

## Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



### Renewing the Covenant

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God will return to us when we are willing to let Him in—into our banks and factories, into our Congress and clubs, into our homes and theaters. For God is everywhere or nowhere, the father of all men or no man, concerned about everything or nothing. Only in His presence shall we learn that the glory of man is not in his will to power but in his power of compassion. . . .

God is waiting for us to redeem the world. . . . When Israel approached Sinai, God lifted up the mountain and held it over their heads saying: “Either you accept the Torah or be crushed beneath the mountain.” The mountain of history is over our heads again. Shall we renew the covenant with God? (Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Meaning of This War [World War II]”)

We are completing six weeks of the Poor People’s Campaign: A Moral Fusion Movement, a revival of the campaign led by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Towards the end of his life, Dr. King proclaimed that we needed economic and human rights for poor people of all backgrounds and led a six-week protest in Washington, DC. And yet, poverty remains prevalent in American society.

Inspired by the 50th anniversary of Dr. King’s assassination and motivated by today’s injustice, Rev. Dr. William Barber II and Rev. Liz Theoharis relaunched the campaign, offering each of us the opportunity to bring our best selves forward to partner with God and each other to sanctify the places where we study, socialize, and do business, and to commit ourselves to stretching to renew our covenant with God. What other choice do we have? What we have been doing, hasn’t been working.

We sing in *Lekha Dodi* “Rise up and leave your destruction behind,” reminding ourselves that in covenant with God we can and must bravely overcome any calamity. May we all have the strength to rise up.

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Hukat 5778

חַקַּת תְּשַׁע"ח



### Israel’s Heroic and Traumatic Journey

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For 39 years the children of Israel had been making their perilous way through the desert. At long last, on the first new moon of their 40th year, they set out on the last leg of the journey, as it is written, “The Israelites, even the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin” (Num. 20:1). The road ahead was by no means assured, however, for no sooner did they arrive there than Miriam died, followed shortly thereafter by her brother Aaron, with Moses, the third member of this incomparable first family, mere days away from losing favor with God. The people were still reeling from Korah’s revolt, which had just claimed the lives of 15,000 rebels. Who would stand between the living and the dead were another plague to descend upon them? The answer lay in the Torah’s precise wording. Only now could one speak of “the whole congregation” as a coherent body. Just so, the United States would one day become a singular place name in the wake of the Civil War that had just torn their country apart. The use of the collective noun signified that a motley of liberated slaves was about to enter history.

Although the first 39 years were by no means uneventful, they were no preparation for a journey that would lead in two opposing directions. The first was momentous and heroic. It entailed acts of warfare, conquest, and diplomacy. Thus, the story of the Exodus suddenly came alive with a wealth of place names, each one marking another battle, or confrontation, worthy of being remembered forever: “Therefore The Book of the Wars of the LORD speaks of ‘. . . Waheb in Suphah, and the wadis; the Arnon, with its tributary wadis stretched along the settled country of Ar” (Num. 21:14). Some of the places along their victorious route were already famous, like the Amorite city of Heshbon, about which the ancient bards would recite: “Come to Heshbon, it is built firm; / Sihon’s city is well founded” (Num. 21:27). We can almost hear

the martial music playing in the background. After all their travails, Israel finally had something new to sing about: cities and monarchs who fell by the sword and inhabited lands that would be added to the borders of Greater Israel. The heroic journey was one-way, strategic, and fiercely territorial.

Not so the traumatic journey, which was depressingly familiar. It rehearsed the same ominous message: nothing was more difficult than to be the first, and now the second, post-Exodus generation. And lest we forgot, in addition to all the heroic place names, Hormah, Heshbon, Be'er on the boundary of Moab, Waheb in Suphah, and so on and so forth, there was yet another place, the infamous Water of Meribah—"meaning that the Israelites quarreled with the Lord" (Num. 20:13). "Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place," they complained to Moses, "a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!" (Num. 20:5). Once again it was their lot to bemoan their liberation. Of what good was their freedom if instead of enjoying the fruits so recently imported from the Promised Land by Joshua and his expeditionary force, they were condemned to a slow death in the desert?

Even Moses had had enough. Losing his self-confidence, he struck the rock with his magic staff not once but twice, an act of insubordination for which he incurred the wrath of God (Num. 20:10-12). Meribah came to signify the place of the broken covenant, not only insofar as "the whole congregation" of Israelites was concerned but more importantly, insofar as God Himself was concerned. Recorded for posterity by the Psalmist, it would even enter our prayers: "Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah," we sing in Kabbalat Shabbat, "when your ancestors tested and tried Me though they had seen My deeds" (Psalm 95:8-9). It was at Meribah that the fate of the Generation of the Desert, the first post-Exodus generation, was sealed.

Finding a solution to the water shortage was only one hurdle. Another was negotiating with the local rulers. When Moses's delegation appeared before the King of Edom to negotiate safe passage, they had only one card to play, and that was their historical experience in Egypt. "Do you have any idea how much we have suffered?" they pleaded. "We cried to the LORD and He heard our plea, and He sent a messenger who freed us from Egypt" (Num. 20:16). But the negotiating tactic fell on deaf ears. What did the King of Edom care that the Israelites were survivors of Egyptian bondage,

that they had suffered a prolonged and unprecedented trauma? "Terribly sorry chaps," he said to the delegation with a sly edge to his voice. "A nasty business that, your Egyptian bondage. But as for crossing my territory—that, I'm afraid is non-negotiable. You'll have to go the long way." There was no special dispensation for the ever-dying people. You suffered? You cried to the Lord? God heard your cries? Then work it out among yourselves.

Because of this diplomatic fiasco, the Israelites "set out from Mount Hor by the road of the Sea of Reeds to skirt the land of Edom" (Num. 21:4). They were forced, in other words, to revisit the site of their trauma itself. To retrace their steps along the Sea of Reeds meant to experience everything all over again: the suffering, the enslavement, the mortal fear of Pharaoh's army; the deprivation, the discontent, and the terrible retribution. There was no antidote for prolonged exile. There was only the return of the repressed: "But the people grew restive on the journey, and the people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food.' The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died" (Num. 21:4-5).

The trauma was not yet over. At any moment it could resurface anew. It was as if nothing had changed after 39 years, neither for the Generation of the Exodus nor for the generation about to enter the Promised Land. The "whole congregation" was still suffering the aftereffects of its trauma. Who was there who had not lost a parent, a grandparent, an uncle or aunt, a neighbor, a friend, or even an older sibling, over the course of the traumatic journey? The personal and collective wounds forever would remain open. After forty years, even after millennia, the whole congregation of Israel would have to struggle long and hard to reconcile the heroic and the traumatic paths of its singular journey through history. It was the fate of each generation, and especially of our own, to find its way, with only the Torah to serve as guide.