

Beha'a lot'cha 5780 – ***When we “other” we do not see***

In *Eyes Remade for Wonder*, Lawrence Kushner wrote:

The wilderness is not just a desert through which we wandered for forty years. It is a way of being. A place that demands being open to the flow of life around you. A place that demands being honest with yourself without regard to the cost in personal anxiety. A place that demands being present with all of yourself. In the wilderness your possessions cannot surround you. Your preconceptions cannot protect you. Your logic cannot promise you the future.

We have been in the wilderness for a while. Weeks of sheltering at home, trying to stay safe from the pandemic of Covid-19, and wondering when and then if it is safe to go out again. And as soon as those questions arise and we are grappling with them, we hear of the heartrending death of George Floyd in Minneapolis in late May, and we view the video and see the photo of the man with his knee on his neck for nearly nine minutes, begging for breath. And if we are not horrified, we should be. And then the anger. Followed by the daily protests that have taken place around the world since then, with people expressing shared grief and outrage and marching for change.

And march we must. Leviticus teaches us “do not stand idly by while the blood of our fellow human being is shed.”<sup>1</sup> In our Torah portion this week, it says, וַיִּסְעוּ מִן־הַהָרִים וַיֵּצְאוּ מִן־הַר־יְהוָה “and they set out from the Mountain of the Lord”. We spent the better part of a year at Mount Sinai, and having received God’s instructions, we set out. We are set out into the world to bring Torah with us. What is Torah? Torah is our instruction, God’s teaching to us. Torah is given to us to teach us how to get along, to learn about what it truly means to be human. But sometimes we forget.

In this same Torah portion, as the Israelites are about to travel to the Promised Land, Moses implores his father-in-law to stay with them, to guide them, as he guided Moses months earlier in how to organize a judicial system.<sup>2</sup> Who is Moses’

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 19:16

<sup>2</sup> Rashi commentary on Numbers 10:31.

father-in-law? He has multiple names, Hobab & Jethro are two of them, he is from Midian, he is not an Israelite, indeed, he was a priest in Midian. Jethro says no, that he will return to his own land. But the fact is, Moses implored him to stay with them, though he was not an Israelite. Why did Moses ask this? Because Moses says to him, וְהָיִיתָ לָּנוּ לְעֵינָיִם “you shall be/or have been to us as eyes.” This is often translated as you shall be our guide. But Rashi translates this as “you shall be our eyes,” meaning, you will enlighten us about anything we might fail to notice.

But alas, he declines, returns to his land, and we begin to travel without him.

And then things go haywire, and nothing makes sense.

We complained bitterly to the Lord. The Lord was incensed and a fire of the Lord broke out, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. The riffraff in our midst felt a gluttonous craving. The people cry, the Lord is angry, Moses is distressed. Those with cravings are fed so much quail that they choke and die. It’s not pretty. They move on. The very next chapter opens with Miriam and Aaron, who “spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married, he married a Cushite woman. They said, “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?”<sup>3</sup> The Lord hears this and calls Miriam, Aaron, and Moses to the Tent of Meeting, like a father calling the kids together for a talking-to. God gives Miriam and Aaron a few words, straightening them out, a Divine attitude adjustment, and departs. Miriam was stricken with scales and Aaron is shocked, and Moses prays for her, *El na r’fa na lah*, “God, please heal her.” She is sent out of the camp for a week. All travel stopped, as the people would not travel without her.

Why did this happen? Here, now? We’d only just left Mt. Sinai!

Because their guide, Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, the one who would enlighten them as to what they could not see, went back to his land, and could no longer advise them.

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<sup>3</sup> Numbers 12:1-2

Jethro was a man who could see people as they are, what they needed, and he could advise and bring them wisdom, he caused them “to see”. Upon his departure, the Israelites could no longer see each other with wisdom.

Everything went haywire, and nothing makes sense.

Each time I read this passage about Miriam and Aaron speaking against Moses “because of that Cushite woman,” I am aghast. It’s out of character for Miriam and Aaron, both spiritual leaders in their own right, to speak this way. Do they no longer see Moses’ wife – and we wonder – as the Sages did, did Moses marry again, take another wife, or are they speaking of Tziporah, Jethro’s daughter? Cushite can refer to a place, it can also mean dark-skinned, and can also mean exceptional beauty. It gives us pause to wonder what Miriam was saying. I have so many questions. Why did only Miriam get afflicted with scales? Why only a partial application of justice? Is this a double standard? Why were Miriam and Aaron speaking jealously about God speaking through Moses? Why, at the beginning of our travels, was there such a loss of humility, humanity, community, leadership, and such complaining?

When Jethro’s presence, vision, and wisdom were gone, the Israelites lost their ability to see with clarity. With Jethro’s presence gone, even Moses’ leadership was challenged.

When we no longer see clearly, with wisdom and understanding, we do and say things that do not make sense. We do not recognize each other, even in the daylight. We see our fellow human beings as “*the other*” – we “*other*” people. We no longer see human beings, we see categories. We “*other*” and we are being “*othered*.” The world of humans are divided into blinding categories of “us” and “them”.

Back in our parashah, Miriam is given a seven-day “time-out.” Everyone stopped. The Israelites stop.

We wonder, what does all this mean, what do we make of this? How do we stop, and begin to see one another again?

Wendy Zierler, in her modern midrash “*For Days Miriam Sat Outside*,”<sup>4</sup> wrote:

...Late on the seventh day, alone and looking uneasy, Moses appeared. Miriam remained silent, her eyes glaring. Halting, Moses began to speak: “You know, sister, I never wanted this post. I tried to tell the voice in the burning bush that I was not suited for this. But God insisted and told me to make snakes out of sticks. The voice in the bush said, ‘If you want to see My powers as expressed in you, put your hand into your bosom and then pull it out.’ And there it was before me: covered with snowy scales! Don’t you see? God has now spoken to you, too, from a cloud. Beware of what you ask for, my sister. God has answered you and etched the power of prophecy onto your skin. Now you too must bear the burden of this people, whom I have never fathered nor mothered, but nevertheless, I carry on my back.” Miriam looked at her arm, and behold, the scales were healed. Her arm tingling, she followed her brother Moses back to the camp. Reverently, the people waited as she gathered her things, and took her place at the head of the line.

May we gather up our things, bring our Torah and instructions into our hearts and minds, and stand at the head of the line, to bring healing, vision and wisdom to our world. May we recognize when we “other” people, seeing people as categories, and instead, remind ourselves to see newly, to see one another as a unique precious human being, as it says in Proverbs, **נֵר יְהוָה נִשְׁמַת אָדָם**, the human soul is the candle of God<sup>5</sup>.

May we pray, as Moses did, to bring healing to our world.

*El na r’fa na lanu.* Please God, heal us.

Please God, bring us through this *bamidbar*, this wilderness, and may we begin again to see the world, see our fellow human beings, as if for the first time. And let us say, amen.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi Lisa

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<sup>4</sup> The Torah: A Women’s Commentary, pg 868, Eskenazi, Weiss.

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 20:27