



From Exile to Trust Torah Reflections on *Parashat Devarim*

Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22

6 Av, 5774

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In this week's portion, we find Moses speaking to the Israelites before crossing the border into their new land. After forty years of living in the desert in exile, the Israelites have been led to the land of Canaan. Before they enter Canaan, Moses pauses to recall significant events that have shaped the community before him.

During the four decades of wandering the wilderness, the Jewish people confronted a variety of challenges; some so great they faced complete obliteration. They did not have any knowledge about what they would face in the coming months and years. Through all of these trials, Moses asked them to keep their faith in God. He encouraged them to trust that God would protect them and at the right moment, would guide them to their land. When the Israelites happen upon potential enemies, Moses encouraged them to exercise self-discipline. Moses says

"Have no dread or fear of them. None other than God, who goes before you, will fight for you, just as God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes, and in the wilderness, where you saw how the Eternal your God carried you, as a parent carries their child, all the way that you traveled until you came to this place. Yet for all that, you have no faith in God, who goes before you on your journeys — to scout the place where you are to encamp — in fire by night and in cloud by day, in order to guide you on the route you are to follow." (1:29-33)

The Israelites did not always find it easy to retain their patience and trust in God in the face of potential enemies or the hardships of their long years in the wilderness.

Exile can take many forms, both for whole people and in each of our lives. We may feel alone and alienated from relatives or friends for a variety of reasons. Perhaps we feel we feel distant from our family or community because of differences in the way we live our lives. Perhaps we have selected a form of banishment for ourselves and chosen to be alone. We may feel disconnected from ourselves or our previously-strong roots, as though we are wandering in the desert, waiting for guidance to point us in a direction. We may feel completely overwhelmed by an obscure future we predict will be filled with discomfort.

When we face exile in our own lives, whether self-imposed or forced, nourishing a trust in anything, much less God, may seem difficult or even impossible. If we are struggling with an illness or in the midst of a difficult time in our lives, we may feel isolated and alone. We may face similar feelings of fear about being annihilated or terrified of an unknown future. The fear of the unknown is often greater than its actualization.

During my treatment for leukemia a few years ago, I remember that my frequent

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anticipatory terror of a medical procedure was often more painful than the actual event. But holding onto any faith in that time before the procedure was almost impossible. Having the mental restraint to not lash out and run screaming from the hospital was critical to my physical healing. How do we encourage and cultivate any trust during these moments of felt exile?

For me, the image of a future self lying in a bed without tubes in my body and without cold metal railings gave me a small sense of excitement. The smell of eucalyptus on a cool forest breeze or the sound of ocean waves thrashing the sand and the sight of the white feathered bellies of seagulls soaring overhead were vivid images that came to my mind while I was in the hospital. One night I awoke with a feeling of overwhelm that I had only experienced once while driving through the desert years before. Awe-inspired, I pulled the car over to weep at the enormous expansiveness of the sky that folded over the horizons like a blanket woven with stars. Tending to a sense of hope, no matter how small, may also help stave off the fear of the unknown.

There is a common yet mistaken myth that envisions a one-way trajectory away from Exodus to Promised Land, from alienation toward community, and from disbelief or doubt to trust. However, Jewish literature repeatedly affirms that these feelings do not evolve automatically from one to the next and do not remain static. The tides of exile and trust – the ebb and flow of hope and despair remain a consistent part of my life even after years of remission.

Just as the Israelites had no knowledge of the future that lay before them, we face life without knowledge of what upcoming minutes, hours, months or years will hold. It prompts us to take stock of the present moment, and to remain open to a different future. The ancient Israelites had hope that their time in exile would at some point end, and that one day they would live in a land they could call their own.

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