Torah speaks in the language of obligations and commands. But where's the freedom in that? Where's the agency that you'd expect from a people newly freed from bondage?

Even when God frees the Israelites from slavery, God's intentions are clear: We read in Exodus "let my people go so that they may serve me in the wilderness." Not so that they can be free to live or build a society as they please. But effectively to become slaves to God. Intriguingly, we get another hint of this with a word we often use to describe God: that is, our Redeemer, our Goel. We throw that word around in religious settings so much that we don't even really think about what it means. But in the context of Torah, the word, Goel, or Redeemer, actually has more to do with ownership than salvation. It's like "redeeming a coupon." Really. With the connotation that God *owns* the Israelites after essentially buying them from Pharaoh. But if that's the case, how can the people really see themselves as free?

You answer that question, Teddy, with an important and generous possibility: that the harsh treatment that God has imposed upon the

Israelites might not be the end goal for Israel, or God's idea of what society should be. But instead, these laws could be some kind of placeholder, guidelines for the people as they continue to pass *between* slavery and freedom.

And that, I think, is a very compelling answer. Because this week's parsha is called BaMidbar, meaning "in the wilderness." And the people are very much in-between. Their story and these laws are therefore useful for *us* to consider when we think about ourselves existing right now in our own kind of in-between. Even though we think of ourselves today as free, we hardly live in a world that is redeemed in the sense of being saved, or more whole, or at peace. Like the Israelites BaMidbar, we, too, are in transition. As Jews, as Americans, as human beings. We imagine ourselves as much more evolved than our ancestors. But, if we believe in a future that is better than this one, we are actually still in-between. Which can, of course, be frustrating.

And yet, there might be a benefit to this in-betweenness of our world yet unfinished. Perhaps in this transitional state, we might be able to see what we want for our future, and find a way to enact it. We may learn more deeply who we actually are, and find a way to celebrate it. And there, I think, is where we come to your teaching, Alex.

You pointed out that in this parsha, the main plotline entails Moses conducting a census of the Israelites in the wilderness. BUT, very importantly, as you said, women are excluded from this counting. We've got 603,550 men, but fewer than *ten* women are mentioned in the entire book of Numbers.

It turns out that this is an auspicious Shabbat for you to raise this dilemma. Tomorrow night we will begin the holiday of Shavuot, when we ritually reenact the moment that the Israelites received the ten commandments, and agree to be in covenant with God. According to *that* part of Exodus, all the people were gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, and they had to purify

themselves to get ready to receive the commandments. But then, as part of their instructions to stay pure, Moses tells them: “do not go near a woman.”

This is a huge bummer. Here, at the iconic moment when the people encounter God, the Ten Commandments moment we’ve seen represented over and over again in pop culture...the text is clearly addressing men only, and not the entire people of Israel.

This episode in Exodus is the pretext for a famous book by the theologian Judith Plaskow, titled *Standing Again at Sinai*, in which she treats the same question that you do. As *she* points out, “half of [all] Jews have been women, but *men* have been defined as *normative* Jews, while *women’s* voices and experiences are largely invisible in the record of Jewish belief and experience that has come down to us.” Like you, Plaskow argues for a course correction. Finding ways of recovering voices that had been silenced for generations, reading Torah through a feminist lens. Only when we’ve reclaimed all that has been lost to us...can we speak of a Torah temimah, a Torah that is perfect.

We can extrapolate from there, using this teaching, that if we are truly going to understand the Torah – its rules, stories, and theology – then we have to *study* Torah through as many lenses as possible among our people. We miss out on half the Torah when we ignore the experiences and commentaries of women. And we likewise miss out on Torah when we ignore the voices of *any* marginalized group of Jews, whom we have previously silenced.

As we find ourselves now, still in-between, somewhere between the degradation of the past and a future that we hope will be better, maybe one thing we can do is to pivot toward the democratic, amplifying as many voices as possible in Jewish communal life. If we’re lucky, we might find in this wilderness...the *space* to consider which essential voices have been missing from our people’s public discourse.

Tying both of your teachings together, Teddy and Alex, perhaps we can say that freedom in our tradition isn't really about the absence of a power over us, especially given our faith in God. Rather what it means to be free as a Jew is to have the freedom to find our own voices within the text. To work within the confines of what we inherit, find ourselves somewhere, and insist that our unique perspectives both exist and are essential. In our communities and in the world. That they can help us all, in the aggregate, to be the best collective we can be. In this wilderness, it seems we need all the Torah we can get, from as many perspectives as possible.

I wind up with this conclusion because...let's face it, this was my attempt at reconciling your very different messages. But also, because we are, at the present time, in a delicate moment as Jews. We are caught in-between a whole lot of things right now in this proverbial midbar. Our universalistic values, and our particularistic ones. Our commitments to all of humanity and to our own people. We're caught in between political extremes. We stand conflicted between loved ones who hold core beliefs that are opposite one another. Maybe even we ourselves are between two or more opinions at any given time.

And in this wilderness of the in-between, if we're being honest and vulnerable: every one of us is kind of confused about where our people is headed. And individually, about what our roles in that people might be.

Over the past twenty months, during which the Jews have been front and center in the headlines, we've been as perplexed as ever about what all of it means. Divided, and in pain. Which only compounds our confusion. Naturally, we've sought out people who think like we do, and tried to silence those who don't. But that's likely the opposite of what we need right now, as we try to understand being in this collective.

It may be that Judaism really is all about being a servant to God. It may be that Judaism is all about taking God to task. It may be that Judaism is a thousand other things altogether. But the only way we're going to figure out what Judaism is, who the Jewish people are, what our values are, and

where we are headed is if we have a maximal amount of Torah to guide us in this wilderness. Which is to say...as many perspectives as possible, from every identity and political persuasion. Every denomination and lack thereof.

As we move into Shavuot tomorrow night, reenacting the moment of our revelation at Mount Sinai, may we push ourselves to find our voice within our own tradition. May we push ourselves to stand there alongside voices very different from our own, but no less essential. And in this wilderness, may we find that the more of each other we bring in, the closer we come to a Jewish collective that is not only whole, but holy.

Shabbat Shalom.