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Parashat B'midbar: Rules for the Wilderness

I will admit that recently, I:

Completely drove by an exit I have turned of millions of times without noticing

Was convinced a morning in person appointment was an hour later than it was, causing me to show up fashionably disheveled, and got two roads so confused I could not find my destination.

In fact, I made so many mistakes that my daughter asked if I was okay.

And these are just the mistakes that show!

My interpersonal interactions are not exactly smooth

Spontaneity, never my strong suit, is now out of the question

Multi-tasking? Don't ask.

Maybe something similar is happening to you

This returning full throttle to the world, or being stalwart, grateful and cheery while pretending everything is natural and we were not all just on zoom in a pandemic for several years

Is not for the faint of heart.

It turns out in the Torah, we're also in-between places, traveling through many stages in the wilderness

42 stages to be exact<sup>1</sup>

And while there's a robust conversation amongst the rabbis about why these stages are even listed out in the book of Numbers

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<sup>1</sup> See Num. 33:1-49

Understandably because reading it one gets the sense that somehow a random copy of Moses' gas bill got stuck somewhere in the Torah –

While there is this open question about what this list is doing in our Torah altogether

It seems, this year, patently obvious, at least to me

That the stations are listed because they have something to teach us about how to move through the kinds of times just like the one that's ending now

We could even call these stations hints or: Basic Rules for Moving Through The Wilderness / Life

So this shabbat, I came up with four such rules:

### **Rule of the Wilderness #1: You Can't Leave Until You Journey**

Let me explain.

Before the itinerary introducing the whole 42 station situation (this is in a few weeks in parashat Matot Masei)

We have an introductory verse

And the verse uses both the words

מִסְעֵיהֶם ("their journeys") and מוֹצְאֵיהֶם ("their departures" or "their going out" or "their leaving")

(Think Yitziat Mitzrayim / our leaving of Egypt and you'll have the idea)

Two times both words are used in one short verse as if to emphasize the distinction between

*"Leaving" or "Going out" versus "Journeying"*

As if to help us see that these are two very distinct actions.

Further, these two words are each written in multiple, different orders in the verse

Making it very unclear which comes first: The "leaving" the "departing" or the "journeying." (!)

Now, typically assume we "leave" in order to "journey"

We expect a yetziah / a "departure" a "going out" first, in some ways an implicit rejection of where we currently are.

But the Sfat Emet

Chasidic commentator

Points out that, actually, in religious travel, actually, we "journey" first and "leave" second.

I'll say it again, because it is unintuitive: We "journey" first and "leave" second.

In other words, the Sfat Emet says you have to be on your way a long time, you have to have really made some tracks before you have really left anything

Now the Sfat Emet bases his interpretation on the fact that, right in the verse before, in a phrase so common we don't even notice it,

we are described as a people *who came out of Egypt*.

And the Sfat Emet teaches that this reference to our *leaving Egypt* right there before the long 42 station itinerary has a specific purpose, it is reminding us

That (even though it might look like it)

we did not leave Egypt first and *then* journey

No, no he says

Because, he says, *we already know Egypt came with us*, it stayed with us in the wilderness

The slavery of Egypt playing itself out again and again

No, he says we did not *leave Egypt* and then journey

Rather, we had to be brave enough to go on the journey, to begin the holy itinerary

And *then*, at each station there was less and less slavery in us, the slavery fell away over a long period of time and wandering

So that by the time we reached the promised land, we had *finally* left Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

Maybe for us too

Instead of trying to *decide* to “leave” we can instead just be willing to go to the next station,

To see what God has in mind for us on the ol’ itinerary

## **Rule of the Wilderness #2: You Cannot Name the Station Until You’re Done With It**

I told you that there were 42 stations and there’s a lot of rabbinic discussion about why we even have this list to begin with. We could go through all the reasons, but I think the most compelling is the most obvious, namely, that each station taught us something

And in fact, if you had a rabbi who wanted to go through the names of each station and try to isolate their literal meanings

As, in fact, you do

You might be surprised to learn that

Along with names that sound right out of Harry Potter like

“Wilderness of Thorns” / aka: מְדִבְרַת סִינַי<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Green, Trans. *The Language of Truth*, p. 275-6.

<sup>3</sup> Num. 33:15-16

There are others that are clearly referring to emotional, spiritual states like:

**מָרָה** / which means bitterness; or to be contentious  
And we happen to know this is where everyone complained about the bitter water until Moses made it sweet<sup>4</sup>

Or: **קְבֵרֵת הַתְּאֵוָה**

Which I translate loosely as: Graves of Desire  
Because that is the place where everyone overindulged their craving for meat and many died, true, in Torah<sup>5</sup>

So now we are maybe beginning to understand the existence of the itinerary – it's not a geographic map at all but  
In the words of HaKtav VeHaKabalah<sup>6</sup>  
a map of what was experienced or happened in each place  
The names describe what happened there  
And the names that make no sense today are just because we forgot what happened there long ago.

It is a historic map of the states of the soul

Now we understand rule #2, now it makes perfect sense,  
Paraphrasing Rabbeinu Bahya, we can't name the station until we're on the way to the next one  
Otherwise we can't say what really happened there.

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<sup>4</sup> Num. 33:8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Num. 33:16-17

<sup>6</sup> See his comment to Num. 33:2

There's a parking lot near one of the fancy malls in Marin,  
where there is a marsh and a bird sanctuary  
A lot of storks and heron are there, somehow surviving the noise  
from the 101 but I digress  
Michael and I pulled the car over there about twenty years ago when  
we found out his father, Marvin, z"l, may his memory be a blessing,  
was in the final stages of his cancer.  
"It's bad, isn't it," I remember Michael said.  
"Yes, it's bad," I said, and we sat there a little while absorbing the  
news before going home to make arrangements for the flights.

Maybe for the high holidays this year we should make our own maps  
with the 42 stations of our lives or however many we think we have  
earned so far  
And name them just what they need to be named  
Names that make sense to us  
Names like, "The bird sanctuary where we learned the news"  
Or, maybe just we can just set place holders, temporary names until  
the intended name of a place, a station, eventually makes itself  
obvious—

Maybe this year in particular we need to try and name the stations  
where things happened to us during the recent tumultuous years  
Or perhaps are still happening  
As we move through God's itinerary  
Whether it looks from the outside as if we were covering great  
physical distances  
Or practically staying still  
No matter how far or how little the distance looks from the outside

See, in the wilderness, too, you might not know this, but the  
geographic distance we covered was also not all that impressive (!)

And we returned to the same place more than once  
Sometimes giving it a new name, sometimes repeating the old one

Which leads me to the third rule

### **Rule of the Wilderness #3: Sometimes Backwards is Forwards**

Another surprising feature of the list of 42 stations is that there are some names of previously established characters in Torah right in the list. Some are more vague, some seem to refer to a tribe, like the tribe of Edom, but one in particular caught my eye: Terach (!)<sup>7</sup>

Remember, Terach is the father of Abraham, he is the original father that Abraham is trying to leave at the very beginning of our story, the one about whom God says to Abraham, "Go! Get out of his house!"

Given everything we've said about this list so far, Terach's sudden and unexplained appearance is riveting. As if there is a place where the people Israel, *this many generations later*, still must confront Terach in some way. (Freud is having a field day somewhere.)

Terach seems to be in the itinerary, as if to teach, that as far as we have journeyed, our parents, our ancestors, can and will still show up at any time,  
Always making at least one appearance in God's itinerary, "Surprise!"

As if Torah is saying, there are times, when, in order to move forward, we must go back and finish old conversations, with those we love, whether they are living or not

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<sup>7</sup> Num. 33:27-28

Sometimes, just like in Torah, those stations last one night and sometimes they last years and years  
And, just like in Torah, we don't get to be done before it is time, and we only know when it is time to go when God tells us its time, not before

But perhaps then, when it's over, for now, with careful penmanship, I imagine we may then write down the name of that earned station in the little book we carry with us everywhere: "Terach"

Sometimes backwards is forwards in our memory –  
and sometimes backwards is actually forwards physically  
As in, you literally have to travel backwards, to the places you've been  
It's just how things go in the wilderness

In fact, I never noticed this before but in the Mekhilta d'Rebbi Yishmael  
We learn that when Aaron dies in Torah  
In Devarim it says he dies in one place but in our book, Numbers, it says that Aaron dies in another, that he dies on Hor HaHar / literally, mountain of mountains.

How does Rebbi Yishmael resolve it? He says that when Aaron died, *we all went backwards* eight stations, from one place to another, so while Aaron died in one place he was actually buried in a second place.<sup>8</sup>

I don't know about you, but Aaron somehow sort of dying in two places

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<sup>8</sup> Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 15:22:1



It makes perfect sense to me  
It makes sense that on God's itinerary  
In order to bury and grieve a great and peace loving leader like  
Aaron  
We have to go backwards at least eight stations

Which brings me to my last very brief Rule for the Wilderness this  
shabbat

### **Rule #4: Every Station is Essential**

Couldn't God have gotten everything across with like, a tidy 5-10  
stations?  
Why are there so many?

The Ba'al Shem Tov famously taught that there is something for us at  
*all the stations.*

Even the ones we want to leave  
He called it a spark, a spark that must be found. Or, better yet,  
Recovered.

That's why, according to the Ba'al Shem, we're sent into this  
wilderness, this world *altogether*  
To collect the sparks

That's why we're sent altogether  
And that's why we're sent *together*  
Because some of us are better at finding certain kinds of sparks  
And some of us better at finding others  
And this kind of recovery project not only takes generations  
It simply cannot be done alone.

Sometimes we want to stay in one place forever  
Other times we might have to remain longer than we'd like  
But I promise you, even if you have a hard time believing me,  
remember  
There isn't a station without a spark, *there's no such thing, that idea  
doesn't exist for us*  
*Each place holds something*  
Eventually, each station earns its name

