

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Do Not Enter

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This week's parashah includes the story of the scouting of the Promised Land. My photograph *Do Not Enter* can be seen as a modern representation of what the scouts saw: the beauty and bounty of the Land along with the dangers some were reluctant to face. The female figure can be seen as the embodiment of the Land's fertility, while the foreboding backdrop of a New York City alleyway and large guard dog represent the strength and ferocity of the people living there. That the photo is in black and white encourages the viewer not to be distracted by other elements and to focus on the power and presence of the figures.

The image is intimidating, and if we interpret it as a representation of the Land the scouts saw, it is clear how the faithless would be willing to abandon their pursuits. However, those that have faith, like Caleb and Joshua, would learn that the truth behind this image may be more hospitable than it seems: the alley where this portrait was taken was on a sunny, friendly street in

SoHo and the frightening dog was a skittish Great Dane puppy who wanted nothing more than to curl up at his owner's feet and nap. To me, the first portion of this week's parashah speaks to having true faith and willingness to stand up to your fears—they might not be all they seem!

This artwork was on display at JTS last year in the Corridors exhibition, part of JTS's Artist-in-Residence program.

To view the image in high-definition, visit www.jtsa.edu/do-not-enter

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TORAH FROM JTS



Shelah Lekha 5777

שלח-לך תשע"ז



Intermarriage and the Desert

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In light of the recent work of colleagues and friends regarding the boundaries of the Jewish people and how that impacts the weddings that should or should not be performed, I cannot but help to read this Shabbat's parashah in terms of boundaries.

The *midbar*—the desert as a metaphor—is a wild, boundaryless place. As the Talmud famously states, "*midbar mufkar lakol*": the desert is free and will always remain ownerless. It will always be a space without walls or structure. It's a place where we wandered aimlessly for 40 years between where we had to leave and where we wanted to go.

The *midbar* as a metaphor is never meant to be a place where B'nei Yisrael makes a home. We camped and we picked up, always moving and never putting down roots. The Jewish people are meant to transition out of this place which is really no-place. If the desert is ownerless (*mufkar*), no one takes responsibility in this (no) place; lawlessness reigns.

In fact, much of the Book of Bemidbar concerns learning about the new boundaries, both physical and otherwise, that the Torah seeks to establish. In this undifferentiated, wild space of the desert, B'nei Yisrael learn how to structure the physical camp and are instructed as to how the camp should travel. They begin to learn about the mitzvot, the new norms and obligations that constitute the spiritual language that will mediate their relationship with God. These mitzvot hope to give structure, direction, and content to the communities they will soon build once they enter the Land.

The Sages understood the undifferentiated expanse of the *midbar* as a place where God had not quite finished the work of Creation. This makes sense if we remember that before Creation, the world was unformed, and thus, chaos. God's work in Genesis 1 was principally the creation of boundaries. The act of separation both creates the "thing"—with its own unique identity—and allows for its perception. God teased apart light from darkness and birthed Day and Night. God separated "water from water" and created the sky, the land, and the seas.

The act of separating redeems the world from undifferentiated chaos. It is only by the act of separation (*havdalah*) that discrete entities—with their own unique identities—emerge. With its very first chapter, our Torah reminds us of a self-evident but at times elusive fact: that in order for something to exist it must have boundaries that distinguish it from other

things. And because boundaries allow things to exist as themselves, the Torah sees them as a source of profound blessing (see Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Fine Line*, 1-20).

With this idea in mind, perhaps we can make more sense out of a strange incident at the end of our parashah:

Once, when the Israelites were in the *midbar*, they came upon an [Israelite] man (*mekoshesh*) gathering wood on the Sabbath day. (Num. 15:32)

This man will be detained and ultimately put to death, yet fundamental questions remain. Who was this person and what exactly did he do that was so horrible?

In an attempt to make sense of this narrative, I draw our attention to the seemingly redundant word “*midbar*” in this introductory verse. Is it not clear that this incident is occurring in the desert?

I suggest that this use of the word “*midbar*” frames and unlocks the meaning of the event that follows. The “*mekoshesh*” is a man of the “*midbar*.” He wants an approach to life *without* boundaries and limitations. He wants to move where and when he wants. The communal spiritual language of responsibility for the world, which is expressed as mitzvot, is not compelling for him. Communal norms stifle his individuality and rein in his autonomy.

Interestingly, there is an opinion in the Talmud in the name of Shmuel that identifies the act of the *mekoshesh* as carrying sticks between the public and private domains on Shabbat. Defined as such, his act constitutes a violation of the prohibition of moving an object from one domain to another. But his sin is not simply transgressing a general Sabbath prohibition. His particular infraction may actually be understood as attacking the *entire project of setting boundaries*—both literally (between public and private spaces) and symbolically. He acts to efface the setting of symbolic lines that are intended to give shape to the emerging nation of the Jewish people (see also Rabbi Shai Piron, *He'arot Shulayim*, 314).

After leaving Egypt, the Israelites will forge themselves into a people whose identity coheres around a commitment to the norms of the Covenant. Mitzvot constitute the particular conversation of meaning that will define this nation. The behavior of the *mekoshesh* is problematic not because of a single infraction. This unnamed man attempts to blur the boundaries that were intended to help form the national and religious identity of the Jewish people. The punishment is clearly not acceptable for our historical moment, but the existential fear engendered by a religious worldview that seeks to efface and elide the meaningfulness of life-giving boundaries does resonate for me. Of course, many serious and committed Jews will differ as to the boundaries of Judaism. But the *mekoshesh* seems not to simply disagree about particulars. He attacks the religious project of boundary drawing in general.

Which brings me back to the recent thinking and writing regarding weddings between Jews and non-Jews. In these rabbis' heartfelt efforts to respond to the challenge of

intermarriage, they are undermining the boundaries that allow for meaningful Jewish identity. And without a core and compelling identity, Judaism will lose its power to inspire.

No doubt the concept of identity is blurry; life is rarely understood completely with binary ideas. But if we were to expand the definition of Jewishness to make room for Jew-*ish*, and if “committed fans of the Jewish people,” “God-fearers,” or “psycho-Semitic Gentiles” were to become new categories in Judaism, then perhaps we would have pushed the definition of “Jewish” beyond all real coherence.

To be clear, all of us must work toward creating loving and welcoming communities that embrace family and community members who have decided not to join the Jewish people. But as we take up this challenge, we must also consider how our responses to these demographic challenges will alter the richness and depth of the Judaism we will offer our children. If we perform a wedding between a Jew and a *fan-of-the-Jews*—someone who is not yet ready to attach themselves to the destiny of the Jewish people—we erode the ability for Judaism to be a religion of norms and aspirations. And even if rabbis assert certain prescriptions around the performance of intermarriage—after this boundary is officially breached—how long before those restrictions go by the wayside? Over decades, it has proven impossible to advocate compellingly for in marriage after rabbis start performing intermarriage. Once a rabbi stands underneath a huppah in front of a Jew and a non-Jewish partner, all that people will see is an acceptance of intermarriage. As a community abandons use of the word “should” in its vocabulary, it will lose much of its power to religiously inspire. Such a Judaism will no longer be a source for moral agitation and personal growth, but will instead serve only to confirm ideas and values already held.

As we face these challenges, we need to consider the relationship between boundaries and the content of the Judaism we want. What is the moment when playing with the integrity of the boundaries of the Jewish people simply collapses any walls and brings the whole project of peoplehood to the ground? Will our Judaism be one that uses the spiritual language of mitzvot: responsibility and norms? To be sure, there are other Jewish denominations that have different understandings of obligation. But if we embrace such conceptualizations of Judaism, we will begin to efface a meaningful distinction between Conservative Judaism and these other worldviews.

The parashah of the *mekoshesh* this Shabbat reminds me that the danger abounding in the transgression and effacement of the project of boundary-making is that in the end—without boundaries and norms—there will not be a “there” there. The drama of Jewish history is the move out of the *midbar* and boundarylessness. If Jewish leaders—even in the hope of good results—continue to elide our boundaries, we will no longer have a meaningful cultural “place” and we will find ourselves back in the desert with no distinct spiritual inheritance to inspire the next generation.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).