Confronting the Wilderness: Thoughts on Parashat Bemidbar

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bemidbar
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The people of Israel began their experience as a free nation—in the wilderness of Sinai! After their long servitude in Egypt, they might have hoped for a quick transition to a beautiful land flowing with milk and honey; they might have experienced a tremendous surge of optimism on their redemption from slavery.

But instead of a quick and happy transition, they found themselves in a wilderness. In this less than hospitable environment, they had plenty of time to focus on their troubles and fears: how long would it take for them to reach the promised land? What obstacles and dangers awaited them? How many wars would need to be waged? The wilderness is an ideal place for despair and brooding, for serious loss of morale.

The Spanish thinker, Ortega y Gasset, in his book “The Revolt of the Masses,” suggested that feeling lost and forsaken is an essential ingredient in proper human development. “And this is the simple truth—that to live is to feel oneself lost—he who accepts it has already begun to find himself, to be on firm ground….He who does not really feel himself lost, is without remission; that is to say, he never finds himself, never comes up against his own reality.”

The wilderness was the formative framework for the development of the Israelites—as individuals and as a nation. By feeling “lost” they came up against “their own reality.” They had to mobilize their inner resources; they had to strengthen their spirits; they had to think creatively.

This week’s Torah portion provides insight into how the Israelite’s coped with their wilderness experience. They took a census. They organized themselves into tribal divisions, appointing leaders over each tribe. Instead of lamenting their fate, they took meaningful steps to evaluate their strength and to form themselves into governable legions. The Torah emphasizes that they counted the people “by

name” i.e. they focused on the individuality and uniqueness of each person, and did not simply lump people together in an impersonal way.

The wilderness experience of the Israelites has continued meaning for us today. When we feel lost, when we feel despair…this is a time for us to grow. The feeling of being in a wilderness is a challenge to us, an opportunity to discover who we really are. When we are complacent and self-satisfied, we lack the stimulus to push ourselves to the limits of our capacities. Like the ancient Israelites, we need to count our friends and allies—upon whom can we depend? Who can really be trusted to stand with us in time of crisis? We need to take specific actions to enable us to cope with real and perceived challenges. We need to see ourselves and others as “names”—not as impersonal ciphers.

But first of all, we need to draw on our own inner strengths. Instead of being frightened or demoralized by the wildernesses we face in life, we need to think quietly and clearly about what we can do to address the challenges before us.

Until we come up “against our own reality,” we do not live our lives to their fullest.

Angel for Shabbat