



Unmarked Territory *Torah Reflections on Parashat Bamidbar*

Numbers 1:1 – 4:20

Bamidbar, the fourth book of the Torah, begins this week with a portion that bears its name, setting the stage for all the remaining portions in the cycle of weekly Torah readings. From now on, through the conclusion of the fifth and final book, Devarim (Deuteronomy), the experience of the Israelites will take place *ba-midbar*, or “in the wilderness.” The exuberance of the Exodus from Egypt having faded, the Israelites find themselves in strange and barren territory, without any signposts or pathways to guide them. And yet it is here, in this desolate and forbidding place, that they discover who they really are and what their lives are really about. It is here that they begin to understand their special connection to God.

Many of us who take to the wilderness have discovered, as did our ancient ancestors, that when we leave behind what is fixed and familiar, it is possible to discover something much more profound and important. In the risk of entering the wilderness is the possibility--perhaps the only possibility-- of spiritual growth. As Lawrence Kushner writes: “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. . . . For it is the only way to begin.”

And so we may seek out the wilderness, even yearn for it, lured by the possibility that in its simplicity and solitude we may see more clearly and feel more deeply, feel closer to each other and to God. But there are other times when we find ourselves in a wilderness that is not of our choosing. Times when we are abruptly uprooted from what is fixed and familiar and thrust into a radically new situation that challenges our sense of who we are and what we can count on, perhaps even our values and beliefs. Illness can be one of those situations.

Illness can plunge us into unfamiliar territory, shattering our sense of security and identity and infusing us with feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty. It is, for many of us, a new way of being. In the wilderness of illness we suddenly may be surrounded by strange and frightening images, startled by unpleasant sounds and odors, accosted by strangers, stripped of the clothing and equipment that define who we are. But if we are open to the flow of life in the wilderness, as our ancestors came to be, then our journey through illness may lead us to transformative revelations about ourselves, our relationships, and our faith. In the experience of vulnerability and weakness, removed from our usual anchors and expectations, we may yet discover strengths, insights, and blessings that we did not know we had.

In what ways has illness been a wilderness for you? In what ways has it been a revelation? What relationships have guided and nurtured you through the unmarked territory? What have you learned about yourself?

As you make your way through the forbidding terrain of illness, may you be like our ancestors "ba-midbar," discovering strengths, insights, and blessings that you did not previously know. And may you too realize that God will be there to guide you—through the days and the nights, however long it takes, whatever the journey may bring. May this be the blessing of all who suffer from illness.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Sheila Segal, C.J.C., a Pastoral Care Supervisor at the Abramson Center for Jewish Life in North Wales, PA. (formerly the Philadelphia Geriatric Center), and Hospice Chaplain with the Jewish Chaplaincy and Healing Program of the Jewish Family and Children's Service of Greater Philadelphia. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.



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- Spiritual support groups for patients, caregivers, and the bereaved
- Healing and memorial services, and specialized rituals
- Education and training for synagogues, Jewish organizations, healthcare workers, and volunteers
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