

Freedom Journeys:

The Tales of Exodus and Wilderness Across Millennia

Rabbi Arthur Waskow and Rabbi Phyllis Berman, 2011

Chapter 14: The Taste of Freedom (an excerpt)

Moving forward into the wilderness after the supernal experience of the Sea, the people began to run low on food and water, and the grumbling began. “Why did you bother taking us out of the Narrow Place we knew, into this broad and barren Wilderness?’ they taunted Moses and Aaron. “The pangs of hunger now are as sharp and bitter as the whips before. Yes, we felt transported beyond ourselves when we saw what happened at the Sea, but now we feel like ill-fed ants creeping toward an ever-vanishing horizon! Weren’t there graves enough in Egypt that you had to bring us here to die?”



Moses reminded them, “It wasn’t the two of us but the Breath of Life Itself, the Hurricane of Change, who blew back the Sea and carried you from slavery into freedom. Stop kvetching! Your nourishment will have to come not from us but from that same Breath of Life!”

And indeed the Breath of Life brought nurture on Its wings, Its winds. Something the people had never seen before began to rain on them. They said *Mahn hu* – “What’s that? – Watchamacall it” (Ex. 16:15), until the name stuck” - *mahn*, manna. Moses told them it was the food they were so badly wanting.

Every day, the manna fell. The people learned to gather just enough to meet their needs for one more day. Any surplus rotted away, began to stink of greed or fear... On the sixth day, a double portion would appear. On that day the extra did not rot away. It was the Sabbatical portion, to be eaten on the seventh day. And thus no longer did the community need work “all the days of [their] life” (Gen. 3:17) in order to eat...

The coming of the manna was the first major experience the people had after their birthing through the breaking of the Red Sea waters. It was the milk of God’s mothering for these newborns...

Enacted scripture - Exodus 16

NRSV with some paraphrasing and narrative added in italics by Sandra Lommasson

Roles: Designate Moses with a mantle; invite the group to join in as moved in a slow counterclockwise

Music background to begin: “Texas” by Ry Cooder* from the 1984 movie of a modern wilderness called Paris, Texasⁱ

It’s the middle of the second month after the sudden departure from Egypt and the miraculous parting of the Red Sea and delivery from Pharaoh’s army. Life in Egypt with all its hardships has begun to fade and the focus has shifted to the everyday and the what next.

Join in to the exodus from wherever your wilderness is, perhaps imagining yourself getting up and moving forward AGAIN through this strange desert place where you don’t want to be—the face of your wilderness - unsure where you’re going or how long it’s going to take – you join that straggling, single-file line of runaway slaves on what feels like anything but a ‘Freedom Journey’.

Notice whether or when you begin to feel a draw to others or a push away from them... maybe you notice the two or three ahead and two or three behind. What happens when you catch their eye or they catch yours? What do you see there? Who do you feel responsible for in this endless, barren landscape where you’ve been traveling for a couple of months... notice what begins to rise among you – especially when you catch sight of Moses, the one who lured you here...

Hear now the ancient story... and let it draw out your voice and the expression of your body...

² The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³ “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill us with hunger.”

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day... ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” ...

Day once again becomes night and you set up camp...

¹³ That evening quails came up and covered the camp – meat! - and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. [*look at it – touch it*]

¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?”^[a] *Mahn hu* – For they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, “It’s the bread the LORD has given you to eat... Gather as much as each of you needs, *about ½ gallon* for each person in your tent.”¹⁷ The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less.¹⁸ When they measured it, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.¹⁹

And Moses said to them, “Don’t try to save it overnight.”

²⁰ But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul...²¹ Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

²² On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, a full *gallon* apiece as the Lord commanded: ‘Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.’”²⁴ So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it.

²⁵ Moses said, “Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find manna in the field.

²⁶ The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey. ...

³⁵ The Israelites ate manna *forty years*, until they came to a habitable land; they ate manna, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan.

*An offbeat expression of the nature of wilderness comes from **Wim Wenders’ Paris, Texas (1984)** which begins with a haunting scene and Ry Cooder’s guitar to match. The movie opens with amnesiac Harry Dean Stanton wandering aimlessly through the South Texas desert landscape, walking out of the desert like a Biblical figure but wearing jeans and a baseball cap, the universal costume of America. His scraggly beard, the deep eye sockets and the tireless lope of his walk tell a story of wandering in the wilderness. What is he looking for? Does he remember?

It’s the story of loss upon loss. This man, whose name is Travis, was once married and had a little boy. Then that all went wrong, and he lost his wife and child, and for years he wandered. Now he will find his family and lose it again, this time not through madness but through sacrifice. He will give them up out of his love for them

For Reflection

After our enacted scripture, pause and notice what's in your body? What are you thinking? Feeling?

Any surprises? (Surprise is often a sign of the Spirit).

Journal (free write your experience) on the back or simply ponder this section above the line.

Some questions to consider (as they fit):

- What was the experience like of getting up and getting moving one more time?
- How did you regard those around you also wandering the desert?
- What did you say [or want to say] to your leaders?
- What was your response to the manna when it first appeared? When there was a double portion that allowed rest?



FOR OUR CLOSING:

One way to think about manna is as those places of nourishment in the long desert crossing – those moments of mercy and moments of grace that nourish you just enough in the day. Think of it as a form of examen – noticing what in this day of your ‘desert’ stirs gratitude or a bit of life/ hope/ connection/ peace/freedom or other signs of Spirit’s presence and movement? As you think about *your* particular wilderness, what seemingly insubstantial ‘whisp’ of manna has come your way *today*? Linger with the details and notice what happens as you do.