

“Revelation in the Wilderness”

Rabbi Hannah L. Goldstein

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We are in the wilderness. Last night, we began our observance of Shavuot- the holiday that commemorates receiving Torah at Sinai. This festival celebrating revelation occurs just as we begin to read the book of Numbers- or Bamidbar in Hebrew. Bamidbar means “in the wilderness,” and it recounts the experience of the Israelites’ wandering between Egypt and the Promised Land. It is a period of growth and identity formation, a time of rebellion, and frustration. It is a time of death and loss for the Israelites, as well as a time of vision and new understanding. It is in the wilderness that revelation occurs. It is this time in the wilderness that prepares the Israelites for life in the Promised Land.

We begin reading Bamidbar as we find *ourselves* in the wilderness. We find ourselves confronting a time of uncertainty and fear, unlike any we have experienced before. And it begs us to consider, do *we* have the capacity for revelation in the wilderness? To see the world anew in spite of the struggles that surround us?

I find myself struggling with the words to describe the “after”- the period that will follow our isolation. So often, we simply say, “When we go back to normal.” But what this pandemic has laid bare, what this wilderness has revealed, is just how broken the world truly was, even before the pandemic began. Is that the normal to which we aspire?

When our undocumented neighbors do not access basic healthcare for fear of being questioned about their immigration status, do we accept that as normal? When people of color are routinely targeted by fellow citizens, and by law enforcement, because of fear and bias, do we accept that as normal? When so many in our city and in our country, live one paycheck away from hunger and eviction, are we willing to accept that as normal?

What has been revealed in this wilderness? In America, we have learned that we are too cavalier about the value of each human life.

Teju Cole wrote a beautiful and haunting piece in the [New York Times Magazine](#) recently, a diary of his reflections on this Pandemic, written while quarantined in Massachusetts. He writes, “Asking certain people to stay home for the sake of society is absurd, because these are people society has never cared about. ‘Stay home so people won’t die’ is a hell of a thing to say to those who are dying of hunger.” *Pikuach Nefesh*, saving a life, is understood to be the highest mitzvah in Judaism. Our time in the wilderness has revealed how far down the list of communal priorities it had plummeted, long before the pandemic began.

It is easy to blame the president, to point fingers across the aisle. But the racist and exploitive systems that are disproportionately killing people of color right now did not begin in 2016. They are the result of decades of complacency, at best, and deliberate policy decisions, at worst. They are the result of centuries of ignoring our country's original sin, our "land of liberty" founded on the backs of slaves. These racist policies are an inescapable part of our American version of normal.

The horrific murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis by a police officer this week is a symptom of a virus that lives deep within our country. It is an outrage and it must be condemned. And, it is just the most overt expression of the growing body count perpetrated by racist policies. Let us harness the anger that we feel when watching that excruciating video- and also direct it toward the thousands who have died in this pandemic, whose names we don't know, whose stories we will never hear, but who were made more vulnerable to the threat of illness in this pandemic because of our country's racist policies.

We cannot allow ourselves to be satisfied only with our own expressions of public outrage, we need to reject what was normal, and change our systems. By fighting voter suppression, by overturning policies that systematically oppress people of color, and, particularly, for those of us who are white, by examining how we have been shaped by the persistent racism in our country.

In the book of Bamidbar, we read the story of the generation that left Egypt. One of the most curious qualities of this generation is their almost immediate desire to return to Egypt. Why would this newly liberated People, moments after witnessing the miracle of the parted sea, begin to yearn for the land of their oppression? They remember Egypt as the time... "when we had our fill of bread" (Exodus 16:3). The Israelites complain to Moses, "We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, the garlic." (Numbers 11:5) They dream of returning to this bountiful buffet that is also the home of oppression and injustice. They yearn for a place where Israelite baby boys could be murdered simply because they were perceived by those in power as a threat. But maybe this is not so hard to understand. You see, they just wanted to go back to normal. Throughout their wandering, throughout their time in the wilderness, the Egypt generation just wanted to go back to normal. And Egypt, with all of its inherent injustice, was their normal.

That generation born in Egypt didn't make it to the Promised Land. The next generation, the generation born in the wilderness, *they* made it to the Promised Land. They came of age in the wilderness, they were shaped by the wilderness. They received Torah in the wilderness, and they knew that they could not go back. The wilderness generation had the imagination to forge a new normal, to create a world of which their parents could not even dare to dream.

During our time in the wilderness, this is my hope for us, to be like the generation born in the wilderness. To open ourselves up to revelation. To see the pain and suffering in our world for what it is, to be honest with ourselves about the circumstances that have allowed our society to become callous and cavalier about the value of each and every life. And, as we emerge from our wilderness, I pray that we have the collective imagination to **banish normal**, and be brave enough to build a better world.