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Parashat B'midbar: What are you waiting for?

1.

No matter how we imagine this stage we're in

I mean this in-between stage

This not yet in the promised land stage

This not in Egypt but certainly with some of the slavery very
much still in us stage

And, of course, I am talking about the Torah

Certainly not any political situations here at home or any
other countries we deeply care about

I'm just talking about Torah, you do with it what you want

No matter how you understand where we are in b'midbar,

In the wilderness, where signage only comes in the form of
fire and clouds

And the internet connection is spotty at best

No matter how you understand this stage we're in

There's no question

We're in between

We're waiting

And waiting is, maybe some of us are waiting right now for
something

Waiting is exhausting

Waiting in the doctor's office

Waiting for test results

Waiting to see if this time it could work out
Waiting for the plane to take off
Waiting for our beloved to return
For the letter to come from our daughter at summer camp
For the call from the potential employer
For the call back from the one whom you offended and
apologized
For the day to end
For the sun to come up

Perhaps the first lesson of B'midbar is simply that there is
no time when we are not waiting for something

And so the question becomes, the question that weaves in
and out of our lives:

How are we waiting? Is the waiting leading us somewhere
or taking us down?

I'm thinking about waiting because in Torah, back in Shmot
we have two kinds of waiting going on simultaneously
One very different from the other.

See, a few parshiot ago, in *Mishpatim*
Moses will go up on Sinai receiving the *aseret hadibrot*,
the ten commandments
Forty days and forty nights

He's not waiting, he is receiving or writing or creating moral DNA or coding the universe or whatever we think happened there

But everyone else is, as you might remember, at the bottom of the mountain, a ways away.

And there's a famous midrash that we were waiting for Moshe to come back

But the thing is, we were *only* waiting

In fact,

We were desperate for Moses to come back

See, according to tradition, even though we had witnessed all these full scale miracles, the ones that got us out of

Egypt, splitting of the sea for starters

Maybe because of these miracles,

Regardless, either way

We were used to either a totalitarian dictator, that is

Pharaoh,

or a high octane, high touch God – represented, embodied of course, by Moses and only Moses

And so the rabbis say that we were not free yet

Rather, in leaving Egypt we had just traded our round the clock Pharaoh boss for Moses the miracle worker

Someone we believed was as all controlling as Pharaoh, just with *more* power.

We hadn't really found God yet say the rabbis

So that when, Moses is late coming down

Some say he was six months late

six days late

Some say he was only six minutes late

When Moses is late coming down

We were so undone, so strung out from the waiting

That when Moses did not come back right when we
expected

Our feeling of waiting and anxiety was so severe

We collapsed

And out of desperation

We made a Golden Calf / a Moses – Pharaoh substitute
right on the spot

We prayed to it and danced around it in a blessed out
trance saying, "This is Our God."

See, when you are waiting that intensely

When you just need the waiting to stop

Anything, even a golden calf statue, could quickly and
easily become your God.

See, we thought, mistakenly, that if we had a golden calf

We could stave off the excruciating feeling of waiting and
not being filled

We thought, mistakenly, that Moses' absence was the whole
problem

We had not yet learned that we are always waiting in life

That being free is getting used to the waiting, learning what to do with it, Maybe learning how to plant something in that waiting

That is, learning how to transform that waiting into growing.

2.

But there's a second image of waiting,
I had never noticed it until recently, maybe you didn't either

And in fact, this second kind of waiting is only hinted at --
See, when Moses is getting ready to ascend Sinai at last

Torah says:

וַיִּקָּם מֹשֶׁה וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ מִשְׁרָתוֹ

And Moses rose with Joshua his servant

וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הַר הָאֱלֹהִים

And Moses went up to the mountain of God

So all we know so far is two things:

- (1) Joshua (Moses' close student) gets up, stands with Moshe at a key moment, and
- (2) then Moses goes up Sinai alone.

And we *also* know, it says, that when Moses comes back *down* from Sinai,

before Moses sees the self-destructive, undoing of the Israelites,

before Moses takes in our pathetic and shiny “god substitute,”
before his bitter disappointment and his dramatic shattering of the first set of tablets in response to that disappointment, remember?

Right before that scene, in all the commotion it is sure easy to miss but
Moses first see and talks with Joshua
who seems to be right where Moses left him, at the foot of the mountain
what I am saying is that Joshua’s been *waiting by himself* at the foot of the mountain all this time.

So, in other words, now we understand, while Moses was on Sinai and Israelites were losing their minds and building an idol, Joshua is by himself, *also waiting the whole time* but significantly, he is just waiting quietly and with trust, loyalty.

Which makes the rabbis wonder: How did Joshua survive all alone? What did he eat?

But it makes me wonder, less about his diet and more
How is it that Joshua, who (according to Rashi) just a few chapters ago was so worried about the idea of Moses dying he could even tolerate hearing those words spoken out loud –

How is it that Joshua, here, is all alone, and not only survives the prolonged absence of his beloved teacher He has the emotional presence to greet Moses, to let him know what is happening, right when Moses comes off the mountain,

Joshua doesn't even ask for anything for himself, he only tries to help.

We want to know, we need to know: What is the nature of *this kind of waiting*, How is Joshua waiting? what keeps Joshua whole?

I have two answers:

First, Rashi, and I quote:

"I do not know what Joshua's role is here.

But I think he was escorting the master until the place where the limits of the mountain were set."

Meaning, on a basic level, everyone knew only Moses could go up Sinai and so Joshua took Moses as far as he could go.

But on a deeper level – What it is that keeps Joshua whole? I'm thinking it's because Joshua *has a role to play*, he has a role to accompany Moses as far as he can possibly go and then no further. Maybe this is what saves him, *the role*.

Maybe Moses should have given all of Israel this explicit role. To help send Moses off and be ready to receive him again.

Because when we have this role, when we accompany someone we love as far as we can possibly go and no further, even if we cannot go with them, we can still realize our importance

To them, to us

We are not empty, far from it

We might, a piece of us, wish we could go completely with them

But we are not empty

We are not just waiting in vain

Like a parent accompanying a bride before she reaches the huppah

Like going with someone to the hospital – this far but not into surgery

Like watching someone you love soar from the sidelines, from the front row

Like *leviat hameitim* / like accompanying our dead to the grave

We walk as close to those we love as we possibly can, we carry them, and then there is a line we cannot cross

Because as much as we love them, we can't always go with them

We stay where we are *and*

Here's the teaching – we are important *from where we stand*, to them and to us. That is, we love most fully from where we are.

This sending off and receiving someone back, even if they return to us completely different, even through death
This is one of the great tasks of life and Joshua has discovered it. By giving himself this role, by waiting in this way, casting and receiving, loving and releasing, he is not only able to survive the waiting, he seems to understand it.

3.

And I want to suggest a second answer for how Joshua stays whole:

That maybe during these 40 days and 40 nights
Joshua sees, experiences that even all alone, even without Moses present, he still exists.

He sees that his life is not a yawning gap waiting to be filled

He experiences how waiting can become growing

I imagine that during those forty days and forty nights, what was once unthinkable starts to land somewhere within him, taking root.

That is, in the separation,
Joshua begins to understand that Moses will not live forever, and that Joshua will not only survive this reality

Joshua may eventually, in one way or another, take Moses' place.

You see, there's a tradition that Joshua wrote the last eight lines of the of the whole Torah,
The lines that describe the death and burial of Moses
The verses Moses could not have written himself

We realize: These are the verses that help us say goodbye to Moses and ready us to enter the promised land.
Joshua not only wrote these verses, he will be the one to lead us there to the promised land
And his book, the book of Joshua, will describe that passage

So I feel certain in saying that it must have been sometime during those same forty days and forty nights,
when Moses was receiving his holy message on the top of Mount Sinai,
that Joshua, waiting *and* also growing

Joshua was simultaneously receiving *his* first eight lines the last eight lines of our Torah, (!)
or perhaps they are the first lines of the book of Joshua (!)
While Moses was on Sinai
Joshua was receiving his verses:
The verses that teach us how to go forward together while being apart.