Wandering, Focusing--and Creativity: Thoughts on Tazria-Metsora, April 28, 2012

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What did the Israelites do during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness?

They didn't need to work for their food, clothing or shelter. They didn't have businesses to run. They didn't have homes to repair or gardens to tend. They didn't have theaters for entertainment or arenas for sporting events. They didn't have televisions or internet connections or facebook. They didn't have a formal school system for their children, or summer camps, or vacation homes.

We may assume that the Israelites—men, women and children—spent part of their days studying Torah. But what else did they have to do? How did they deal with what must have been overwhelming boredom? What did the Almighty have in mind when He imposed forty years of wandering on them?

Actually, this extended period of wandering and boredom may have proven to be one of the best things that happened to the Israelites of those times—with a lesson for us today.
Wandering is an essential ingredient in the development of imagination and creativity. When we let our minds roam, we often come up with fresh ideas and insights. If we are constantly busy with our work and with our electronic devices, our minds become constricted. We are subject to an unending barrage of images and information—we have no time to let our minds drift, to daydream, to transcend the ever-present stimuli that shower us unremittingly. Our great sages over the generations practiced "hitbodedut"—isolation of oneself from the hurly burly of life by means of meditation, wandering, going to unfamiliar places.

I suspect—although the Torah does not inform us of these details—that the Israelites experienced tremendous boredom when they began their sojourn in the wilderness. But then, they must have realized that they needed to create structure for their lives. They must have developed groups and classes for the children. Storytellers and singers must have emerged. They needed to draw on their imaginations and creativity in order to make life happy, meaningful, and fulfilling. They learned to improvise and to think "out of the box."

When I was a little boy, I would sometimes complain to my mother: “I’m bored.” My mother wisely responded: “That’s wonderful. It’s good to be bored. Now use your imagination and see how you can break through your boredom.” Boredom is a jumping board for ingenuity and innovation.

During those years of wandering, the Israelites also received a number of very detailed commandments. They were told to build a Mishkan and were given precise measurements, types of materials and fabrics, even the color of the fabrics to be used. They were given a highly ritualized system of offerings and sacrifices. They were given precise rules about which animals they may and may not consume. In this week’s Torah portion, we read of the technical laws relating to ritual purity. Why did the Israelites need so many specific laws with so many meticulous details?

Why would the Almighty demand rigorous adherence to such precise rules? Couldn’t the Israelites worship just as well in a Mishkan that they built according to their own desires? Why did the Almighty delineate the exact materials and colors, rather than just let the people do what they chose on their own? What was the point in giving such specific rules about sacrifices, and food consumption, purity and impurity?

I believe that the stress on details underscores the second ingredient in creativity. It isn’t enough simply to wander in an unstructured manner. The mind needs to be tuned in to specific details, to be able to observe things very carefully. God was teaching the Israelites not to view things in an undifferentiated way, but to focus intently on specific materials, colors, sizes, animal characteristics, unusual blemishes on one’s skin. The emphasis on these details provided the broader lesson of the importance of focusing on the details of objects, on our surroundings, on all those things which constitute the world we live in.

The Israelites’ forty years in the wilderness served as the religious and creative foundation of our people. From that experience, we learn the essential importance of wandering and imagining, of letting our minds roam and invent. We also learn the vital need for focusing on details, and taking the time to see things as they really are in their uniqueness.

What did the Israelites do during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness? They became a dynamic, creative, focused and imaginative people. They set the foundations for the future development and creativity of the people of Israel for all eras to come, including our own.

Angel for Shabbat