

Peace Through the Wilderness

There are so many bizarre things happening in the world that it is hard to know where to focus.

But I want to begin with the [Johnson Amendment](#) that states that not-for-profits like synagogues, churches and mosques, as well as non-religious not-for-profits, cannot engage in partisan political activities.

For more than half a century, this law has prevented religious organizations from endorsing political candidates or parties; we are allowed to speak out on issues, even political ones, but not for parties or candidates.

The current president has stated explicitly that he wants to do away with this distinction and allow churches and all non-for-profits to engage in direct political activity.

Not only will this damage communities encompassing people of various political persuasions, but it will also further erode the vanishing wall between church and state.

I strongly oppose this change. Eliminating the Johnson Amendment will mean that more “dark money” will flow into politics from religious groups. Given the Citizens United Supreme Court decision that brought millions of dollars of untraceable money into politics, this will hurt our democracy even more. (For more about this, see [this article](#))

But even though I support the Johnson Amendment, I will say a few words about our current president. It will come as no surprise to those of you who know me in my private life that I do not have many positive things to say about him. Beyond his positions on issues – usually antithetical to

the Jewish values that I believe in, he does not seem competent, nor nice, nor careful with his words.

That said, some have suggested that he may sort of accidentally stumble upon a way to Mideast peace. The opposition leader in the Knesset, MK Tzipi Livni said something to that effect a few weeks ago at the AIPAC New England Regional Dinner. Since our president follows little protocol and has left almost everyone uneasy, he may be able to shake the Israelis and Palestinians out of their hardened positions and open up new paths on the road to peace.



While I am not sure I fully agree with her, I will hold it out as a hope. And peace can use all the hope it can get.

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This came up Thursday night at an event that my son, Ari, and I went to at Temple Israel in Natick, for [Kids4Peace](#) sponsored by Temple Emunah



and several other synagogues and churches. Even in our wildest dreams, if Prime Minister Netanyahu

took the dramatic steps of stopping settlement construction, started to negotiate for peace along with making difficult compromises that include giving up land and at the same time, Prime Minister Abbas accepted Israel as the Jewish homeland, stopped the routine incitement to violence and

was willing to negotiate and give up things like the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their ancestors' pre-1948 homes, even with all that, would there be peace?

Would it change the feelings of people who have been killing each other for 100 years?

Would the dynamic on the ground immediately shift?

Probably not.

Change like that takes time.



Back in 1993 when the Oslo Accords were signed, the hope was that the two sides would mellow, bringing them closer to peace and that is how a final deal would have been made. But Israel kept on building settlements and the Palestinians split into two groups: one of extremely violent

terrorists, Hamas; and the other, Fatah, that did not fully embrace a peace path either.

Israelis and Palestinians need a new path, a new relationship; they need to forge new connections, they need new ways to relate to each other. Most Israelis and Palestinians never meet each other, never interact, never speak even if they only live a few miles or even a few blocks away from each other in a wondrous, but complicated city like Jerusalem.

In the past few months, I have already mentioned new organizations that have started like [the Hand-in-Hand schools](#), which bring together

Israelis and Arabs in a shared educational setting and

Kids4Peace, which works on bringing Jews, Christians, and

Muslims together once a month. While their main work is focused on Jerusalem where they have over 500 families involved, they also have a Boston chapter and we hope that some of our Emunah 7-12 graders will be getting active in this group starting in September.

Speak to me, Rabbi Fel, Me'ir or Beni for more info.

But this is still not easy work. This work takes courage. Many Palestinians are shunned by their families or communities for merely talking to Israelis. And many Israelis are taken to task for being part of these groups as well. To take a stand for peace is risky; it moves us out of our comfort zone.

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All of which brings me to this most amazing *parashah* and new book of the Torah we began this morning: *B'midbar* – in the wilderness. It is a *parashah* about taking the census of the tribes of the Israelites in the wilderness. It's interesting to realize what will take place in this book of the Torah – the people are only in the beginning of their journey to the land of Israel. This book encompasses some 38 years of wandering – replete with challenges: the lack of water, the need for *manna* to eat as the people miss Egypt and its food, leadership struggles and rebellions, sibling squabbles, egalitarianizing land inheritance and beating rocks among other moments.

But the key is time and the place.

This is a 40 year journey.

Why so long?

The people needed time to move beyond their slave-mentality. Our tradition teaches that a new generation needed to be raised who were not beaten – both literally and metaphorically – by the slave experience. This new generation would be the ones to enter the land, creating a new, more just, civil and holy society. The scars of slavery were so deep, so traumatic that they needed time to heal and in some cases, could not be healed. Like us, this new generation of Israelites did not have the direct experience of Sinai, they have the tradition – woven into their lives through narrative and reenactment.

We see this in the people's behavior throughout this book of the Torah, throughout the wilderness. They are so scarred by Egypt that they cannot help but constantly complain, testing the patience of both Moses and God. Rabbi Harold Kushner points us to the teaching of Rabbi



Samson Rafael Hirsch who wrote in the 19th Century: “[*B’midbar* contrasts the people of Israel as it actually is [to] the ideal to which it was summoned in [the previous book of the Torah, the book of] *Va-Yikra*, [the book of Leviticus].”

Life is often messy. Most of the learning in life does not come at the peak experiences like Sinai. While those moments can inspire, ignite, and create an opportunity, we then need to do the real work – the work of the wilderness, the work of the mundane moments, the work of becoming the best people we can.

How do we welcome the stranger into our midst?

How do we treat each other?

How do we care for those in need?

That’s hard and the Israelites make many missteps along the way.

But there is one other crucial aspect to this journey: Where does this occur?

In the wilderness – *B’midbar*.

There is something so powerful about being in the desert. It takes us out of our comfort zone – that’s why we still do it until this day almost 3,500 years later. We send our children to Jewish summer camps in beautiful, but somewhat remote places so they can be challenged by the wilderness – so they can interact with nature and with each other in that space. They do not have the comfort of being able to stay home with the same level of

parental influence; they learn independence, self-reliance and how to be confident in complex situations.

Kids4Peace brings some of its students to summer camps here in the U.S. – both the Jewish-Israelis, Muslims, and Christians from Israel and the Palestinian territories and those from those faiths here in the US.

That's also why we take trips. For many of us who are American Jews, trips to Israel have been the cauldron that has crystallized our Jewish identity. I remember hiking through the Judean desert when I was 18 years old to Wadi Qelt with my cousin Elie.



It must have been over 110 degrees on that summer day and the hike pushed us to our limits. The heat was so extreme that our guide told us to hike in the aqueduct that was carrying drinking water so we could cool down a bit. That detour led us off-course and we had to slide down the side of a cliff on our backs, inching our way down. Frightening to be sure, but also bonding and transforming as well. That experience in the

wilderness taught me about myself, deeply connecting me to the land and my cousin.

The wilderness forms us and forges us in the most powerful ways.

Finally, there is a third aspect to the wilderness that the Hasidic tradition opens up for us. In the mystical tradition, the wilderness means a place of self-transformation.

Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk teaches “Only persons willing to make nothing of themselves, who make of themselves a *midbar*, a desert, are worthy of having the Divine Presence rest on them, and of attaining the true light of the Torah.”

The wilderness is great and expansive – it reminds us to be humble – to work on our own egos, placing others first. When we do that work – when we place others first, by filling ourselves with humility, then we can become transformed.

And so we can learn many lessons from the Israelites’ experience that are relevant today. We need time – sometimes even years to truly transform ourselves, to create new connections that can lead to us peace.

As the summer approaches and some of us head to our wilderness experiences – at camp, or the Cape or anywhere in the world, even at home, may these be moments when we can reconnect with our deepest selves, with nature and with becoming the people we want to be. That may just start the grass-roots process of bringing people of various faiths together and who knows, maybe even Mideast peace.