

Jewish in the Wilderness

Rabbi Shefa Gold

Description: Our foundational story, our entire journey from slavery in Egypt to the flowing milk and honey of the Promised Land—takes place in the wilderness. It is in the wilderness where we encounter God and receive the Torah. It is in the wilderness where we so carefully construct the Mishkan (the portable sanctuary where the Presence of the Divine can dwell) which represents the structures of a holy life. The word for wilderness in Hebrew is midbar, which can be understood as the place without (mi) speech (daber). It is the place of silence from which all speech, all meaning is born. In the wilderness we listen to God’s voice as it speaks to us directly through the miracles of Nature. And we cultivate enough spaciousness and silence so that the “still small voice” within can be discerned and followed. My paper will explore a Jewish relationship with wilderness that inspires us to receive the Torah as a mirror of the inner landscape, and experience our own lives as a journey from slavery to Freedom.

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The voice on the other end of the phone-line was completely incredulous, “How could a decent Jewish girl, a rabbi no less! be living out in the middle of nowhere?!” I had sent a box of the CDs I produce to my distributor on the east coast and they had arrived damaged. “Why can’t you send them UPS?” he had sputtered in frustration. I calmly explained that I lived in the country more than an hour’s drive to the closest UPS center, so I sent them via the US Postal service. “And it’s not the middle of nowhere,” I added. “It’s the most beautiful and sanest place I could ever imagine living...Why are you living in the middle of such craziness?” This high-powered east coast Jewish businessman paused for a moment to consider this, and then slipped back into puzzled incredulity.

When I hung up I realized that my distributor had just given voice to what so many urban Jews had been just too polite to say. Jews belong in the city, at the heart of sophistication and culture, certainly not in the wilderness.

Yet our foundational story, our entire journey from slavery in Egypt to the flowing milk and honey of the Promised Land—takes place in the wilderness. It is in the wilderness where we encounter God and receive the Torah. It is in the wilderness

where we so carefully construct the *Mishkan* (the portable sanctuary where the Presence of the Divine can dwell) which represents the structures of a holy life. The word for wilderness in Hebrew is *Midbar*, which can be understood as the place without (*mi*) speech (*daber*). It is the place of silence from which all speech, all meaning is born.

Our central prayer in Judaism says, “*Shma!*” Listen! Then you will experience the Oneness and Unity of all Reality. And then you will love God/Reality with all your heart, all your soul and all your might.

The perception of Unity and the Love that flows from that perception begins with listening. A practice of deep listening therefore seems to me to be an essential requirement of a Jewish life. The wilderness is the place where the skills of deep listening are refined. In the wilderness we listen to God’s voice as it speaks to us directly through the miracles of Nature. And we cultivate enough spaciousness and silence so that the “still small voice” within can be discerned and followed. In order to love with all my heart, all my soul and all my might, I must have a rich inner life. How else can I explore the reaches of the heart, the expanse of the soul or the strength of my humanity? When I look out my window at the sweeping vistas and wide expanse of red rock mesas, cottonwood valleys, and open skies, I am sent to the spacious inner landscape, where the Great Mystery reveals itself again and again with each breath.

I spend about half my time traveling and teaching in communities around the world, mostly in cities where the complexities of meaningful speech are always in high demand. I am a lover of words, of music, stories, text, philosophy...and I spread that noisy love wherever I go...But when I return home to the Jemez Mountains of northern New Mexico, I am nurtured by the silence, by the wilderness. I am completely inspired by the birds and chipmunks that play at my feeder. I am startled into reverence for all Life when a bear lumbers casually onto my deck. When a storm blows up the valley, I stop and gather up all of my senses in witness to Majesty in Motion.

Each day I am surprised by the dawn’s magic as it lights up the mesa.

Then I return to my holy text and say, "Of course...this is what I've been praying about!"

*People to the ends of the earth are overawed by Your wonders;
At the coming of morning and evening they stand up and sing for joy. (Psalm 65)*

Our Jewish story begins with Abraham, who is told, "Lech L'cha!" Get going... literally, "Go to yourself." Abraham is commanded to leave his settled, comfortable urban life, and set out into the wilderness.

Each time we respond to the call of the wild, we are hearing God's command to leave the safety of the known... and venture forth into the unknown. As we step out into the wilderness we are also stepping inward, in to the wild of our own hearts. "Lech L'cha!" Get going... literally, "Go to yourself." I go to the wilderness to find myself, to know the wild and holy animal that is suffocating beneath layers of expectation, decorum, habit and distraction. There I will find the source of my vitality.

Our ancestor, Jacob, whose life like ours, was filled with complicated struggles, thorny deceptions and deep yearnings, was also sent out into the wilderness. He put a stone under his head as a pillow and was given a glorious dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder that stretched between Heaven and Earth. He woke up, received God's promise along with a moment of Awakening as he realized, "God was in this place all along. This is none other than the House of God. This is the gate of Heaven!"

His revelation, our revelation is given through the power of Place. God has been waiting in this place all along. But sometimes our constructs, our ideas, our elaborate civilization... keep us from experiencing the raw power of place. The word for place in Hebrew is Makom... which is also a secret name for God. When layers of civilized conditioning are stripped away in the experience of Wilderness, we remember that "This is none other than the House of God." We never really owned it. We are honored guests here and our host is the Lord of Hosts, welcoming us each day.

Our Jewish calendar is designed to connect us with the cycle of the seasons, with the waxing and waning of the moon, with the times of planting and harvest. Our prayer times each day are tied to the mysterious moments of changing light. Our celebrations connect us with the phases of the moon. And our lunar calendar is modified so that we can also be attuned to the cycles of the sun. Our religious life is meant to send us outside so that we can feel ourselves moving in relationship to the cosmos.

At the end of Shabbat I go outside to search the sky for three stars that signal permission to perform the ceremony of Havdalah. Yet so many reject the gift of the stars in favor of the authority of what is written in their calendars.

Looking up at the stars I can remember that “God was in this place all along,” and that “This is the Gate of Heaven.” I receive my inheritance as a set of tools that can connect me with a larger Reality. Our holy books are meant to send us to a place beyond words.

D.H. Lawrence expresses the sadness and exasperation I feel when clock-time and calendar-time supersede the Reality that is right in front of us, when we become imprisoned in the systems that were meant to free us.

“Oh, what a catastrophe, what a maiming of love

when it was made personal, merely personal feeling,

Taken away from the rising and the setting of the sun,

And cut off from the magic connection of the solstice and the equinox!

This is what is the matter with us: we are bleeding at the roots

because we are cut off from the earth and sun and stars.

And love is a grinning mockery because, poor blossom,

we plucked it from its stem on the Tree of Life and

expected it to keep on blooming in our civilized vase on the table.”¹

“Our civilized vase on the table”... may be the only life that feels safe and comfortable and we may even feel satisfied with these poor blossoms. Our religious lives, our intellectual inquiries, our sense of identity may also feel safe, comfortable, respectable and civilized. Then, we try to quench our deep thirst for vitality through various forms of entertainment, technology, food, sports, or vicarious thrills. Yet all our efforts are but a “maiming of love.” All of our efforts leave us still yearning for raw truth, for the fullness of love.

In writing my book, Torah Journeys: The Inner Path to the Promised Land, I wanted to enter in to the landscape of Torah and let the power of the wilderness open me to the transformative truth that is hidden between the words, in the white fire that glows between the black fires of text. In writing Torah Journeys, I became aware of my own

¹ (D.H. Lawrence, “A Propos of Lady Chatterley’s Lover.” In Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore, editors, *Phoenix II: Uncollected, Unpublished, and other prose works by D.H. Lawrence*. New York: The Viking Press, 1968).

wilderness journey as a journey of awakening. The journey of Torah mirrors my own soul's journey as I step up to the challenge of becoming whole-hearted, of reclaiming the shadow-places inside me. Through Torah I experienced the places inside me that were both dangerous and wonderful.

The experience of wilderness reawakens our sense of wonder. It strips away our illusions of safety and puts us face to face with the truth of our fragility, our vulnerability. In that vulnerability, we find our true power, our true love. To live a Jewish life requires that we cultivate the courage to directly encounter the most awesome aspects of Creation.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches us that, "Awe is an intuition for the creaturely dignity of all things and their preciousness to God; a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something absolute. Awe is a sense for the transcendent, for the reference everywhere to God, who is beyond all things."

This "sense for the transcendent" is awakened in us in the wilderness, in that place that is beyond our comfort zone. We are called the People of the Book. And sometimes we can get caught inside the pages, inside the ideas, inside our heads. We get fixated on the finger that is pointing to the moon, and meanwhile the moon shines on, her secrets secure.

Or, perhaps as The People of the Book, we can let the book send us to the place beyond words, where secrets are revealed. In the Song of Songs, the lovers know that they must venture out to the fields, to the vineyards, to the jagged mountains in order to find the fullness of love.

Will you dare to put your books down and be sent into the wilderness to encounter Your Creator directly?

*I am my beloved's
And his longing is for me,
Only for me.*

*Come, my beloved,
Let us go out to the field
And lie all night among the flowering henna,
Let us go early to the vineyards
To see if the vine has budded,
If the blossoms have opened,
And the pomegranates are in bloom,
There I will give you my love.
The mandrakes yield their fragrance
And at our doors are all kinds of precious fruits,
Both newly picked and long-stored,
I have hidden them away for you.²*

I am given as a gift to this life, though I resist.

My small life is a gift to the whole.

The cosmos longs to know itself through me.

I hear this longing in the call to adventure,

The call to journey within and beyond.

Come, my beloved,

Let us go out to the field

Come my beloved,

Let us leave the comfort of familiar habit,

Let us challenge these walls, fling open these doors,

Explode definition, shatter this outgrown identity.

Let us dare to disagree with the wardens of Time and Space,

Let us step outside possibility,

There I will give you my love.

Come my beloved,

Let us go down into the valley,

To see if the cottonwood has budded its new green,

To caress the feather of mountain mahogany,

And breathe in the butterscotch of pine-sap flowing,

² Song of Songs, Chapter 7, translation by Rabbi Shefa Gold

My precious fruits, both newly picked and long-stored,
Have been hidden away too long.

Whatever I don't give away,
Will decay and fester and become misery.

Let us go out to the field

Where spaciousness can untie my tangles,
Where tantalizing fragrance can inspire my curiosity,
Where I can lose my apprehension, find my humor,
Play in the soil of the Ancestors, bury treasures for my descendents,
And open to my true desire.

There I will give you my love

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