

04/07/17

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# Embracing My Desert

Yasmine Eichbaum '12 | Bronfman Torah | Shabbat HaGadol 2017

**Yasmine Eichbaum** (Bronfman '12) is a rising junior at Princeton University and studying chemistry, neuroscience, and dance. This past year, she has been working in a neuroscience lab at UCSF in San Francisco. As a Californian, she loves running, biking, hiking, and, recently, surfing! She enjoys conversations about the interfaith experience, feminism, dance, and her favorite podcasts.

Freedom has become the unofficial theme of this year because I decided to take time away from school. Near the close of my summer internship, I was offered the opportunity to stay the year and carry on the research of a scientist going on maternity leave. I accepted this offer because it would be an invaluable experience and, truthfully, I needed a break from college. I wanted to explore my life's vocation, not solely my college major. This detour afforded me freedom to step away from formal education, but it also created uncertainty.

In Parshat Beshalach, I came across a passage that completely changed the way I viewed the Passover story. G-d, through Moses, saved the Israelites. However, this is one facet of the narrative. It was, after all, G-d who created the confrontation between the Egyptians and Israelites in the first place. Here's one remarkable example:

*"Now when the Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Phillistines, although it was nearer; for God said, 'The people may have*

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*a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt.' So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds." (Exodus 13:17-18)*

Then moments later, trapped against the Red Sea, the Israelites, facing danger and uncertainty, were prone to complain and panic,

*"They said to Moses, is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the desert? What is this that you have done to us to take us out of Egypt? Isn't this the thing [about] which we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, leave us alone, and we will serve the Egyptians, because we would rather serve the Egyptians than die in the desert." (Exodus 14:11-12)*

Why did G-d lead the Israelites down a "circuitous" path forcing confrontation with the Egyptians? At long last, the Israelites were free! But G-d understood that being free didn't mean the Israelites were ready to go straight to the Promised Land. Prolonging their journey home, G-d was preparing the Israelites to adapt to the challenges and uncertainties that come with their new freedom. It was not enough for the Israelites to be physically free, the Israelites had to fully embrace the uncertainty of freedom. Slavery was brutal, but an understood reality.

When I decided to leave my familiar school environment, my foremost fear was losing my college community. Would I return forgotten by my friends and disregarded by my professors? I was also anxious about the different rules that govern the working world. How would my contributions be measured? Apart from making strides in my research, I harbored ambitions of running a half marathon, finishing neglected books on my shelf, and volunteering. Once I "settled" into the year, I found myself in a place younger than the fellows in the lab, older than my siblings, displaced from my bedroom by my grandparents, and for some reason with a persistent cough. I was uncomfortable and wandering.

Unlike the Israelites, Henry David Thoreau *willingly* threw himself into nature. In his memoir, he describes the reasons why:

*"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life...and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice*

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*resignation, unless it was quite necessary.” (Walden, Thoreau, 25)*

As a free man, Thoreau would rather boldly and “deliberately” live in the wild, even if meant facing danger and uncertainty. In contrast, the Israelites’ questioned the value of freedom and insisted they would rather be slaves. To obtain clarity, Thoreau had to envelop himself in nature, stepping away from a conventional context. The Talmud asks, “why was the Torah, given in the wilderness?” It answers: to study Torah, one must, “make [one]self-humble like this wilderness, which is open to all” (Eruvin 54a). One must be clear of preconceived notions to learn and appreciate Torah. With this in mind, G-d freed the Israelites from Egypt in order for them to receive the gift of Torah. The Israelites would not have been worthy of the word of G-d until they were living “deliberately” in the wilderness, and serving G-d, not man.

Granted, I did not move to the desert. But I decided to throw myself into the wilderness of young adult life, untethered. Gradually, but unevenly, I found my footing. My co-workers asked me to join them after work to try artisan beer (don’t worry I am 21). I performed in a small community theater production and through this made more friends. Also, I even managed to finish knitting a hat for the newborn baby of my mentor (while under the watchful eye of my helicopter grandmother). I’m learning some great research skills, but more importantly, I’m clarifying what I want to dive into academically next year. Moreover, I have gained confidence knowing that I can change direction in my life and immerse myself in unfamiliar territory. During this Pesach, I am truly grateful for these experiences but most of all, the freedom to wander.

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