VOICES OF THE WILDERNESS

REBECCA GUTTERMAN

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

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♦ Number of Chapters (Sections): Nine.

♦ Contribution: This thesis offers an in-depth, creative study of images of the wilderness in Jewish texts and literary tradition.

♦ Goal: The goal of this thesis was to strengthen my own skills brought to bear on the project while offering readers new ways of regarding what is for us an all-important motif.

♦ Division: The writing is grouped into three headings each of which contains three sections, comprising nine sections in all. The first section serves as an introduction, the last as a conclusion.

♦ Materials Used: Relevant primary and secondary sources (e.g. Tanakh, Midrash, related articles and books).

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Contents

In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead.

-- Tony Kushner

One

A voice rings out: Clear in the desert
a road for the Lord,
Level in the wilderness
a highway for our God.
Isaiah 40: 3

The year I lived in Israel, one of my friends developed a fascination with the desert. A group of us had traveled south to the Negev, and she decided to extend her time there when we were ready to return to Jerusalem. When spring arrived, she went back to the desert on her own. She came back to us bursting with stories. We were taken with her independence and her adventurous spirit. Past a certain point however, it seemed we could not truly grasp the significance of her experience there. It was as though she had been someplace, both literally and metaphorically, that only she knew about. True, in a sense we had all been there. But the desert had entered *her* in a way that ran deeper than what the rest of us had experienced. As much as I wanted to, I didn't understand. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't put it into words.

Desert comes from the Latin word for "abandoned" or "deserted." The summer before our journey to the Negev, I had lost my mother to cancer. For me the desert, that ragged abandonment, was inside. I preferred Jerusalem, with the sense of enclosure it afforded. The city was anything but a stranger to grief and loss. Every street was named for the memory of someone. I took every step with the feeling that someone had taken it before me, turned every corner knowing it had been turned by others with holes in their histories and hearts. The words of the traditional blessing *Ha-Makom yinachem etchem b'toch sha'ar avlei Tziyon v'Yerushalayim*-- may you be comforted among all those who

mourn in Zion and Jerusalem— held me. Even when comfort seemed impossible, I still had "among those." It was difficult to imagine finding that kind of solace as my friend found hers—alone in the middle of an apparently barren landscape. In the middle, one might say, of nowhere.

Before that year, my primary experience with the desert came when I was twenty-four. I had been living in San Francisco, where ocean met mountains met sky, and where all those edges spurred me to develop my own. My heart's home was still Western Massachusetts, whose hills anchored me in place; still this was heady and intoxicating, and it pulled me in. But I found myself pulled back the other way too– east, towards home. So without knowing just why (as I said, I was twenty-four) I gave into that pull and decided to leave. I made the drive across the country with a new friend, and we joined some people we met on our way to go camping in Utah. California was behind me, but I wasn't yet ready to feel the enveloping comfort of the familiar. Those five days in the desert gave me the time I needed to reconcile the powerful hold that both of these homes had on me. Wherever I looked my jaw dropped in amazement: the rock walls that shone almost red in the sunlight, my friend sitting in a pool at the bottom of a canyon looking for all the world as though Renoir could have painted her. This was the middle of *somewhere*. I could hardly believe such a place existed. The breathtaking mystery of the landscape merged with the easy comfort of my fellow travelers, and I contemplated the possibility of finding softness and edge in the same place, at the same time. Something had thrown me open.

There is one picture in particular from the first day that I hold in my mind's eye. The sun is low in the sky, the light diffuse. A path cuts straight through the middle of the

landscape, and keeps going far into the distance. Looking at it now, I can almost hear the voice in Isaiah 40 that calls out to level a road for God. A road through the wilderness.

I could not have known then that my own road would take me to Rabbinical School, or that my life would be leveled by a loss that would cause me to hold the desert at arm's length during the first year of my studies. Both of these things had happened by the time that, in the context of searching out a thesis topic, I came across the following lines from Bamidbar Rabbah: "Anyone who does not throw himself open to all like a wilderness cannot acquire wisdom and Torah." (1:7)

Suddenly I could see the colors in Utah again. I could remember how it felt to be thrown open. It was startling to see a midrashic rendering, albeit a brief one, that seemed to celebrate the creative properties of the desert... the very properties that my friend had tried to impress upon us in Israel. Gazing out the library windows three years later, I could feel something stirring inside. This midrash on the wilderness was not something to brush by on the way towards a topic that would surely emerge any day now. The wilderness—the desert-- *was* my topic. Like the texts that take it up, I had both embraced and avoided this place. I was ready to engage with images of it again, wherever they might lead.

If there was one textual voice celebrating the wilderness, could there be others? What would they sound like? The notion that our literary tradition contains images of the wilderness that are anything other than negative was a revelation. Our collective associations with it are by and large discouraging. We remember our ancestors wandering there, angry and forlorn, on the way to someplace better. It was the site of such intense misery at times that the Israelites begged to return enslavement of Egypt.

The wilderness is called desolate, "an empty, howling waste." (Deuteronomy 32:10) At the same time, individuals like Hagar and Moses experienced transformative encounters with God there, as did an entire community at the moment of Revelation at Sinai. And still the overwhelmingly negative perceptions maintain a powerful hold.

Later prophetic writings however, began to consider the desert in other terms. In the relative safety of retrospect, the wilderness years are viewed as a time during which the God enjoyed Israel's unflagging devotion. From the vantage point of the social corruption they observed around them, prophetic voices look back and lament that these simpler days are no more. In some of the later passages of the book of Isaiah, the exultant call to transform the wilderness into territory that boasts roads, rivers and pastures becomes synonymous with a vision of a wholly peaceful, prosperous world.

As the image of throwing oneself open to the wilderness implies, I found that midrash too, had a way of teasing out multiple meanings from this landscape. Amorphous as it was, the desert was seen a place that honed a community into something finer than it would have been otherwise. Filling in gaps in the Biblical text, the rabbis imbued even the "waste wilderness" (Bamidbar Rabbah 1:2) with purpose and meaning. In both Prophets and Midrash, this landscape emerges with a voice. No longer a static backdrop, the wilderness takes its turn as muse, participating in the transformation of its inhabitants and itself.

All these contrasting images of the wilderness can seem disparate and self-contained. Taken together though, they form a fascinating kaleidoscopic picture, rife with creative tension. The desert never emerges as a wholly positive place. Yet just when it seems about to emerge as a wholly negative one, it is pulled back. In the words of writer

Barbara Kingsolver, "even a desert has tides." It ebbs and flows back and forth from one notion to another, as to what it is and what meanings it holds. The road through the wilderness is wide enough to encompass wild anxiety, haunting loneliness, and a delicious sense of discovery.

This project is my way of tracing that road, in a way that does not attempt to tame or to make strictly linear sense of the wilderness. Rather, I hope to bring out the fullness of the images that exist already, and to bring them into conversation with each other. I have intentionally organized the pieces that follow as an interlocking series of clipped portrayals, rather than doing so strictly by genre or chronology. Some sections are thematic, exploring transformation or theological significance of the wilderness. Others focus on a specific text, or on midrashic re-workings of Biblical material. There is a great deal of overlap in these images, or voices as I came to think of them. I wanted to find a structure that would serve the content. In making this choice, I hope allow the reader to hear this cacophony, and to find his or her own sense of how to make meaning of these voices in the wilderness.[1]

Together, the photographs of the time I have spent in the desert encompass sky, rocky canyon walls and shallow rivers. They all edge their way into the frame. Light shines from a corner just around the bend. And the road stretches into the distance, looking like it could go on forever.

[1] A note on terminology: "the Hebrew *midbar* is defined as a region of uninhabited and unirrigated pastureland." (Sarna, p. 14) Midrash consistently translates *midbar* as "wilderness," while the Biblical text moves interchangeably between "desert" and "wilderness." I use *midbar*, desert and wilderness interchangeably as well.

Two

> What still amazed me about the desert was all the life it had in it... there were bushes and trees and weeds here, exactly the same as anywhere else, except that the colors were different, and everything alive had thorns.
>
> -- Barbara Kingsolver

While visiting my uncle's family last year, my aunt and I stayed up one night looking at their photo albums, many of which featured pictures of the older two daughters as babies. Kate was born nine months after Tessa was adopted, and as such their baby and toddler years occurred simultaneously. In these pictures they hold hands, they tumble over each other, their shared effervescence nearly pushing outside each frame. Their mother looked at one such image for a long time. Finally she said to me, "I really miss those days."

"Do you?" I asked idly, as I continued turning pages.

"Oh yeah," she replied, with an intensity that stopped my hands and made me look at her. "They're so sweet. And they love you so much."

Like grapes in the wilderness.

Her nostalgia, as we looked at their young smiling faces, fixed in the image of a simpler time, was deeply felt. It reflected what seems a part of the human condition: romanticizing the past as being better, safer or simply easier than it really was. While that is not the only way retrospect is experienced, something about knowing how a given story ends has the power to lull us into forgetting the more tumultuous aspects that had us in their grip at the time. Nowhere in this bittersweet moment with my aunt did memories

of sleep deprivation and toddler meltdowns surface. Rather, she remembered the unique sense of devotion and malleability flowing from her young children. This image, now fixed as pure sweetness, remains in her heart.

Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel.
Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season,
I saw your ancestors. (Hosea 9:10) [2]

Through the voice of the prophet Hosea, God remembers the first generation that crossed from Egyptian slavery into freedom with a similar wistful romanticism. In this recasting, the reader imagines the beginning of the people's journey into the wilderness as profoundly uncomplicated. The old life has been discarded, the new one not yet begun. The Israelites brim with potential. They are ripe for the shaping. However, the purity of this moment cannot hold. Sharply contrasting the tender retrospective description above, God has this to say about that generation at the time:

> God spoke to Moses, 'Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have acted basely. They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!' God further said to Moses, "I see that this is a stiffnecked people. Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze for the against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation. (Exodus 32: 7-10)

In this passage, which appears a mere seventeen chapters after the crossing of the sea, the people are no longer seen as obedient and faithful. Indeed, the episode being described

[2] When citing Biblical texts, I have based my translations on *The HarperCollins Study Bible* and *Tanakh: The New JPS Translation.*

has long been portrayed as the nadir of the Israelites' rebelliousness and faithlessness: the building of the Golden Calf. Despite its myriad interpretations, some more forgiving than others, what remains clear is that this action is an expression of fierce will. No longer intensely malleable, they have stepped into more complicated waters. Divine displeasure is abundantly evident, translating into a desire to disassociate from the people Israel. They are described to Moses as *amcha asher he'elayta m'eretz Mitzrayim—your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt. This stands in sharp juxtaposition to the frequent reminders emphatically punctuating the text from the crossing of the sea forward, that *I am the Lord your God/ who brought you out of the land of Egypt.*

We see then, that while Hosea voiced Divine recollection of Israel as grapes in the wilderness, God hardly held them in that kind of loving and delighted gaze as a matter of course. Retrospect has softened and simplified their image. This generation—with its rebellions against its leader, with its endless lament over a wilderness that could never be home-- is forgotten for the moment. Instead, a mythic rendering emerges--- a compliant generation behaving as God desired.

This "corrected" vision of the Israelites arises among the period of unrest preceding the fall of the Northern Kingdom. During the period in which Hosea prophesied, approximately 750-722 B.C.E., worship of the Canaanite god *Ba'al* took hold. So did other behaviors and practices confirming Israel's failure to hold up its end of the Covenant.[3] Against this backdrop, Hosea presented various allegorical images through which they might understand God's love for them as everlasting. Israel in its former virtue is recalled at a time like this precisely because the current reality threatens to break a long-standing, Covenantal bond. This is one of the more prominent tasks the prophets

[3] Mays, p. 1329.

as a whole take up, and particularly during times of distress: that of reminding the people of who they once were and what the core vision was for them.

That the wilderness is evoked in this recollection is especially significant. It provides the setting for this nostalgic reworking of a people's identity. Biblical commentator Shalom Paul points out the fact that "the expression 'grapes in the wilderness' represents imagery which almost borders on the fantastic."[4] An apt perception, considering that God seeing Israel in this way is more fleeting fantasy than ongoing reality. Even more to the point, these lines are a clear departure from our conventional notion of the wilderness as a barren place in which nothing grows. In this rendering of midbar, life flourishes in a surprisingly redolent, sensual way. The round, sweet, fecund qualities we might associate with grapes are incongruous with the harsh, barren prickliness ordinarily associated with the desert. While grapes growing in the wilderness may not be meant literally, as Paul suggests, the image opens the reader to the notion of the wilderness as a place that breathes life.

Israel being likened to first fruits also contributes to the tender, revelatory note this image strikes. The ancients paid their highest tribute to God through offerings of first fruits, or the early bounty of a harvest. Acceptance of said offerings assured Divine approval and continued benevolence. The parallel image of first fruits and Israel's more innocent incarnation in the wilderness occurs elsewhere in Prophets, as in the following passage from Jeremiah:

> Go proclaim to Jerusalem: So said Adonai:
> I accounted to your favor
> The devotion of your youth,
> Your love as a bride—
> How you followed Me in the wilderness

[4] Paul, p. 164

In a land not sown.
Israel was holy to Adonai,
The first fruits of His harvest,
All who ate of it were held guilty;
Disaster befell them...
-- declares Adonai. (Jeremiah 2: 2-3)

In both passages, the language evokes innocence, the tone wonder. The writers demonstrate that Israel too once embodied those qualities, during which time God held them in exquisitely loving regard. *What has happened to you*? these prophetic voices ask beseechingly. Even as they go on to admonish the Israelites for idolatry, debauchery and faithlessness, their lament-- surveying what has become of these once choice fruits-- is a hurting extension of God's. And midbar is portrayed neither as empty nor inhospitable, but rather as the setting that first nurtured promise and brought it forth.

As such these images of the wilderness make use of and transcend their own nostalgia, and point to something greater. They remind a people of their roots, and suggest that it is possible to return to the purpose and devotion that once guided their lives. This is a core theme throughout the Prophets. Whatever the specific historical context or issues at hand, one of the constant, insistent underpinnings of these books is the message that redemption is possible—the door is remains open, however far the people have strayed from its threshold. The wilderness contains a picture of the past that while perhaps mythic, may yet inspire Israel to return to its core vision and forge a better future.

Three

Two years ago, I spent the summer working with a theater ensemble to create a performance piece based on Jewish sources. We had decided to look at a series of characters from Torah and their encounters with wells. There was a point during the show where the stage lights dimmed and each of us spoke a line of text we felt summed up the character we had created. I still remember what I felt as I called out: "An angel of Adonai found her by a spring of water in the wilderness... and said, 'Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?'" (Genesis 16: 7-8) Hagar spoke to me more clearly at that moment than she ever had in the weeks of research, writing and improvisation that had led to it. As difficult as this may be to convey, I felt that I had finally internalized her, this young (as I imagined her) handmaiden with neither direction nor agency in her life. She emerged off the page as vital and alive, standing alone *bamidbar*—in the wilderness, neither where she had been nor where she was going. This is the first of two desert passages in which Hagar appears (the second occurring five chapters later in Genesis 21), each of which concerns a precise moment in time when returning to her former surroundings feels (or truly is) untenable, and going forward impossible. Each features an encounter with a Divine being through which a path out of the midbar becomes clear. Standing on that stage, I knew I would be returning to her and to who she was at the moment those words were spoken. For the purposes of this project, I chose to focus on Genesis 16: 7-14, with an eye towards discerning the role of the wilderness in Hagar's theophany. That passage is as follows:

> An angel of Adonai found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur, and said, 'Hagar slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?' And she said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai.' And the angel of Adonai said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment.' The angel of Adonai said to her, 'I will greatly increase your offspring, and they shall be too many to count.' The angel of Adonai said to her further, 'Behold you are with child and shall bear a son; You shall call him Ishmael, for Adonai has heard your suffering. He shall be a wild ass of a man; his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; he shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen.' And she called Adonai who spoke to her, 'You are El-Roi,' saying 'Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!' Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai roi; it is between Kadesh and Bered. (Genesis 16: 7-14)

Clearly, I had many rich verses to choose from when contemplating which one captured this character and my creative intersection with her. I believe I chose *ay mizeh va'at v'anah te'lechi*— "... where have you come from and where are you going?" (verse 8) because these words convey the essence of liminal space. This refers to physical, psychological and/or temporal structures in which the boundaries and supports that usually hold one up in life are absent. From these spaces, new senses of direction or identity are often forged. So are new ways of seeing and hearing, of paying attention to one's surroundings in this uniquely charged space. Liminal spaces are ones that, to paraphrase the angel who questions Hagar, are not where we have been or where we are going. For her, that space is the wilderness.

In his article "The Wilderness and salvation history in the Hagar Story," Thomas B. Dozeman writes that "the prominent role of the wilderness outside of Genesis raises the question of whether Hagar's repeated journey there is intended to embed her story in a larger history in which parallels are created between the lives of Hagar and Moses, and

also between the Ishmaelites and Israelites."[5] The similarities between her encounter with the Divine in the wilderness and that of Moses are indeed striking. Both are addressed at moments of humility, both chosen for the carrying forward of some larger purpose. Feminist scholar Phyllis Trible goes so far as to suggest that Hagar *is* Moses without the mantle of leadership and larger role in a people's redemption that followed.[6] At the very least it seems fair to suggest that this passage concerning Hagar's running to the wilderness prefigures various facets of midbar that will reverberate in later texts. It emerges as a place in which one might imagine herself and her future in new ways. It also hints at deprivation and fear—at a loss of direction in which one can only name the last place she occupied but cannot give words to what might come next.

Dozeman is also correct in pointing out that these various ways of seeing and relating to the wilderness are never seamlessly harmonized. The desert is allowed to maintain its ambiguity as a place where lack of resources can pose a mortal threat on the one hand (as in the second Hagar narrative), and a backdrop for a life-giving encounter, as in both narratives. As befits such a setting, Hagar's moment of transformation in the wilderness is similarly ambiguous. She does not experience full salvation there; it is difficult in particular for the modern reader to read the command that she return to a home in which Sarah mistreats her as the prescription for a happy ending. This passage does not offer an end to her story at all, as evidenced by the text's returning her to the wilderness in a subsequent chapter, together with the child she is promised here.

[5] Dozeman, p. 24.
[6] Trible, p. 23.

What then, does happen to Hagar by that spring of water in the wilderness? In his commentary on Genesis, Nahum Sarna writes:

> Hagar fled in the direction of her native land, for *Shur* is elsewhere described as being close to Egypt... *shur* also means a wall (Aram. *shura*) ... In the Hebrew, the 'spring on the road to Shur' contains a play on words: 'ayin' may mean 'an eye' as well as 'a spring,' and *shur* can mean 'to see' and also 'a wall.'"[7]

In a further play on words, Hagar has in effect "hit a wall." The reader finds her in the midst of a failed attempt to run toward home; when the angel asks her where she has come from, she answers with the most immediate place she has been. She does not however, call Abraham's household "home." Moreover, she has no response to the second question. Perhaps she does not know where she is going. Or perhaps something in her is aware that she has gone too far to return home. What happens after these words she speaks, and the ones she doesn't, is that Hagar sees and is seen in the wilderness. This is where the aforementioned wordplay, *ayin-yud-nun*, suggesting "well" and "eye" becomes especially important. Sarna adds that "the place where Hagar takes refuge thus suggests "a seeing eye."[8] Nearly every translation her response to the angel and subsequent naming of God — *Atah El-Roi... hagam haloh raiti acharei roi*/ "You are a God of Seeing— Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!" (verse 13) contains the ubiquitous footnote "meaning of Hebrew uncertain." This extraordinarily evocative phrase suggests that Hagar is witnessed in her darkest moment, all pretense and self-protective barriers gone. And she survives. The landscape that brought such piercing vision about is the same one that tends to suggest boundlessness and deprivation. Yet out

[7] Sarna, p. 120.
[8] Ibid.

of this wilderness and the theophany she experiences there, Hagar finds sustenance for the moment, in the promise of a future.

There is a "doubled consciousness" around midbar in this passage—one we will see reflected many more times in subsequent sections. The importance of what happens to Hagar there in both of the passages that concern her is undeniable. Yet the importance of leaving the midbar is equally communicated, as evidenced by her walking away in the end—back towards Abraham's household, bearing the weight of an uncertain future. In Section One, we saw the ways in which midbar, contrary to conventional perceptions, holds growth. Here we see it as holding revelatory, life-changing moments. Will we, in images that follow, glimpse the wilderness as a place that might hold growth and change—the substance of life—over the course of time?

In a work such as this, where my investment in plumbing the figurative depths of midbar is clear, there is the risk of investing this landscape with too much meaning at times. There is always the possibility that what happened to Hagar there could have happened anywhere. Of his travels in the Negev, writer Daniel Hillel muses, "the desert is deceptive. Sometimes... there is less to it than meets the eye. But sometimes there is more."[9] Acknowledging the difference between those times is crucial, or the process of making meaning of the desert could yield diminishing returns.

Hagar's theophany in the wilderness however, does seem to belong to those times where there is more to the desert than meets the eye. "The desert is not without promise," continues Hillel. "The seemingly useless wasteland is in face pregnant with hope and promise... the hope of a new abode, a new opportunity, a new life."[10] And so,

[9] Hillel, p. 30.
[10] Ibid., p. 4.

literally and figuratively, is Hagar—this Egyptian handmaiden who discovers her own promise in a setting that witnesses and mirrors it. This takes the desert beyond the role of mere backdrop against which the process plays out. The midbar rises up, and becomes a muse.

The fascination with the desert is part of the ageless human struggle to come to terms with the conditions of existence, with the inevitability of death after life and the search for life within life.

-- Lesley Hazleton

Four

In Section Two, we saw ways in which prophetic allusions to midbar portray the past as simpler than it really was. Recastings of midbar in later Rabbinic writing also attempt to gain a retroactive understanding of the desert. The Rabbis composing midrash were in a unique position when it came to giving this landscape and all it represented a voice. Clearly, they were well past the years of wandering in the desert. They were also free of the urgency to use midbar to remind a people of their roots, or to inspire them with the vision of a better day (see Section Eight) that marked the Prophetic writings. This comparative lack of agenda freed them to engage in wrestling with the meaning of midbar on multiple levels. As we will see, selected midrashim contemplate the desert as a place of refuge, a place that fosters purposeful growth, even a place in which the presence of God might be uniquely heard and felt. In their inimitable way, these writings are able to fuse disparate texts in order to see what sparks might fly when they meet.

While the Israelites wandered through the wilderness, "a schematic story of complaint"[11] went with them. This story encompasses some or all of the following elements: the community railing against Moses for wrenching them from their former settled life to risk death in the wilderness, Divine wrath at their insurgence, Moses interceding on their behalf (in some cases), and the people emerging newly chastened and ready to do God's will once more. The cycle plays out again and again, until the final complaint story in Numbers 21: "...the people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food.'" (Numbers 21:5) In response,

[11] HarperCollins Study Bible, p. 220.

God sends *n'chashim s'raphim* – "fiery serpents" against the Israelites, which caused the death of many of them. This mode of dramatic, physical punishment that surged from heavenly to earthly realm is fairly characteristic of God's approach to quelling rebellion in the wilderness.

In Bamidbar Rabbah 1:2 however, the rabbis wed this verse to a later prophetic one from Jeremiah. In doing so, they imagine a Divine response manifests in thought and reflection rather than in action. Consider the opening:

> Another exposition of the text, *And the Lord spoke unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai* (Numbers 1:1): This recalls the verse: *O generation, behold the word of God: Have I been like a desert to Israel? Or a land of thick darkness?* (Jeremiah 2: 31) The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel, 'You said to Moses: *'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?'* (Num 21:5); but was I at all like a wilderness to Israel, or did I act towards them as a wilderness?' (Bereishit Rabbah 1:2)

This retelling reflects a doublespeak similar to that which we saw in Section Three. On the one hand, through Jeremiah 2:31, the rabbis evoke the possibility that in fact, there always was Divine guidance during the people's wanderings. This casts the wilderness in a positive light. On the other hand, the insistence that God was not like a desert, and the parallel of desert with *eretz ma'apelyah*—a land of thick darkness—pulls it back into a negative state. A tension emerges between two questions: *Was the desert really all that bad?* Or *did I (God) embody the absence and darkness that the desert, as a given, embodies?* One interpretation of *ma'apelyah* here takes the root—*aleph-fey-lamed*, meaning dark, and plays with it against *afilot*—late. The writer in question concludes that God was never late in fulfilling promises to Israel in the wilderness—that not one of

God's words "fell to the ground" (p. 5) in fact, which reflects a further play on words: *afal* and *nafal*—fall. The investment then, is in showing that God did not let Israel fall into darkness, although the desert may well have been a dark place.

It is also worth noting that while most sources translate *hamidbar hayiti l'Yisrael* as "have I been like a desert to Israel?" the presence of the definite article renders the literal meaning "have I been like *the* desert?" This would connote the author's intention of drawing on the memory of wandering in *the* wilderness of Sinai. This formative experience with the midbar seems to stand in for any experience that parallels it, like that of the dispersion from which Jeremiah prophesied. In the verses just prior to 31 in chapter two of this book, the people are chastised for rebellion and idolatry, behaviors that characterized the Israelites' response to the real or imagined terror of God's abandonment of them in the desert. When Bamidbar Rabbah picks up on this verse, it becomes a trigger for hearing God's voice, and using it to tell a different story. In the Rabbis' retelling, God reminds the Israelites of ways in which they were actually cared for and guided in the wilderness:

> Did I not assign to you three special tutors, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam? It was due to the merit of Moses that you ate the manna ... Moreover, it was due to the merit of Aaron that I set clouds of glory about you... And again, the well was due to the merit of Miriam, who sang by the waters of the Red Sea... R. Berekiah, the priest, said in the name of R. Levi: 'When a mortal king sends high officials into one of his provinces to conduct its affairs and administer justice, who has to be responsible for their maintenance? Is it not the citizens of that province that must be responsible? The Holy One, blessed be He, however, did not do so, but though He sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam... yet it was Israel who were provided for through their merit. (Bamidbar Rabbah 1:2)

As with Hosea 9:10, this is a striking example of what retrospect makes possible. Now that the forest can be glimpsed through the trees, midbar emerges as safe and contained rather than wild and unformed. In the Hebrew text, Moses Miriam and Aaron are called *pedegogin*—from pedagogy. This intensifies the sense of teaching and learning—constructive activities indeed— that can and did happen in the wilderness. Imparting knowledge from generation to generation-- or from these three mentors to their community in this case-- also connotes continuity. While in the midst of their wanderings, the people voiced time and time again their anguished worry to Moses that they would die in the wilderness. This midrash suggests that their collective oblivion was never possible, even as many individuals among them fell there. The seeds for their continuity were being planted in the desert, even without their awareness of it.

Such faith in the eventual resolution of a difficult experience is close to impossible while in the heat of that experience. In Arthur Frank's The Wounded Storyteller, he discusses two distinct narrative types at length. In the chaos narrative, the relationship between the teller and the story at hand is painful and raw. Whatever meaning might be made cannot emerge through this narrative; "its plot imagines life never getting better... chaos feeds on the sense that *no one* is in control."[12] Restitution narratives, on the other hand, are about looking back and culling meaning from chaos. With the knowledge that life *did* get better following the people's years in the desert (or that life changed, at any rate), the Rabbis were able to use the insight born of retrospect to compose a restitution narrative. In it, they recast the wilderness as less chaotic than it seemed at the time. The result is ingenious: in addition to texts from different time periods entering into dialogue, chaos and restitution narratives achieve midrashic overlap in a way they seldom can in

[12] Frank, pp. 97-100.

life. The wilderness retains its chaotic voice, but its restorative powers emerge as well. On the page, it suddenly becomes possible to live through and meaningfully evaluate a difficult experience simultaneously. And in this strange, reflective light of this interpretation of midbar, the image of it as a land of thick darkness gives way as well.

Does the possibility of God's presence in the desert take away its darker elements? Or can the desert hold the darkness of the unknown and God's presence side by side?

My friend and I are standing at the beginning of a wooded path. It is a cold, sharp winter night, so dark that all I see in front of us is our breath in clouds. She wants me to walk down the path with her, but I clutch. I tell her I don't want to do this.

"Listen," she says. "This is one of my favorite places. Remember this: It's not scary. It's just dark."

For a long time we stood quietly, absorbing the stillness around us. Finally I put a cautious foot forward. I still couldn't see. But I could hear her voice. I could hear her footsteps in perfect time with my own. Imagining what I would feel at the end of the path, I walked forward.

The desert is not scary. It's just dark.

Or alternately it is neither of these. Or it is both, depending which of its voices emerges at any given time. Mostly though, the desert harbors the unknown. And that is what can make it scary.

Or dark. Or both.

Or neither one at all.

Five

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very happy i've become
ever since i changed
to a piece of fire

and with this fire
i'll burn my house and
dwell in the desert.
-- Rumi

Elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah, another common notion about the wilderness as set forth in Torah is debunked. In this case, that notion is the central theme of the wilderness as a place of uncertainty— as one long way station that cannot be embraced because it lacks both the security of the past and the promise of the future. Or so it would seem. Bamidbar Rabbah 1:2 extends, as the Rabbis draw on a particularly potent passage from Jeremiah 9:1. This section of the midrash traces the conflict between God and Israel, as each struggles to make sense of the other's apparent abandonment:

> ... why do my people say 'We have broken loose, We will not come to You anymore?' They [Israel] said to Him: You have destroyed our Temple and have removed Your divine presence from us. What then would you ask of us? '*We will not come to you anymore.*' He answered them: 'O that I were in the wilderness now! Where are all those miracles which I wrought for you?' And so it is actually stated: *Oh that I were in the wilderness in a lodging place of wayfarers, that I might leave my people,* etc. (Jer. 9:1) (Bamidbar Rabbah 1:2)

As stated, a central premise in Torah from the middle of Exodus on is that the midbar is a place a people longs to escape from. In Jeremiah 9:1 however, through the voice of the prophet, God expresses a longing to escape from the people *to* the desert. The irony of

this wish is rivaled only by its poetry. The feeling conveyed is that God's own heart could break if the people persist in repeatedly disregarding the Covenant. And the prospect of God's withdrawing from the people, frightening as it is, is also genuinely affecting. The people's sense of desertion is also explored here. They feel that the destruction of the Temple is a sign that God has already escaped; as such they justify their own "breaking loose" (Hebrew root *resh-vav-daled,* or "depart") from God. In contrast to the expectations we might bring to this zero-sum game of desolation and abandonment, for once it does not play out in the desert. Instead the desert stands apart from this dynamic. It beckons from the margins, holding out a tantalizing promise of refuge.

What is the significance of this reversal— desert as unsafe vs. desert as height of safety? It is a variation on a set of surprisingly positive portrayals of midbar, from its role in God's nostalgia for the Israel of old to its role in nurturing and "character building," as we will see. The *malon orchim* of Jeremiah 9:1 would literally be translated as "a hotel for guests." At first glance, these words harmonize seamlessly. A hotel is, by definition, meant for guests. When imagining such a place as the locus of God's longed-for escape though, there is some dissonance. How can such a place truly be a refuge, characterized as it is by transience?

Returning to the translation of "malon orchim" that Bamidbar Rabbah uses, we find "lodging place of wayfarers." The juxtaposition deepens. Here malon orchim is imagined as a home of sorts, but it does not change those who pass through it into inhabitants. They are still wayfarers.

I attempt to visualize a malon orchim in the desert. Unfortunately, the worst clichés begin to play out in my mind's eye: people circled around a campfire in relaxed poses, metal coffeepot burning, firelight flickering across one face, then another. They are probably even telling stories, these imagined guests. As a dear friend never tires of reminding me though, life is often a process of discovering why clichés are clichés. So I will myself to consider some of the truths that this one just may embody.

Temporary resting places do in fact offer a sense of refuge. The reality that no one is where he or she really lives can pave the way for a unique kind of fellowship. Sometimes the sense that there is nothing but these people, this moment in time, gives these connections a marked intensity and velocity. In a way this describes what happened in my introductory reflection of traveling in the Utah desert. Away from home and the ordinary demands of time, we created a contained enclave in which we were almost effortlessly at home together. Paradoxically, the awareness that the specificity of this place and dynamic would not last enabled us to sink full throttle into the refuge they created. We never did keep in touch, save for one dinner that brought all but one of us together six months after the trip. But the fact that more than eight years later they remain a touchstone for this project speaks volumes. Wayfarers though we might have been, the lodging place we fashioned lives in me still.

Consider Jeremiah's specific lament delineating God's pining for the desert in the opening verses of chapter 9:

> Oh, to leave my people,
> To go away from them—
> For they are all adulterers,
> A band of rogues.
> They bend their tongues like bows;

They have grown strong in the land
For falsehood and not for truth;
They advance from evil to evil.
And they do not heed Me
-- declares Adonai

It is the image of the *me'ra-ah el ra-ah yatzau*—the people going from one evil to the next that registers most poignantly. The root, *yatzah*, suggests a departure—a people slipping away. God observes their downward spiral and, as communicated by Jeremiah, feels powerless to stop it. From here, clarity emerges as to exactly why God might express longing the particular kind of refuge a malon orchim in the desert could offer. It represents an escape from the forces of time and disintegration that are rendering the Israelite people unrecognizable. This is echoed in Psalm 55:

I said, 'O that I had the wings of a dove!
I would fly away and find rest;
behold I would flee far off;
I would lodge in the wilderness; *selah*
I would soon find me a refuge
from the sweeping wind,
from the tempest.' (verses 7-9)

The escape to the wilderness that both prophet and psalmist are crying out for, as it turns out, has everything to do with a longing to reinvent life for the better. In these visions, a profound sense of peace (read: the wings of a dove) is possible there, as is shelter from the storms that shake the rest of life to the core. God may even imagine (in as much as this is possible) renewing a positive relationship with Israel from the vantage point of this malon orchim, set as it is in a place so redolent with potential.

In Section Two, we saw our first unconventional portrait of the wilderness as a place that holds succulence and life. Here we glimpse its sheltering properties. Best of all, in

the interplay of these passages, midbar need not become something else in order to be recognized and appreciated. Just as the wayfarers remain wayfarers, the wilderness remains wilderness, rather than turning into streams or farmland. It is clear from the image of midbar as escape that for those willing to cast a creative eye towards this landscape without trying to change it, extraordinary things can be mined there. And that is what allows midbar, just like the wings of a dove, to soar.

Six

I don't want to make anyone fearful
Hear what's behind what I say.

There's the light gold of wheat in the sun
and the gold of bread made from that wheat
I have neither. I'm only talking about them,

as a town in the desert looks up
at stars on a clear night.
-- Rumi

To read through the quotations that frame these writings, one might think that Rumi, a 12th century Persian poet, focused his body of work exclusively on the desert. While that is not the case, when he does evoke this landscape the result is near mystical beauty. The desert somehow becomes part of a larger sense of mystery and astonishment loose in the world. The final stanza of his poem "Unmarked Boxes," that imagines a town in the desert looking up at stars is particularly piercing. I kept these lines in view as I traced images of midbar in Jewish sources, sifting through the conventional and the unconventional. Grouping the conventional (read negative) ones together, I found myself generalizing about them in the way many of us tend to do: *the Israelites hated wandering in the desert because they were rebellious, they were shortsighted, because they missed their old ways.* These images formed a cluster that I began to consider "the typical." They hardly seemed worth expounding on, beyond their being a convenient basis from which to move out and champion the more unconventional portraits. But Rumi's imploring his readers to "hear what's behind what I say" finally got the better of me. Not

knowing what, if anything, I would hear, I began trying to listen to what might be behind the Israelites' seemingly endless litany of complaints about the desert.

> And they (the Israelites) said to Moses: 'Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?' (Exodus 14: 11-12)

> Setting out from Elim, the whole Israelite community came into the wilderness of Sin... In the wilderness the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of Adonai in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death. (Exodus 16: 1-3)

> The whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night. All the Israelites railed against Moses and Aaron, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt... or if only we might die in this wilderness! It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!" (Numbers 14:1-3)

How would we know where these passages come from, if it were not for the notes of attribution at the end? As stated, passages like these tend to run together, assuming one mass, undifferentiated portrayal of the Israelites' physical and psychic antagonism towards the wilderness. Common threads do weave in and out of these passages. Romanticization of Egypt is one, and pleading for death is another. However, there are also elements in each passage that render each distinct. There are more things than one that the community cries out against.

It is astonishing that in the first passage the Israelites have not even reached the wilderness. Yet they rail against it nonetheless, a full chapter before they cross the sea

and enter the midbar. This is the first negative, outcry against the wilderness of its kind in the Torah, and they hardly yet know what they are crying out against. Midbar thus assumes its threatening role and ominous persona in a way that is almost predetermined. The Israelites refer to a previous conversation with Moses (never elucidated in the text) in which they warned him of their preference of known servitude to the wild unknown of freedom. This romanticizing of Egypt, though familiar, is unique in that it is not fueled by pure nostalgia. They have not gained the requisite distance from their lives in Egypt. The misery of slavery is still their felt reality. Thus their emphatic *"we would still rather be here than there"* rests on the "there" being so frightening as to be deemed a worse option than being enslaved. Midbar assumes a mythic hold over the people before they ever set foot there. Its threat is that of imposed change, its only consequence death. The prospect of living rather than dying in the wilderness does not cross their minds.

The next passage raises the stakes of their rebellion against the wilderness are raised. This happens as the people travel deeper into the midbar—as they suffer more losses, face more crippling battles. By now, it is not only that life in Egypt would be preferable to death in the wilderness. *Death in Egypt would have been preferable to life in the wilderness.* For life as they are experiencing it bamidbar is untenable: an exercise in deprivation and loss. To express their vision of the life they long for, they draw on memories—likely imagined—of the physical sustenance they once received. It is worth noting that rich, detailed references to food often make an appearance in passages like this. In Numbers 20:4-5, echoing Exodus 14:11-12, the people again accuse Moses of bringing them to the wilderness to die, raging: "Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this terrible place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates?..."

Even more feral is their "gluttonous craving... the Israelites wept and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic." (Numbers 11: 4-5) Because it is unlikely slaves would have had unrestricted access to such pleasures, it makes sense to wonder what these food fantasies really represent. Could it be that the Israelites are also missing the color, texture and succulence of life? It will be some time before the wilderness is remembered as a place in which grapes might have flourished. In contrast, for them, the desert bodes death.

And yet. Perhaps it is not death itself but a kind of death they are longing for when they say it would have been better to have died by God's hand in Egypt. A kind of death that would not feel anonymous, in which they might be remembered as more than one fallen traveler among so many others. When thinking of this in contemporary terms, the wish of many terminally ill people to die at home comes to mind. Who can say just what it means for death to occur in an environment that implicitly and explicitly tells a person who he or she was in life? The wilderness lacked the capacity to do just that for the Israelites. It was in a sense their "hospital" -- a place to recover from slavery, to heal and even to be remade. Yet while they received physical sustenance there, as the Rabbis imagine God reminding them in Bereishit Rabbah, they experienced it undifferentiated and impersonal. From God's perspective they were now cared for and free. From their own perspective they were trapped. The Israelites could not see a way to live in the desert that would leave an imprint. Behind their retroactive wish for death in Egypt is the fear that they could not die in a way that would leave an imprint either. Behind what they

are saying is the inexpressible fear that there is too much space for these things to be possible in the wilderness, and also not enough.

The tension between how the people experience midbar and how God would have them experience it proves fatal for them in many episodes. This is evidenced in the third passage from Numbers (see p. whatever 14:1-3 turns out to be on). On the surface these verses seem to contain the same elements of the previous two passages, and in a sense they do. Egypt is again romanticized, the wilderness again decried. However, looking at the context surrounding this passage reveals something altogether different. Their outcry is triggered by the intimidating report the scouts bring back from Canaan. Despair for the future caves into an all-encompassing sense of futility that leads them to wish *only* for death, whether in their present setting or their former one. Their death wish is fulfilled in the wilderness, but in a way that chillingly recalls the saying "when God wants to punish you, He answers your prayers." For later in the same chapter they are told:

> ...not one shall enter the land in which I swore to settle you... Your children who, you said, would be carried off—these will I allow to enter; they shall know the land that you have rejected. But your carcasses shall drop in this wilderness, while your children roam the wilderness for forty years, suffering for your faithlessness, until the last of your carcasses is down in the wilderness. (Numbers 14: 30-33)

This response, among other things, amounts to one more miserable portrayal of the wilderness. It also indicates that the people's relationship with this wilderness, vexed from the very beginning, is justified in remaining so. *Hear what is behind what the Israelites say when they rebel against the wilderness.* Just before the crossing of the Red Sea, God instructed Moses to change the location of the Israelites' encampment. The Divine intention was that Pharaoh would then say "they (the Israelites) are astray in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them." (Exodus 14:3). This bit of subterfuge comes

back to haunt many years later, in the form of fear the people literally and figuratively battle time and time again. They are parallel fears really—loss of self, loss of life. *The wilderness will close in on us, and it will be as though we never lived.* This fear is softened only later-- as Divine and human perspectives on midbar meet the only way in midrashim where these voices can interact far from the persistent cycle of rebellion and punishment.

And in that meeting, we might imagine those voices regarding the desert as they would the expanse of stars hovering above it—in supplication, in amazement, in awe.

if the elixir of life
that has been hidden in the dark
fills the desert and towns
what do you think will happen

-- Rumi

Seven

At other times, even without the interplay of different texts achieved through midrash, there are instances in which Divine and human perceptions seem not to contrast at all. The following is an example:

> ... do not exalt yourself, forgetting Adonai your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions, a parched land with no water in it, who brought water forth water from you from the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers had never known, in order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end. (Deuteronomy 8: 14-16)

As the Israelites prepare for the final stage of their journey into Canaan, this passage warns them not to forget their eternal indebtedness to God should their fortune later improve. The romanticization of the wilderness that occurs in Prophets, and the softening of it in midrash is notably absent. As expressed by Moses, God seems in agreement with the Israelites for the moment. The midbar has been a desolate place, rendered mortally threatening by a scarcity of resources and the overwhelming presence of physical dangers. No one would choose this landscape. It is altogether without value. Or *is* it? Just as we plumbed what was behind the people's outcry against the midbar in the previous section, we now ask what is being said about God in this overwhelmingly negative portrayal. For this passage contains a powerful theological statement, and it is not particularly far below the surface. What is behind these words is this: *the wilderness as a vast and frightening place, but God's beneficence and power to work miracles kept you safe throughout, whether you were aware of it or not.* Spelling out the dangers

besetting the people in this way has the effect of underscoring that they never could have made it through their wanderings by themselves. They did not in fact, make it through by themselves.

Think about the linking of the words *gadol v'norah* in verse 14, which most sources translate as "great and terrible." *Gadol v'norah* come together to describe the wilderness in this way just one other time—earlier in Deuteronomy at the beginning of Moses's retrospective narration of the people's journey. (In Isaiah 21:7, the prophet also announces a proclamation from the desert, defined as *eretz nora-ah*—that terrible land). In numerous other instances however, *norah* translates as "awesome." And these instances are invariably ones that describe places or moments that hold the presence of God. The most widely known of these is Jacob's awakening from his Divinely inspired dream with the words *ma norah ha-makom hazeh*—how awesome is this place! (Genesis 28:17). Similar understandings of *norah* are echoed in Deuteronomy 7:21, Psalms 66: 3 and 5, and Job 37:22.

What about midbar as "great and awesome" rather than "great and terrible?" It is possible then. What would the implications be? The edge of fear implied by "awesome" – filled with awe — would be retained. But rather than being seen only in terms of its dangers, the midbar would be appreciated as a place of mystery as well. In the aforementioned passages, it is often the inability to completely understand God that causes the narrator to remark on this Presence as awesome. Otherworldly, and too vast to take in all at once, like a tragedy. These elements can inspire terror. So can the desert. These elements can inspire wonder.

So can the desert. Images of it like that evoked in Deuteronomy 8: 14-16 are none too subtle in their implication that beneath the surface—past the treachery of poisonous snakes, the lack of water, the apparent emptiness, God's presence is in fact working wonders. This is alluded to in Bamidbar Rabbah (see Section Four), in which the rabbis elucidate the ways in which God sheltered the Israelites through their wandering. Here though, both in this Biblical passage and in subsequent midrashim which take up God's presence in the wilderness, something more is being suggested. Besides God-given physical sustenance, they imply that the people receive sustenance of a different sort in the desert. Namely, their character is built up. It is understood as a place in which they grow strong and flourish on the inside as well as on the outside, thereby reflecting God's best laid plans for them.

Deuteronomy 8:16 tells us that the negative and punishing aspects of the desert, far from being random were actually part of an intentional pattern of trials. If this is so, in what ways did the people benefit from them? What is gained, and what is lost when we attempt to understand midbar in this way?

Since negative images of the wilderness have always exerted a powerful hold while positive ones have tended to rest between the lines, midrashim on God's involvement with the wilderness perform a kind of repair. Speaking about ways in which ill people reflect on their experiences, Arthur Frank holds that "stories have to repair the damage that illness has done to the ill person's sense of where she is in life, and where she may be going. Stories are a way of redrawing maps and finding new destinations." [13]Recasting the desert as a place of constructive purpose rather than raw dangers, a place marked by God's presence rather than absence requires a kind of redrawing of the maps of which

[13] Frank, p. 53.

Frank speaks. Take for example the following two stories, which might be seen as doing just that, and finding still another route into meanings of the desert as they go:

> Rabbi Levi explained that... the hen, when its young are tiny, gathers them together and places them beneath its wings, warming them and grubbing for them. But when they are grown up, if one of them wants to get near her she pecks it on the head and says to it: 'Go grub in your own dunghill!' So during the forty years that Israel were in the wilderness the manna fell, the well came up for them, the quails were at hand for them, the clouds of glory encircled them, and the pillar of cloud led the way before them. When Israel were about to enter the Land, Moses said to them: 'Let every one of you take up his spade and go out and plant trees.' Hence it is written, 'When you shall come into the land, you shall plant." (Vayikra Rabbah 25: 5)

As with Bamidbar Rabbah 1:2 (in Section Four), the wilderness emerges as a protective space in which the people's every need was met. What is new in this midrash is its speaking to the entirety of the journey—both through and inevitably out of the wilderness. This is done through likening God to a mother who cares for her young in all the myriad ways in which they cannot care for themselves. This cloaking of God in maternal rather than paternal imagery is fascinating in and of itself. In time however, the young—and by analogy the community—achieve a certain stage of maturity that allows them to move out of the protective space in which they grew.

The Rabbis paint a bittersweet picture. Certainly it is one among others explored here that rehabilitates the wilderness, envisioning it as constructive rather than destructive territory. In this image, just as in Deuteronomy 8, God was very much behind the scenes. Here, that Divine presence is conjured up with tenderness absent from the Biblical text. So it is all the more wrenching to absorb the idea that once out of the midbar, God's all-encompassing, overt caretaking will recede into the background. If we follow the analogy of the mother hen, God is envisioned as pushing the people away once they reach

Canaan. And if they doubted God's presence in the wilderness that emanated Divine protection for them, how will they ever be sure of it as they step forward into another unknown landscape?

On the other hand, all this is happening because the people have been deemed ready. Just as the success of the hen's creating that protective space is judged by the preparedness of her young to function outside of it, this midrash implies that the desert has helped the people successfully achieve a semblance of competency and maturity. They are ready to be more proactive and to look after their own lives to a greater degree, as evidenced by Moses telling "*kol echad v'echad michem*—every one of you—to go out and plant trees." What stronger metaphor for laying down new roots out of which a new life will grow? The work of the people's hands will flourish outside the desert because *they*—the work of God's hands—flourished *in* it.

The second midrash extends this vision of the wilderness as a place fostering growth by comparing Israel to a vine:

> R. Tanhuma bar Abba began, 'You plucked up a vine from Egypt (Ps. 80:9). Why is Israel compared to a vine? Because just as a vine, when its owners seek to improve it, is uprooted from its place and planted elsewhere, and then indeed it flourishes, so when God intended to make Israel's fame known throughout the world, He plucked them up out of Egypt; and brought them into the wilderness, where they began to improve and where they received the Torah, and where they said: 'All that God has spoken, will we do, and obey' (Exodus 24:7)—thereby making their reputation known throughout the world, as it says, 'And your renown went forth among the nations for your beauty (Ezek. 16:14).

What does this tell us about places where change is possible? What does it say about God's role in the process? The Rabbis have made a 180-degree turn. Far from a desolate wasteland, midbar is seen as eminently hospitable soil. Not only that, but based on its

unfamiliarity, it was the only place in which the people could have flourished as they did. This speaks directly to Deuteronomy 8:16, which asserts that the people benefited from trials faced in the desert, but does not specify how. The desert was part of God's Divine plan all along, this midrash responds. It was the setting for Revelation and the establishment of God's covenant. As such, it was the ideal setting for the Israelites' becoming a community worthy of Torah and bound to God for all time.

And what of the vine metaphor? In using it to describe Israel in the wilderness, the Rabbis have found a way to assure themselves that growth is uniquely possible in foreign environments. This was of no small importance, as they themselves were living and writing from the midst of a later dispersion. They have taken a setting that connotes dislocation and turned it instead into a symbol of hope. If Israel could flourish in the desert like a vine transplanted, then perhaps in spite of the wrenching discomfort of uproot, the Rabbis and their disciples could go on fruitfully as well,

As this confirms, there is a great deal that is positive about seeing God as part of midbar in the ways these midrashim do. They make retroactive sense of the wilderness experience, infusing it with a sense of containment and purpose. And in so doing, they speak soothingly to other times when life spins out of control.

Yet on the other side of the coin is the possibility that these recastings of midbar reduce a wild, expansive setting to a laboratory of sorts, in which experiments are methodically performed and results dutifully recorded. There is a distinct reluctance to allow the midbar to exist as a place thrown open, one that need not make linear sense. Either way, these passages reflect a yearning to envision God as being with us-- shaping and guiding us-- through our wildest, most dangerous passages. These visions of God

bamidbar do assuage some of the fear of "the great and terrible wilderness." But in that process, some of the wonder is lost as well.

Eight

With a mere rebuke I dry up the sea
And turn rivers into desert.
-- Isaiah 50:2

Even a desert has tides.
-- Barbara Kingsolver

In chapter 35 of Isaiah, the prophet calls the people together to tell them of the moment of glorious redemption awaiting them. These are the words he uses to describe what is about to happen:

> The arid desert shall be glad,
> The wilderness shall rejoice
> And shall blossom like a rose.
> ...
> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
> And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.
> Then the lame shall leap like a deer,
> And the tongue of the dumb shall shout aloud;
> For waters shall burst forth in the desert,
> Streams in the wilderness. (Isaiah 35: 1, 5-6)[14]

What is fascinating about this passage is the series of dichotomies it sets up. Along with the desert that shall be glad and the wilderness that shall rejoice and blossom, consider the remaining series of opposites:

> *eyes of the blind-------- opened*
> *ears of the deaf--------- unstopped*
> *lame---------- shall leap*
> *tongue (of the dumb)--- shall shout aloud*

[14] Midbar is translated as "desert" here, while the Hebrew *aravah* is wilderness.

The word *nivku* in verse 6 is of particular interest here. Its root is *bet-kuf-ayin*, translated here as "burst forth." It can also be defined as break, split or cut. *Nivku* then, could be understood as "to be broken... cut." The word is only used in this form one other time in the Tanach: "*nivku kol mainot t'hom rabbah*-- all the fountains of the great deep burst apart." (Genesis 7:11). With that bursting apart of water the world first knew catastrophic destruction, after which it would never be exactly as it had been before. The bursting forth of water in the desert—*nivku va'midbar mayim*—promised in Isaiah 35:6 clearly promises rebirth rather than destruction. Yet the use of the same word brings a similar sense to this passage that the desert is about to split open. It will never be exactly as it has been before.

This is the larger theme that the above series of opposites hints at: transformation of the wilderness. In Section Two, I discussed ways in which wilderness acts as both backdrop and muse for transformations experienced by individuals. In later prophetic passages, we see a related yet contrasting dynamic. This literal and figurative ground, holding portent and mystery, is now placed in the context of something that will itself be made new. As stated, this image of midbar is particularly resonant in Second Isaiah (chapters 40-66). The authors paint a picture of a transformed wilderness when they want to convey a vision of a world transformed for the better, offering physical and psychological safety to all. Consider the following passages:

> I will open up streams on the bare hills
> And fountains amid the valleys;
> I will turn the desert into rivers,
> The arid land into springs of water. (Isaiah 41:18)

I am about to do something new;
Even now it shall come to pass,
Suddenly you shall perceive it:
I will make a road through the wilderness
And rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43: 19)

One of the most striking features of both passages is God's manipulation of the desert. When the people act in accordance with the Covenant, as in these passages, the wilderness changes for the better in ways that will nurture them. When the opposite is true, a reverse transformation takes hold. Rivers become desert once again, and we are never to forget that it is in God's power to effect this. Midbar bends to the will of the Divine, and as such it claims an indelible role in the alternate erosion or restoration of the world.

Another important feature is the role of water in redeeming the present state of the midbar—echoes of water bursting forth in the desert in chapter 35. This is of literal importance. According to the HarperCollins Study Bible, Isaiah 41:19 is meant to convey the assurance that "God will provide water and shade for Israel when it crosses the desert in its return from exile."[15] Figuratively as well, water flowing through the desert suggests a landscape in which need will be sated, and deprivation will be no more. Without saying so overtly, these passages hearken back to the constant stream (pun intended) of Israelite complaints in Exodus and Numbers regarding the lack of water as they wandered through the *midbar*. Turning specifically to Isaiah 43:19, it is worth noting that in the verses that directly preceding it, the prophet recalls the triumphant crossing at the Red Sea. In the next breath, he instructs the people: "do not remember the

[15] HarperCollins Study Bible, p. 1070.

former things or consider the things of old." (Isaiah 43:18) Given this, the *chadasha*—new thing to be done in verse 19 carries an implicit obligation that the people cast their eyes forward, concentrating exclusively on what is to come. Yet the former hardships the desert conveyed, as well as the fears it both incurred and represented, would have rendered an erasure of these memories difficult at best. Thus, the promise of irrigating the wilderness, which speaks to the past even as it attempts to mollify it. All this illustrates the difficulty of completely transforming the wilderness.

Still, the writers are urgent in their attempt to recast the desert in linear terms in these passages. The last two lines of 43:19 delineate God's promise of *bamidbar derech bishimon n'harot*– a road through the wilderness and rivers in the desert. At once this connotes a wilderness both longed for and not quite possible. As with water, a road through the wilderness would go a long way in guaranteeing the people safe passage. This would be necessary incentive for their attempting the passage from their present exile in Babylon back to Jerusalem at all. However, a road through the wilderness also undercuts the deepest essence of what wilderness is, and is perhaps meant to be: mysterious, and *wild.*

The tensions implicit in wilderness becoming something other than what it is emerge even further in the following passage, also from Isaiah:

> Until a spirit from high is poured out on us,
> And wilderness is transformed into farmland,
> While farm land rates as mere brush
> Then justice shall abide in the wilderness
> And righteousness shall dwell on the farmland

> For the work of righteousness shall be peace,
> And the effect of righteousness, calm and confidence forever
> Then my people shall dwell in peaceful homes,
> In secure dwellings,
> In untroubled places of rest. (Isaiah 32: 15-18)

With these lines, the larger hopes bound up with transformation of the wilderness emerge. In his commentary on Isaiah, Joseph Blenkinsopp writes:

> The author's somewhat curious ideas about ecological transformation, always associated with the creation of a social order based on justice and righteousness, are constructed with the help of three terms that connote symbolically conditions of existence as much as specific regions or environments. They are in ascending order: wilderness (midbar); forest... (ya'ar); and fertile land (karmel), all three juxtaposed with the city... We hear of a transformation within the natural environment brought about by the spirit of God... This environment will then be the setting for a just and equitable social order.[16]

Indeed, the prospect of the wilderness changing into farmland connotes that which is unusable and inhospitable becoming land that is fertile and lush, sustaining life rather than snuffing it out. The image then extends to "justice abiding on the wilderness/righteousness on the farmland (v. 16). These words have the exultant ring of the prophet Amos's call that "justice well up like water/Righteousness like a mighty stream." (Amos 5:24) Prophets draw on elements of the world around them in different ways in making their moral comment and telling of what is to come. The wilderness too plays its part.

The picture painted here is altogether a departure from that of the wilderness as "an empty howling waste" (Deut 32:10) or "a land where no one dwells" (Jeremiah 2:6) Here

[16] Blenkinsopp, pp. 434-35.

the harshness of midbar is erased. It is filled instead with the flourishing of the highest and most generous ideals. The fact that the Hebrew text reads *v'shachan bamidbar mishpat*—justice shall literally dwell in or inhabit the wilderness, gives *mishpat* the weight of a near physical presence. In a transformed wilderness, the emptiness associated with conventional images of the wilderness is gone.

Verses 17-18 extend this utopian vision of a brave new world even further. Peace, confidence and calm will be the much-desired offshoots of righteousness and justice. In its closing lines the finality of the transformation is made clear through the people living safe, ordered lives. Were Isaiah to speak this prophecy in a contemporary idiom, a fitting tag-line might be "this is not your father's midbar." The longing for home that infused that generation's wandering is laid to rest. Here the midbar *is* home, and it is stability incarnate. It exults in its own physical and spiritual abundance. It is able, with calm beneficence, to ensure literal and psychic safety; not just for a moment, but forever.

What an ideal vision. It is nearly impossible not to fall under its spell. There is only one problem.

It is not the midbar anymore.

The image of its wholesale transformation, in which it embodies a people's dearest hopes instead of darkest fears, is deeply compelling. Yet I find myself grappling with what happens when midbar becomes something other than itself in these prophetic visions. What about this wilderness is eroded as springs of water irrigate it, and a road cuts straight through it, and so much visible purpose takes hold there? What becomes of its mysteries? Or is something of its mystery retained even as it transforms. If, as evidenced throughout these sections, midbar is seen here and there as a place that

nurtures life, than shouldn't it make sense for these images to spring from the midbar? Why this feeling instead, that too much water, too many voices of clarity, too much order can only have come from outside the midbar, and can only have the affect of rendering it another kind of territory altogether?

As these questions indicate, more than any other theme, transformation of the wilderness has been an alternately inspiring and infuriating one to follow. Inspiring because there is something truly and undeniably compelling about taking a landscape with a long-standing hold on dislocation and misery, and turning it into a locus of hope and belief in the propensity for positive change. When the prophetic voice molds the desert in this way, the land answers that call for change by becoming fertile and lush. And with all this I still fear losing the ability or desire to let the desert be... to hear that voice in the wilderness referred to in Isaiah 40:3 as a voice *of* the wilderness, with something to offer all its own. Running through our literary and religious tradition is a near constant urgency bent on taming and subduing the midbar, so that it might become ordered and purposeful. Even the midrashic call to "throw oneself open like a wilderness" is in the service of wisdom and Torah. When not bewitched by she sheer poetry in the images of midbar transformed, I found myself wishing for more voices like that of Jeremiah 9:1, expressing Divine longing for the desert. What would it be like, to encounter among these voices, a vision of a world transformed in which the desert participates while still retaining a measure of its mystery, its wildness, its edge? In which the desert is allowed to be, instead of needing always to become.

Nine

Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice,
... let them shout from the tops of the mountains

-- Isaiah 42:11

There is one more midrash.

One more voice.

> God may... be compared to a prince who entered a province, the inhabitants of which, seeing him, fled. He entered a second one and there again they fled from him. He then entered a ruined city and they advanced to welcome him and praised him royally. Said the prince, 'This city pleases me more than all the provinces. Here will I build my lodging place and here will I dwell. So when the Holy One, blessed be He, came to the Red Sea, it fled from his presence; as it is said, *The sea saw (God) and fled* (Ps. 114:3); likewise, *The mountains skipped like rams* (ib. 4). When, however, He arrived at the waste wilderness, it advanced to welcome Him and praised Him royally... So He said: 'This place pleases Me more than all the provinces; therein will I build a lodging-place and dwell therein.' They began to rejoice that the Holy One, blessed be He, was to dwell therein; as it is said, *The wilderness and the parched land will rejoice* (Isaiah 35:1) (Bamidbar Rabbah 1:2)

The wilderness... embraced for all it is, for all it holds. For its fullness, perhaps even for its barrenness. For its capacity to rejoice. For the possibility that it could be home.

The inhabitants of the ruined city, the Rabbis explain, having nothing to lose, have nothing to fear from the approaching prince.

And so the wilderness. Holding light and dark, empty space and growth. With all it holds, nothing to lose. Advancing in welcome.

The doubled consciousness never goes away. Even here, it is called the waste wilderness, and likened a ruined city.

But in the words of the poet Rumi, one more time: where there is ruin there is hope for a treasure.

So the wilderness will rejoice. And the road through it, filled with many voices, stretches into the distance. And it looks as though it could go on forever.

The love of the desert, like love itself, is born of a face perceived and never really seen.

-- Antoine de Saint Exupery

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