

Bimidbar 5771 – In the Wilderness of Israel  
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Shabbat Shalom.

It was hot, and we were scared out of our minds.

It was a hot August day, and my cousin Elie Kaunfer and I were hiking through the Judean desert in the summer of 1989 on an SPNI – the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel – hike. Our hike went through Wadi Qelt, meandering through deep ravines, passing majestic vistas, and culminating at the Saint George Greek Orthodox Monastery near Jericho.

Since it was over 100 degrees, our guide let us walk through an ancient Roman aqueduct that was next to the trail. (We later learned that it was probably carrying untreated sewage, but that's another story.) The water kept us a bit cooler for this serious hike. The only problem was that, when we got close to the monastery, our guide realized that we were not on the right trail. We were a few hundred meters above the Monastery so we would either have to walk back a few kilometers to the right trail – not a good idea in that heat – or try to climb down the side of the cliff.

When we wondered how we could survive the treacherous descent, our Israeli guide stated “*Ze lo ba'ayah* - No problem,” letting us slither down a trail that must have been created by ibex, mountain goats indigenous to Israel. We carefully walked with our backs to the rocks one by one, slithering down.

Suddenly, we heard a scream that came from a woman who was carrying a baby in a baby sling. Our hearts skipped a beat and sank. Fearing the worst, we froze in place.

This week, we began the fourth book of the Torah: *Bimidbar*, which literally means “in the wilderness.”

The Israelites are in the wilderness of the Sinai desert. Having experienced the heights of Sinai and the depths of the Golden Calf, now they are simply wandering – almost aimlessly. It is a year after Sinai. If it had been a straightforward journey, the people would already have arrived in the land of Israel, but they have not. They have not taken a direct route, perhaps because they were not prepared – they could not leave Egypt and immediately enter their new land – or perhaps because this generation was still consumed with their slave mentality. They needed a new generation, a new group of leaders, to lead them to their next experience.

Our rabbis conceive of the Israelites as needing to be spiritually ready for Israel. Often, the text tells us that the Israelites wanted to return to Egypt, such was their need for maturation. Building on the Midrash, Rabbi Kushner comments on this in our *Etz Hayim Humash*: Israel's willingness to be “‘open as a wilderness' to let the Torah's

morality fill the moral vacuum in the lives of former slaves, was the essential first step in God's remaking the world." (Etz Hayim Humash, p.770)

The people are in the wilderness – still 39 years away from the Promised Land. In many respects, that's where the State of Israel is today. The people of Israel and the Palestinians seem mired in the wilderness. They can see the Promised Land in the distance, there is a vision of peace, but it still seems so distant – years away.

While I was living in Israel in 1993, when the euphoria of the White House handshake was omnipresent, we really thought peace was at hand, but years of continued conflict have made that a vanishing dream.

I remember speaking to Israelis that year, and they spoke of the fact that their children would probably not have to serve in the army. How far we are from that dream....

Terrorists on the Palestinian side and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, may his memory be blessed, by a Jew started to derail that. Then years of distrust, broken promises, unmet expectations and new waves of terrorism and war have shattered those hopes.

Today, the Palestinians have made a deal with the devil, signing an unity arrangement with Hamas, a universally recognized terrorist group – abductor of Gilad Shalit, who remains in isolation after FIVE years with no contact with the outside world – and Hamas is also the group that murdered two of my dear friends in 1996: Matt Eisenfeld and Sara Duker, may their memories somehow inspire us to a better tomorrow.

Hamas continues to explicitly demand the destruction of all of Israel and the murder of Israelis and Jews, and they work to achieve it. We don't have a real partner for peace; we have a Palestinian Authority that names city squares after terrorists and they continue to teach hate.

While there is clearly less blame on the Israeli side – Israel has pulled out of Lebanon, Gaza and swaths of the West Bank, receiving violence in return – there are still areas where Israel has not been helpful.

While the Oslo Accords and subsequent agreements do not require Israel to stop building on the West Bank, that continued expansion has made Israeli overtures of peace appear to be disingenuous.

Prime Minister Netanyahu is a skilled orator. Listening to him at the AIPAC conference on Monday evening in DC and to his powerful speech to Congress on Tuesday, I was reminded of his tremendous talents, but he has not been able to move Israel towards peace. He is no Yitzhak Rabin.

He does not seem to have a plan, nor does there seem to be any diplomatic creativity among Israel's ranks. Perhaps if some of Israel's inventiveness in science, hi-tech and bio-tech was harnessed into politics, there would be some new ideas.

And Israel is being riven by external threats – think Iran and its nuclear ambitions, Hezbollah to the North and Hamas in Gaza. And there are internal challenges – a greater disparity between rich and poor, no freedom of religion for non-Orthodox Jews among others and a Hareidi community of Ultra-Orthodox Jews that contributes neither to defense nor to the economy.

So, how can we move forward? How can Israel move out of the desert? Out of the *midbar*, out of this wilderness?

To move forward, we must first start with what is good and inspiring. Spending three days this week with our Temple Emunah contingent and 10,000 other delegates in DC at the AIPAC conference was incredibly powerful. Micah Ezekiel, who is at USY's Spring Convention this Shabbat, joined us as a teen delegate, and his enthusiasm was welcome. He celebrated Israel's successes and participated in sessions that discussed Israel's complicated and precarious situation.

The next generation of American Jews must be engaged with Israel. Thanks to Birthright and other Israel trips, close to half of young American Jewish adults aged 18-26 have visited Israel; only 10% had visited just ten years ago.

The feeling was incredible – where else can you enjoy a gala kosher dinner with 10,000 people? It may have been the largest sit-down kosher dinner in human history! And there is strength in numbers, and that feeling for our numerically-small people is quite comforting.

It is also reassuring that almost 300 members of the House and 70 senators joined us, along with many other politicians, diplomats and honored guests. There were 1,500 college students including 215 student-college presidents many of them were Latino and African-American – including some from historically black and Christian schools. There were over 250 rabbis, including almost 150 Conservative rabbis who brought 130 synagogue delegations – some 3000 people!

There was also diversity at AIPAC. I heard from many Christians who are strong supporters of Israel. Seeing an African-American clergyman from Detroit holding hands with a Conservative rabbi from New Jersey was reminiscent of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel standing arm-in-arm with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. marching for civil rights in Selma. While then the Jewish people reached out to help our African-American sisters and brothers, today we require their support to help us and Israel feel less alone.

There was also a surprising variety of attendees. I met two members of J-Street who also came to AIPAC. They felt that while they did not agree with everything Israel

did, they understood that AIPAC was the best at guaranteeing a strong US-Israel alliance. I also spoke with more right-wing folks, members of the ZOA, the Zionist Organization of America, who do not support the same two-state solution that AIPAC does, but they, too, understood AIPAC's vital mission.

One session I attended featured Leon Weiseltier, an editor at the New Republic, who spoke about how the liberal Palestinian leader Salam Fayyad was the big loser in recent weeks. While he has been a skilled technocrat building up an economy and infrastructure for a future Palestinian state, Fayyad has been shunted aside with the new unity Hamas government.

Weiseltier spoke with a group of rabbis, placing Israel's current situation in an historical context. He noted that over the course of history, the Jewish people have made peace with kings and individuals – the leaders. Often they were Christians; often they were Muslims. They formed relationships with those leaders. Think about Pharaoh during the time of the Torah. Joseph forged a strong relationship with him, but when a new Pharaoh was chosen, that relationship was gone, and the Hebrews were enslaved.

Similarly, now that there are so many changes with rulers on an individual basis, Israel's relationships with her peaceful neighbors is at risk. That is a reminder that perhaps we need to make peace, not simply with leaders, with individuals, but with actual people. Peace needs to be built from relationships on the grass-roots level between many people. Relationships just at the top are not enough. Israel must reach out to Western Arabs, to those who are more liberal, to those with whom the possibility of a deeper relationship can exist. Israel was forced to rely simply on Mubarak, and now he is gone...

We all learned from different perspectives – some more on the left who loved President Obama's speech to AIPAC on Sunday morning, and some more on the right who felt more in common with Bibi's speeches.

In President Obama's defense, he strongly reiterated that Israel must remain a Jewish state and that he would veto any UN vote in September to announce a Palestinian state that is not born out of negotiations with Israel. He also strongly criticized the unity agreement between Fatah or The Palestinian Authority and Hamas, a terrorist organization that must either reform itself or remove itself from Fatah for there to be any peace talks.

But I must also take issue with Obama. He gave away Israel's card, the West Bank, as the starting point for talks and did not have the Palestinians give up their card, the right of return. That was unfair and unwise. (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alandershowitz/obama-explains-and-makes-b-867004.html>)

Palestinians cannot return to the State of Israel. If they do, there will be no Israel. They can return to a future Palestinian state, and they should be compensated along with

the hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees who were forced from their homes in Arab countries during the same period.

Right now, we need some hope – and then some new light.

Back to Wadi Qelt. While, tragically, Wadi Qelt would become the site of terrible murders of Jews by Palestinian terrorists in the 90's, on that day in 1989 we could think only of this mother and her child and her scream.

Elie and I did not move and offered a silent prayer that she did not scream because she dropped her baby. The Israeli medic who was behind us somehow jumped past us – it was a miracle of physical dexterity and sheer courage as he ran by us along a two inch ledge. He seemed to levitate off the wall, being held up by some magical horizontal gravitational pull, bravely jumping past us to try to help this woman. Somehow he made it to her.

She was OK – she had lost her step and her hat fell off, and due to the intensity of the experience with her infant, she screamed. We continued forward.

Sometime we need leaders courageous enough to leap forward in incredible ways. As in this morning's Torah reading, sometimes we need a new generation or new ideas to lead us out of the wilderness.

As President Shimon Peres explained, in the documentary, *An Article of Hope*, which we screened here on *Yom Ha'atzmaut* about the first Israeli astronaut in space, Elan Ramon: "Some people carry hope with them, but actually it is hope that carries us up."

May hope propel both peoples toward peace.