

THE WILDERNESS WITHIN

Rabbi Marc Margolius

West End Synagogue, Kol Nidrei/Erev Yom Kippur 5774/2013

Raise your hands: how many of you this summer spent time in Central Park or Riverside Park? Upstate New York? Canada? New England? Jersey Shore? Colorado? A beautiful place outside North America? A national park?

For many, though not all of us, summer presents the opportunity to escape this hyper-stimulating urban habitat in which we live. We get a taste of the quieter places on this planet. For my family, it's time in the Berkshires, swimming and kayaking in the waters of the Stockbridge Bowl, taking in the cultural offerings of that area. For some of us, it's a time to experience one of our remaining wilderness areas, like the great National Parks, where the landscape literally takes our breath away. These are places of *yir'ah*, awe-inspiring places where we experience a profound sense of our apparent insignificance and, simultaneously, gratitude for our place in the grand scheme of the universe.

Whether in the majesty of Grand Tetons or the clear waters of the Stockbridge Bowl or the Ramble in Central Park, each of us is profoundly affected by these moments. But when summer ends, and we come back to the grit of our daily New York lives, it's not easy to sustain the sense of spaciousness we've tasted in the wilderness.

The *midbar*, the wilderness, represents the deepest aspect of reality we can know. When we escaped from Egyptian slavery, we could've taken the short cut to the Promised Land. Instead, we took a more circuitous route through the desert, a trip that lasted an entire generation. And according to Moses in the Torah portion we studied this past Shabbat, that's where we met God – "in a desert land, in a howling wilderness" [Deut. 32:10].

We often think of the wilderness as a place and period of hardship and struggle. But in fact, the wilderness served as our womb, our spiritual incubator. It's where we learned how to release our resistance and allow ourselves to experience the sacred.

In the wilderness, there was no need to shop for food or clothing. "I led you through the wilderness forty years," says God. "The clothes on your back didn't wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet" (Deut. 29:4). When the new generation prepared finally to enter the Promised Land, Moses reminded us: "Don't forget -- God brought water for you from the flinty rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna" (Deut. 8: 14-16). Like a first-class rafting trip, our ancestors' adventure was all-inclusive: everything was provided, so we could just take it all in.

Wilderness is where we can hear the voice of God. The Hebrew root links *midbar*, the word for wilderness, with *m'daber*, speaking. The wilderness is a place of revelation, a place for dramatic and transforming insights. Hagar hears the voice of God only after she flees to the wilderness. Moses experiences the voice at the burning bush only after he leads his flock *achar ha-midbar*, to the very edge of the wilderness. Our ancestors receive Torah at Sinai, according to one midrash, only because the wilderness is a place of total silence, without distractions. And the prophet Elijah hears God as he crouches in a mountainside cave, in a *kol d'mamah dakah*, a still small voice in the wilderness.

Wilderness reminds us of life's infinite and therefore sacred dimensions. We all need the wild spaces which are constantly threatened by our desire to conquer the planet. Five decades ago, the author Wallace Stegner pleaded passionately with the American government not only

to conserve national recreational areas, but also to preserve the few remaining untouched American landscapes in which hardly anyone would ever set foot:

Something will have gone out of us as a people, if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed, if we permit the last virgin forests to be turned into comic books and plastic cigarette cases; if we drive the few remaining members of the wild species into zoos or to extinction; if we pollute the last clear air or dirty the last clean streams and push our paved roads through the last of the silence.... [N]ever again [would] we have the chance to see ourselves single, separate, vertical and individual in the world, part of the environment of trees and rocks and soil, brother to the other animals, part of the natural world and competent to belong in it. ... [A]s the remnants of the unspoiled and natural world are progressively eroded, every such loss is a little death in me. In us.

Meaningful human life, Stegner argued, requires sacred, empty places we can call our wilderness.

We each stand in need of the endless possibility wilderness instills in us. But *midbar* exists not only in space, but in time as well. Every Shabbat is intended as a time for leaving our noisy reality, wandering back into the silence of the wilderness, and attuning our hearts and minds to the voice of God. The Torah describes today, Yom Kippur, as Shabbat Shabbaton, the Shabbat of Shabbats, the ultimate refuge and revelation. Tonight, we walk into a wilderness in time, a *midbar* in which we need not shop or cook or eat or really do anything except be fully present. Today we are *dor ha-midbar*, the generation of the wilderness, attending to the needs of our spirits, not our stomachs. And as much as we require sacred place in our lives, our souls desperately crave this wilderness in time, this Shabbat Shabbaton.

Over the next 24 hours, you and I may happen upon some important personal revelations. But what happens after the final *tekiah g'dolah* tomorrow night, when we return from this sanctuary to our noisy reality? How can we preserve our visions, born in the wilderness, after we return to the Land of Reality, after we're engulfed by the forces of ingrained habit and drowning in the mundane tasks of daily life?

The answer lies in the truth that wilderness exists not only in place and in time -- it exists also as **an idea activated by memory. Each of us carries a wilderness in our mind's eye, it the gates of our imagination.** For Wallace Stegner, the very "thought of the colored stretches of southern Utah, the reassurance that there are still stretches of prairie where the world can be instantaneously perceived as disk and bowl, and where the little but intensely important human being is exposed to the five directions and the thirty-six winds -- this thought, in and of itself, enlarges our spirit and expands our vision."

For Jews, this isn't exactly breaking news. Our tradition teaches that we need not literally actually sell ourselves into bondage to know what slavery feels like, nor need we actually visit the Sinai peninsula to hear the voice our ancestors heard. Just as we are to imagine ourselves as if we, personally, are always leaving Egypt, so we are to consider ourselves always standing at Sinai, hearing the still small voice. Within each of us there is an interior wilderness we carry wherever we go, a portable wilderness activated not by sight or sound, but by remembrance. On the brink of entering the Promised Land, Moses tells the new generation, "You shall remember all the way which the Holy One your God led you these forty years in the wilderness." As well as any people, we Jews understand the reality of that interior wilderness, what Stegner called the "geography of hope."

One of my favorite novels, [The Brothers K](#), by David James Duncan, describes four brothers whose younger twin sisters are aspiring scientists. These sisters develop an

experiment called "the Hump of Energy," which involves snapping the end of a garden hose and watching the resulting hump travel down the length of the hose.

The girls imagine there are all sorts of similar "humps" of energy flowing through the world and us, such as humps of anger and meanness that travel invisibly through generations. One day, maybe even way in the future, those hump of destructive energy without warning, emerge from us and hurt others -- even people we love, even if we didn't mean it and even if they didn't deserve it.

One of the older brothers, an aspiring Buddhist, agrees with his sisters' theory. You're right, he says. Every person gets jolted throughout life by humps of mean energy that have passed through generations to us; we can't avoid getting zapped over and over. But, he says, we don't have to keep passing on that flow of anger. Deep within us, there's a place where it can end. When we feel that "hump of meanness" within us, he says,

[We] can just bury the zap, for instance, like the gods buried the Titans in the earth. Or [we] can be like a river when a forest fire hits it -- pssssshhhhhh. Just drown it, drown all the heat and let it wash away.... And the great thing, the reason [we] can lay a river in the path of any sort of wildfire is that there's not just rivers inside us, there's a world in there.... I've felt how there's a world, and rivers, and high mountains, whole ranges of mountains, in there. And there are lakes in those mountains -- beautiful, pure, deep blue lakes. Thousands of them. Enough to wash away all the dirt and trouble and witchiness on earth....

Our problem, says the brother, is that we have difficulty imagining and remembering this internal wilderness. He says:

Something truly heavenly, something with mountains higher than St. Helens or Hood and lakes purer and deeper than any of earth -- we never look for such things inside of us. So when the humps of witchiness come at us, we've got nowhere to go, and just get hurt, or mad, or pass them on and hurt somebody else. But ... if you want to put out the fires, you can do it. You can do it if you remember to crawl, right when you're burning, to drag yourself if that's what it takes, clear up into those mountain lakes inside you, and on down into those cool, pure lakes.

Judaism also teaches us that there's a wilderness within every person, a place in which we transform the hurts and mistakes of the past so they won't haunt our future. One rabbi [Eruvin 54a] teaches that one who makes him or herself "as a wilderness" receives Torah as a gift and becomes the inheritance of God. And in exploring that interior wilderness, we can find the means to dissipate the hump of angry energy so it won't eat away at us, and so we won't pass it on to others.

Now it's clear why our ancestors spent 40 years in the wilderness, instead of taking the shortcut to the Promised Land. It would have been natural for those who'd been oppressed to perpetuate that pattern upon others, much as abused children -- the very people who we'd think would know better -- so often themselves become abusers. Where else but in the wilderness could a group of oppressed former slaves find the space and the perspective to create a community dedicated to the idea that they would never treat others the way they'd been treated?

Only in the stillness of the wilderness could we have the perspective to promise not to oppress the stranger, because we know the heart of the stranger, having been strangers in the land of Egypt. Only in the wilderness could we have the largeness of vision to imagine that when we reach the Promised Land, we must obliterate the memory of Amalek, who attacked the

weakest among us as soon as we left Egypt. Only in the empty spaces of the wilderness could each of us begin to shed the habits of mind and behavior that enslave us, and learn to halt repeating cycles of hurting others and ourselves. And that is what our people have done, despite centuries of oppression and injustice.

Our pain, our losses, our sins, constantly release hump after hump, wave after wave, of potentially destructive energy. We get zapped all the time by anger, by old wounds, by a sense of worthlessness. Usually, we don't even notice that "hump" of energy passing through us.

We all need a lake where we can douse the flames of anger at others and ourselves. We all need a desert where we can evaporate the ponds of old grudges and release the sadness and shame we've inherited. We all need an open plain and endless sky in which we can still the bad vibes which have ricocheted through the generations down to us. We all need a mountaintop or a canyon or even a Central Park Sheep Meadow quiet enough for us to hear the familiar patterns of negative thoughts within us and begin to free ourselves from their grip. We all need a wilderness where we can make *teshuvah*, where we can diffuse and transform the noxious energy which has passed through history into our genes and our souls.

Tomorrow's Torah reading describes the high priest confessing the people's sins onto a scapegoat, which is then sent off to the wilderness. In the Talmud [Yoma 68b], the rabbis wonder how we know when, exactly, the goat has reached the wilderness? One rabbi says that guards would signal that the goat had gotten there; another teaches they'd simply wait however long they calculated it would take the goat to arrive. A third rabbi teaches that they tied a thread of crimson wool to the door of the Temple; when the goat reached the wilderness, the thread turned white. However it was known, says Rabbi Yehudah, here's the point: the mitzvah was fulfilled as soon as the goat reached the *midbar*. Transformation begins the moment we meet the wilderness.

Our concept of *teshuvah* has evolved radically from magical and vicarious atonement. In Judaism, forgiveness requires confessing, apologizing, fixing the harm we've inflicted. But there is still powerful meaning in recalling the scapegoat ritual, because in it our ancestors expressed a universal human need -- *our* need -- to bring our angers, our hurts, and our shame to a place where they can be neutralized and transformed. We no longer want a High Priest to transfer our sins to a goat. The Temple and its cult are gone. But human anger and pain and sin remain. And fortunately for us -- though we often forget it -- the wilderness within us remains as well, just waiting for us to pay attention and notice it at any moment.

Tonight and tomorrow, we meet at the trailhead and turn to that wilderness we each carry within us. We collect all our hurts, all our regrets, all our disappointments, all our destructive patterns of thought, and bring them to those mountains and lakes and deserts and Hudson Rivers and Central Parks within us.

As we turn inward, may we each find there a wilderness large enough to swallow our pain, quiet enough to still our fears, awesome enough to renew our vision of who we might be. In the wilderness with us, may we find a wind that clears away the storm clouds in our lives and our world and reveals a more hopeful horizon. May we make ourselves as barren as a wilderness, may we imagine ourselves as empty as a shofar, may we feel a wind blowing through us all day long, a wind that emerges from us, at darkness tomorrow, as a *tekiah g'dolah*, a wind which brings healing, hope, and shalom to our broken selves and to our broken world.