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Parashat B’midbar: What are you waiting for?

1.
No matter how we imagine this stage we’re in
I mean this in-between stage
This not yet in the promised land stage
This not in Egypt but certainly with some of the slavery very much still in us stage
And, of course, I am talking about the Torah
Certainly not any political situations here at home or any other countries we deeply care about
I’m just talking about Torah, you do with it what you want
No matter how you understand where we are in b’midbar,
In the wilderness, where signage only comes in the form of fire and clouds
And the internet connection is spotty at best
No matter how you understand this stage we’re in
There’s no question
We’re in between
We’re waiting

And waiting is, maybe some of us are waiting right now for something
Waiting is exhausting

Waiting in the doctor’s office
Waiting for test results
Waiting to see if this time it could work out
Waiting for the plane to take off
Waiting for our beloved to return
For the letter to come from our daughter at summer camp
For the call from the potential employer
For the call back from the one whom you offended and apologized
For the day to end
For the sun to come up

Perhaps the first lesson of B’midbar is simply that there is no time when we are not waiting for something

And so the question becomes, the question that weaves in and out of our lives:

How are we waiting? Is the waiting leading us somewhere or taking us down?

I’m thinking about waiting because in Torah, back in Shmot we have two kinds of waiting going on simultaneously
One very different from the other.

See, a few parshiot ago, in Mishpatim
Moses will goes up on Sinai receiving the aseret hadibrot, the ten commandments
Forty days and forty nights
He’s not waiting, he is receiving or writing or creating moral DNA or coding the universe or whatever we think happened there
But everyone else is, as you might remember, at the bottom of the mountain, a ways away.
And there’s a famous midrash that we were waiting for Moshe to come back
But the thing is, we were only waiting
In fact,
We were desperate for Moses to come back
See, according to tradition, even though we had witnessed all these full scale miracles, the ones that got us out of Egypt, splitting of the sea for starters
Maybe because of these miracles,
Regardless, either way
We were used to either a totalitarian dictator, that is Pharaoh,
or a high octane, high touch God – represented, embodied of course, by Moses and only Moses

And so the rabbis say that we were not free yet
Rather, in leaving Egypt we had just traded our round the clock Pharaoh boss for Moses the miracle worker
Someone we believed was as all controlling as Pharoah, just with more power.
We hadn’t really found God yet say the rabbis

So that when, Moses is late coming down
Some say he was six months late
six days late
Some say he was only six minutes late
When Moses is late coming down
We were so undone, so strung out from the waiting

That when Moses did not come back right when we expected
Our feeling of waiting and anxiety was so severe

We collapsed
And out of desperation
We made a Golden Calf / a Moses – Pharaoh substitute right on the spot
We prayed to it and danced around it in a blessed out trance saying, “This is Our God.”

See, when you are waiting that intensely
When you just need the waiting to stop
Anything, even a golden calf statue, could quickly and easily become your God.

See, we thought, mistakenly, that if we had a golden calf
We could stave off the excruciating feeling of waiting and not being filled
We thought, mistakenly, that Moses’ absence was the whole problem

We had not yet learned that we are always waiting in life
That being free is getting used to the waiting, learning what to do with it, Maybe learning how to plant something in that waiting
That is, learning how to transform that waiting into growing.

2.
But there’s a second image of waiting,
I had never noticed it until recently, maybe you didn’t either

And in fact, this second kind of waiting is only hinted at --
See, when Moses is getting ready to ascend Sinai at last

Torah says:

יִכְּמֶה מֵשָׁה וִיוֹשֻׁעַ מְשַׁרְתּו
And Moses rose with Joshua his servant

וַיָּקָם מֹשֶׁה הָאֱלֹהִים אֶל־הַר
And Moses went up to the mountain of God

So all we know so far is two things:
(1) Joshua (Moses’ close student) gets up, stands with Moshe at a key moment, and
(2) then Moses goes up Sinai alone.

And we also know, it says, that when Moses comes back down from Sinai,
before Moses sees the self-destructive, undoing of the Israelites,
before Moses takes in our pathetic and shiny “god substitute,”
before his bitter disappointment and his dramatic shattering of the first set of tablets in response to that disappointment, remember?

Right before that scene, in all the commotion it is sure easy to miss but
Moses first see and talks with Joshua
who seems to be right where Moses left him, at the foot of the mountain
what I am saying is that Joshua’s been waiting by himself at the foot of the mountain all this time.

So, in other words, now we understand, while Moses was on Sinai and Israelites were losing their minds and building an idol, Joshua is by himself, also waiting the whole time but significantly, he is just waiting quietly and with trust, loyalty.

Which makes the rabbis wonder: How did Joshua survive all alone? What did he eat?

But it makes me wonder, less about his diet and more
How is it that Joshua, who (according to Rashi) just a few chapters ago was so worried about the idea of Moses dying he could even tolerate hearing those words spoken out loud –
How is it that Joshua, here, is all alone, and not only survives the prolonged absence of his beloved teacher He has the emotional presence to greet Moses, to let him know what is happening, right when Moses comes off the mountain,

Joshua doesn’t even ask for anything for himself, he only tries to help.

We want to know, we need to know: What is the nature of this kind of waiting, How is Joshua waiting? what keeps Joshua whole?

I have two answers:
First, Rashi, and I quote: “I do not know what Joshua’s role is here. But I think he was escorting the master until the place where the limits of the mountain were set.”

Meaning, on a basic level, everyone knew only Moses could go up Sinai and so Joshua took Moses as far as he could go.

But on a deeper level – What it is that keeps Joshua whole? I’m thinking it’s because Joshua has a role to play, he has a role to accompany Moses as far as he can possibly go and then no further. Maybe this is what saves him, the role.
Maybe Moses should have given all of Israel this explicit role. To help send Moses off and be ready to receive him again.

Because when we have this role, when we accompany someone we love as far as we can possibly go and no further, even if we cannot go with them, we can still realize our importance
To them, to us
We are not empty, far from it
We might, a piece of us, wish we could go completely with them
But we are not empty
We are not just waiting in vain

Like a parent accompanying a bride before she reaches the huppah
Like going with someone to the hospital - this far but not into surgery
Like watching someone you love soar from the sidelines, from the front row
Like leviat hameitim / like accompanying our dead to the grave
We walk as close to those we love as we possibly can, we carry them, and then there is a line we cannot cross
Because as much as we love them, we can’t always go with them
We stay where we are and
Here’s the teaching – we are important from where we stand, to them and to us. That is, we love most fully from where we are.

This sending off and receiving someone back, even if they return to us completely different, even through death. This is one of the great tasks of life and Joshua has discovered it. By giving himself this role, by waiting in this way, casting and receiving, loving and releasing, he is not only able to survive the waiting, he seems to understand it.

3.
And I want to suggest a second answer for how Joshua stays whole: That maybe during these 40 days and 40 nights Joshua sees, experiences that even all alone, even without Moses present, he still exists. He sees that his life is not a yawning gap waiting to be filled. He experiences how waiting can become growing.

I imagine that during those forty says and forty nights, what was once unthinkable starts to land somewhere within him, taking root.

That is, in the separation, Joshua begins to understand that Moses will not live forever, and that Joshua will not only survive this reality.
Joshua may eventually, in one way or another, take Moses’ place.

You see, there’s a tradition that Joshua wrote the last eight lines of the whole Torah, The lines that describe the death and burial of Moses The verses Moses could not have written himself

We realize: These are the verses that help us say goodbye to Moses and ready us to enter the promised land. Joshua not only wrote these verses, he will be the one to lead us there to the promised land And his book, the book of Joshua, will describe that passage

So I feel certain in saying that it must have been sometime during those same forty days and forty nights, when Moses was receiving his holy message on the top of Mount Sinai, that Joshua, waiting and also growing

Joshua was simultaneously receiving his first eight lines the last eight lines of our Torah, (!) or perhaps they are the first lines of the book of Joshua (!) While Moses was on Sinai Joshua was receiving his verses: The verses that teach us how to go forward together while being apart.