

The Wandering Jew

“Jewifying” Your Summer Vacation

Parashat Beha'alotcha 5779

Numbers 9:23 At the commandment of the LORD they encamped, and at the commandment of the LORD they journeyed; they kept the charge of the LORD, at the commandment of the LORD by the hand of Moses. {P}

כג על-פי יהוה יִחַנוּ, וְעַל-
פי יהוה יִסְעוּ: אֶת-מִשְׁמֶרֶת
יהוה שָׁמְרוּ, עַל-פִּי יהוה
בְּיַד-מֹשֶׁה. {פ}

The Torah states: "According to the word of the Almighty they shall encamp and according to the word of the Almighty they shall travel." (Numbers 9:23). When a person is in his usual place, it is relatively easy to keep higher standards of Torah observance. However, when a person travels, said the Chofetz Chaim, there are many tests that arise. When in a strange place, away from one's familiar environment, one is faced with new difficulties. Also, there is not the social pressure to maintain one's standards. A person needs to make a special effort to observe Torah values. This is hinted to in our verse: Whether at rest in one's home environment or traveling, all that you do should be "according to the word of the Almighty."

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky was about to take his place at the end of a long line waiting to board a bus, when someone in front of the line who knew him called out, "Rebbe, you can come here in front of me!" "I'm not permitted to," replied Rav Yaakov. "It would be stealing." "I give you permission. I don't mind." "But what about everybody else behind you?" said the Rosh Hayeshiva. "I would be stealing their time and choice of seat by moving them back one. Who says they allow me to?" And Rav Yaakov took his place at the end of the line. (The Jewish Observer, November, 1985)

<http://www.shalomadventure.com/torah/weekly-torah-portion/1434-parashat-beha-alotcha>

במדבר ט בהעלתך
 QV. WHEN WOULD AN ISRAELITE BE
 ELIGIBLE TO HAVE A "PESACH" FOR PESACH?

NJPS are defiled by a corpse or are on a long journey would offer a passover sacrifice to the LORD, ¹¹they shall offer it in the second month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, ¹²and they shall not leave any of it over until morning. They shall not break a bone of it. They shall offer it in strict accord with the law of the passover sacrifice. ¹³But if a man who is clean and not on a journey refrains from offering the passover sacrifice, that person shall be cut off from his kin, for he did not present the LORD's offering at its set time; that man shall bear his guilt.

¹⁴And when a stranger who resides with you would offer a passover sacrifice to the LORD, he must offer it in accordance with the rules and rites of the passover sacrifice. There shall be one law for you, whether stranger or citizen of the country.

RASHI 10 On a long journey. Notice that the last letter of the Hebrew phrase, the ה of רחוקה, has a dot over it. This teaches that it does not literally refer to a long journey, but to a more limited distance—being anywhere outside the threshold of the courtyard during the time when this offering can be slaughtered. **A passover sacrifice to the LORD.** The rules for this "second passover" are that he may have both leavened and unleavened bread in his house; it is not a festival day, so there is no prohibition of leavened bread except while he is eating the passover offering.

14 When a stranger who resides with you would offer a passover sacrifice. A "convert," as we understand the word. One might think the verse is saying (as the Hebrew could also mean) "when a stranger resides with you, he should offer a passover sacrifice." But no: **There shall be one law for you.** When the convert comes to bring the passover

NAHMANIDES 10 A long journey. I'm surprised that Rashi accepts the opinion of R. Eliezer, rather than that of R. Akiva, who defines "a long journey" as any distance farther from Jerusalem than Modiin. That is certainly the straightforward sense of the verse. It may be that the point of the dot over the ה is simply to denote that it refers not to an intrinsically long journey—just to a journey that is too long for him to make it back in time to present the passover offering. Notice that v. 13 mentions merely "a journey," not "a long journey." In fact, it is not merely the traveler or one who is unclean who must observe the second passover; even someone who deliberately ignores the first passover is obligated (according to our Sages) to observe the second passover. Our passage, however, says merely that one who could not observe the first passover is permitted to observe the second passover, and that one who is unclean is specifically forbidden to observe the first passover. If someone wishes to travel during the first passover, he is permitted (if he wishes) to have someone else bring the offering at that time on his behalf. If he does so, more power to him. Perhaps that is why our verse specifically mentions a "long" journey. If he was not that far away, he could either observe the second passover or have someone bring the first passover offering on his behalf and get back in time to eat some of it that night.

14 When a stranger who resides with you would offer a passover sacrifice. This refers to strangers (that is, converts) offering a passover sacrifice on this particular occasion in the wilderness. The comparable rule in Exod. 12:48 may have applied specifically only to the passover offering in Egypt (which is what that passage is about; see my comment to Exod. 12:43). After all, the strangers of the mixed multitude that came out of Egypt at that time benefited from the same miracle as did the Israelites. But those who converted in the

OJPS generations shall be unclean by reason of a dead body, or be in a journey afar off, yet he shall keep the passover unto the LORD; ¹¹in the second month on the fourteenth day at dusk they shall keep it; they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs; ¹²they shall leave none of it unto the morning, nor break a bone thereof; according to all the statute of the passover they shall keep it. ¹³But the man that is clean, and is not on a journey, and forbeareth to keep the passover, that soul shall be cut off from his people; because he brought not the offering of the LORD in its appointed season, that man shall bear his sin.

¹⁴And if a stranger shall sojourn among you, and will keep the passover unto the LORD: according to the statute of the passover, and according to the ordinance thereof, so shall he do; ye shall have one statute, both for the stranger, and for him that is born in the land."

IBN EZRA 10 On a long journey. There is no need to research this—the Sages have already told us how long is long. [C] **Defiled by a corpse or ... on a long journey.** Only the first of these applies to "you," but both apply to "your posterity."

13 A man who is clean and not on a journey. Rather, "a man who is clean, or not on a journey," as in v. 10. The conjunction ו can mean "or" as well as "and"; see "He who strikes his father or his mother" (Exod. 21:15). **That man shall bear his guilt.** He himself. [D]

14 He must offer it in accordance with the rules and rites of the passover sacrifice. The rules of the "second" passover (vv. 10-13) apply to him as well. But some think it is talking about the rules of the "first" (regular) passover.

[C] In fact, this is not as straightforward as Ibn Ezra makes it sound. See the comments of Rashi and Nahmanides. [D] But not his children, as we might otherwise have thought from his being "cut off."

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 10 On a long journey. Deleting the ה that has the dot changes the adjective from feminine to masculine and the meaning from "on a long journey" to "one who is far away on a journey" (Hizkuni). He must be farther away from Jerusalem than an ordinary man can walk between sunrise and noon, when the time period for offering the passover begins (Gersonides). Everyone knows when Passover occurs and should be responsible for not being away at that time. So our Sages concluded that this must refer to the lamb for his sacrifice having escaped and run off or being unavailable to him for some other reason; it is not the person who is "afar off," but the possibility of offering the sacrifice (Abarbanel).

14 When a stranger who resides with you would offer a passover sacrifice. One who converts in between the first and second passovers must offer sacrifice on the second passover; it is a festival in its own right, not an occasion to make up for missing the first one (Gersonides).

NOW - WITH NO
 TEMPLE SAC. — CAN YW TAKE YWR JUDAISM WITH YOU? IS PESACH
 PORTABLE?

NJPS until morning, they broke camp as soon as the cloud lifted in the morning. Day or night, whenever the cloud lifted, they would break camp. ²²Whether it was two days or a month or a year—however long the cloud lingered over the Tabernacle—the Israelites remained encamped and did not set out; only when it lifted did they break camp. ²³On a sign from the LORD they made camp and on a sign from the LORD they broke camp; they observed the LORD's mandate at the LORD's bidding through Moses.

IO The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²Have two silver trumpets made; make them of hammered work. They shall serve you to summon the community and to set the divisions in motion. ³When both are blown in long blasts, the whole community shall assemble before you at the

RASHI 10:2 Have two silver trumpets made. Which they can sound before you as before a king: "Then he became King in Jeshurun" (Deut. 33:5). But what it really says is "Make for yourself" (compare OJPS). You are to make them and use them—no one else. [J] **Hammered work.** You shall make them from a block of silver by hammering with a mallet. **To summon the community.** When you want to summon the Sanhedrin or the rest of the people to gather around so you can speak with them, summon them by means of trumpets. **To set the divisions in motion.** When it is time to set out on the march, sound the trumpets as a signal. — You see, therefore, that they were signaled to break camp in three ways: by the Holy One, by Moses, and by the trumpets. **3 When both are blown in long blasts.** "Both" is added (correctly) by NJPS. This is the signal for the community to assemble before you at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

[J] See Rashi's comment to Deut. 31:28.

NAHMANIDES day and a night, and they would have to set out again on the second morning—an even more difficult burden, for by that time the people would have convinced themselves that they were staying, unpacked, and set everything up as if they had arrived at the end of a journey. Then the cloud would lift, and they would immediately have to load everything back up without any time to make preparations for the journey.

22 Whether it was two days. And they would have to start the journey at night. Or a month or a year. It is possible that the specific durations given in this passage are the only ones that actually occurred on their travels through the wilderness. The "many days" of v. 19 would mean many "years," as the Hebrew word can sometimes mean. For the "long time" that they remained at Kadesh, according to Deut. 1:46, is really the same expression (see OJPS there). [B]

[B] The Israelites remained at Kadesh for 19 years, according to Seder Olam. See Rashi's comment to Deut. 1:46.

should be understood as meaning "at the time of summoning ... at the time of setting in motion." But I think my original statement is correct.

3 When both are blown. Literally, "when they blow them" (compare OJPS). But this is how Biblical Hebrew expresses the passive; see (e.g.) 26:59 and Gen. 48:1. NJPS is also correct to add "both." **The whole community.** Including the chieftains.

[E] Some texts have Ibn Ezra citing "two days" of v. 22 (a slight difference in Hebrew) as his proof that our expression refers to a single day. [F] See 1 Chron. 15:24 and 2 Chron. 5:12-13, 7:6, 13:14, and 29:28.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 21 They broke camp as soon as the cloud lifted in the morning. This is to teach you that it would only lift in the morning; it never put them to the trouble of starting out in the evening (Bekhor Shor). Not even any time past noon (Hizkuni). No matter if it was a place of restful waters and refreshing streams, their submission to God's will was so great that they immediately set off without complaint, day or night—for in the summer one can travel in the wilderness even at night (Abarbanel).

10:2 Have two silver trumpets made. Two would be sufficient for the purposes they would need them for (Abarbanel). Make them of hammered work. This would make them louder; there would be no joints letting air escape (Abarbanel).

OJPS cloud was taken up in the morning, they journeyed; or if it continued by day and by night, when the cloud was taken up, they journeyed. ²²Whether it were two days, or a month, or a year, that the cloud tarried upon the tabernacle, abiding thereon, the children of Israel remained encamped, and journeyed not; but when it was taken up, they journeyed. ²³At the commandment of the LORD they encamped, and at the commandment of the LORD they journeyed; they kept the charge of the LORD, at the commandment of the LORD by the hand of Moses.

וְנִעְלָה הָעֶנָן בַּבֹּקֶר וְנִסְעוּ אִוְיָמָם וְלַיְלָה
וְנִעְלָה הָעֶנָן וְנִסְעוּ: 22 אִוְיָמָם אֶרְחֹשׁ
אִוְיָמָם בְּהָאֵרִיךְ הָעֶנָן עַל-הַמִּשְׁכָּן
לִשְׁכֵּן עֲלָיו יִחְנֶה בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא יִסְעוּ
וּבְהָעֲלֹתוֹ יִסְעוּ: 23 עַל-כֵּי יִהְיֶה יִחְנֶה
וְעַל-כֵּי יִהְיֶה יִסְעוּ אֶת-מִשְׁמֶרֶת יִהְיֶה
שְׁמֶרוֹ עַל-כֵּי יִהְיֶה בְּיַד-מֹשֶׁה: פ

וַיִּדְבֹּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: 2 עֲשֵׂה
לְךָ שְׁתֵּי חֲצֹצְרוֹת פְּסָף מִקְשָׁה תַנְעִשָׁה
אֹתָם וְהָיוּ לְךָ לְמִקְרָא הָעֲדָה וּלְמִסְעַ
אֶת-הַמַּחֲנֵה: 3 וְתִקְעוּ בָהֶן וְנוֹעְדוּ אִלֵּיךְ

ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS + The only additional information in those verses is the details about "two days or a month or a year" (v. 22) and the like, but doesn't the general statement that "however long the cloud lingered over the Tabernacle the Israelites remained encamped and did not set out; only when it lifted did they break camp" make the earlier part of the verse superfluous?

IO And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying: ²"Make thee two trumpets of silver; of beaten work shalt thou make them; and they shall be unto thee for the calling of the congregation, and for causing the camps to set forward." ³And when they shall blow with them, all the congregation shall gather themselves unto thee at the

RASHBAM 10:2 They shall serve you to summon the community and to set the divisions in motion. More precisely, "They shall serve you for the calling of the congregation, and [they shall serve] the camps for setting forward" (compare OJPS). "Setting forward" is not a verb, as NJPS translates, but (like "calling") a noun. The preposition *et* serves the same function with the divisions as *l-* serves with "you" (= Moses).

IBN EZRA 21 Day or night. So they would sometimes travel even at night. But some think the phrase means "if the cloud stayed all day and all night," which I think is correct. Note that the Hebrew literally says "or by day and by night," which supports this view. [E]

23 On a sign from the LORD they made camp and on a sign from the LORD they broke camp. This is not a repetition of v. 18. It is telling us that this same procedure held good for the entire time they spent in the wilderness.

10:2 Trumpets. The letter *x* appears twice in this noun, and it appears twice in the verb form as well—but in the verb only one of them is pronounced. [F] **To summon ... to set in motion.** These forms are verbal infinitives. I suppose they might be nouns, and

WILDERNESS SPIRITUALITY

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by Michael Comins

(This article was written for a Rabbinic journal. Lay readers may not be familiar with the Hebrew terms. A glossary with translations appears at the conclusion of the article.)

Does wilderness matter?

Ask a person where they feel God's presence, in a sanctuary or on a mountain, most will prefer the natural setting to even the most beautiful of buildings. Ask whether they are moved more by a synagogue service or a day walking in Yosemite, most will choose the latter. Of course, the comparison is unfair and does not rule out a positive experience in *shul*. Nevertheless, the Jewish people suffers when its leaders do not understand the implications of these facts.

Hundreds of thousands of North American Jews spend time in nature every year; tens of thousands hike, climb, ski and kayak in wilderness. Many understand and express their love of the natural world as something spiritual. Consciously, and often unconsciously, they seek an avenue to express the emotions they feel in nature. When that path is not found (or worse, when the path found is not Jewish), the result is a dis-connection between a person's deepest, spiritual moments and Judaism.

The damage is two-fold. We miss the opportunity (for many Jews, the best opportunity) to educate towards Jewish forms of belief and religious practice in a place where the question of God is not contrived. The power of a trip to Israel to make Judaism and Jewish history relevant is well-known. In contrast, with precious few exceptions, the world's greatest classroom to teach about God and prayer is off the mainstream, Jewish community's radar screen.

But worse is the implied message that is broadcast every summer day to thousands of Jews in wilderness. When they do not know how Judaism might help them to interpret the powerful emotions they experience in nature, and when they have no idea of how their wilderness experience connects to a synagogue service or a Passover *seder*, the inevitable conclusion is that Judaism is irrelevant to their strongest moments of God's presence.

Community is a benchmark of Jewish spirituality, and indeed, the Jewish God-moments of my youth were at camp and other communal settings. But our prayerbook and Jewish piety in general assume an individual relationship with God. Yet, personal, spontaneous prayer was never taken seriously in my Jewish education. Rather it was in wilderness – leaving community, civilization and Jewish educators behind – that I found a spiritual voice.

I emphatically support a traditional Jewish education, particularly Hebrew language. In the wilderness forays of my youth, the tradition came with me. I prayed the *siddur* while backpacking and gained insight into what inspired the psalmist and liturgist, who often wrote with an intimate knowledge of nature. Certainly, the quest for God might not have been an issue if not for my Jewish education. But for me, and I suspect most people, if there is no relationship with God outside of a *minyan*, there won't really be one within, either. Wilderness matters because it is an optimal environment to work out an unmediated, direct relationship with God.

YIRAH

Why is God so available to so many in wilderness? A. J. Heschel was surely right in teaching that the experience of wonder and awe is antecedent to faith in God.

Awe is more than wonder, beauty or grandeur, although it includes them, because danger is involved. Indeed, *yirah* also means fear. Many of life's awesome moments are liminal situations in which death is never far. However, awe is different than fear in that we are attracted rather than repelled from awesome things. When lightning strikes, we want to see it. I think of child-birth as the paradigmatic, awe-filled event. Wonder, mystery, danger, beauty, fear, attraction – it's all in awe.

In the backcountry beauty is commanding and pervasive. So is danger and risk. Yet, one “feels alive” from more than adrenaline. The grandeur and fragility of our world, the immediacy of life and death, are all around. Just as Judaism has been dubbed the path of “normal” mysticism, wilderness is the gateway to “normal,” everyday awe.

And the experience of awe makes divinity a real issue. We can validate the insights of Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. Ultimate questions and liminal situations sensitize a person to God's presence.

DEVEQUT

An important dynamic of spiritual living, one that serves as an organizing principle for me, is the interplay between *teshuvah* (repentance) and *devequt* (in the Hasidic sense of “cleaving” to God). It is our stories, embedded in the story of the Jewish people, that inform our personalities and provide the unique content of our selves. The work of *teshuvah* involves the utilization of one's

analytic capabilities to critique one's story. We scrutinize our past with an eye to the future. This left-brain activity is essential to moral refinement.

If *teshuvah* is about improving our ongoing stories, however, *devequt* is about getting beyond them. Stories are necessarily self-centered. If my story carries the best of me, it is also the repository of my bitterness, pettiness, neurosis and arrogance – all the things that blind me to God. *Devequt* is possible when we lessen the grip of past and future on our minds and create a space where we can be aware of our souls. Focusing perception on the present is not only psychologically liberating. The practice of mindfulness, in transcending rational mind, literally makes room for God.

In our society, analytic skills are essential for success and this is reinforced by the traditional, Jewish emphasis on study. We may or may not be very good at *teshuvah*, but it is consistent with our usual emphasis on good thinking. On the other hand, giving our tumultuous minds and ambitious personalities a rest – the work of *devequt* – is like pulling teeth. I can't think of anything more difficult than the long hours I spent on the meditation cushion, trying not to breathe but to be breathed. How different in nature, where living in the here and now is easy and effortless. Mindfulness is the great gift of wilderness. Because of the risks, paying attention is not optional. There are serious consequences for getting lost in thoughts of the 'to do' list back home.

Much has been written about mindfulness as a path beyond ego. Less known is the calm, spaciousness and heart-opening that come with living in the present – and this leads to trust in God's world. One can feel more certain, more safe and more at home in the backcountry than in the city.

Wilderness teaches one how to live fully aware of danger without anxiety. Nothing is riskier to the outdoor enthusiast than the denial of risk. Statistically, I am much more likely to die from a car accident than a grizzly attack, but I'm constantly aware of potential hazards when I'm far from a hospital. Outside the human comfort zone called civilization, I am less prone to falling into routine.

In the city, I employ a different strategy. I avoid anxiety by “forgetting” what I know about accidents. And when I drive, I'm rarely thinking about driving. Neither wilderness nor the freeways are forgiving, but in the city, I deceive myself and act otherwise.

In nature, the awareness of mortality is constant. One cannot see wildflowers or moose calves without passing rotting tree trunks, the remains of fire or unburied bones. Unlike the sanitized world of the supermarket, birth and death are encountered together in the natural world. Yet most of us see beauty, not terror. One knows without reservation that God's world is good, including the mosquitoes and the lightning storms. If one learns to listen well and acts in sync with the rhythms of season and habitat – the sweet lesson of informed surrender – one feels safe, even protected, despite the risks. An instinctive trust in oneself and in the universe is acquired. In these circumstances, a spontaneous, naïve, organic faith arises; leaps are unnecessary.



(The role of the outdoor, Jewish educator is to name this trust – the *emunah* of the Hebrew bible.)

BODY

I have resonated both to Martin Buber's description of I-thou encounter with a tree and to Rabbi Nachman's claim that every flower and shrub has its own melody – melodies that carry our prayers.

For me, the doorway has been something that Judaism doesn't deal with very well: the body.

Focusing primarily on breath and other body-sensations, 24/7, during a six-week silent, meditation retreat, showed me that the body has its own wisdom independent of my frenetic mind and neurotic personality. I saw how emotion and thought interact with the body, and vice-versa. I learned that while the mind has many ruses, the body does not lie. And I saw how the body reacts directly to the physical environment around it. Of course, a spring day in the Tetons feels different than a December night in the Mojave desert, but through body awareness, I now understand this in a tangible way. I know that each induces or supports different states of consciousness, and these can be related to one's spiritual practice. Some places, some times, some climates are better for prayers of praise or petition; others for introspection and silence.

Nothing prepared me for what I learned from repeated solo-retreats, loosely patterned after the native American "vision quest." The practice involved sitting alone in wilderness for several days in a small circle, fasting in silence and engaging in focused listening, chant, prayer and *chi quong* – a Daoist form of body-meditation. The body is like an antennae that physically feels all around it, and when one fasts from food, its powers are magnified ten-fold. Granite feels different than limestone; an organ pipe cactus feels different than a ocotillo, let alone a redwood tree. And water. Oh my, water. Perhaps one needs to spend serious time in the desert to know its powerful effect on the body, and the soul. What radiates from the natural world affects me viscerally.

The opposite is also true. Now I know why the sense of holiness in synagogues, monasteries and mountain-tops, where prayers have been offered over and over again through time, is so real. Prayer has changed them. When I feel their sacredness, I'm not projecting; I'm responding.

I disdained Kabbalah during my rabbinical studies and even today I resonate far more with Martin Buber's description of the encounter with God than the mystic's attempt at divine union. I don't know what to make of the certainty and detail with which various *mekubalim* have presented their physics and meta-physics. But I have learned something important enough to share even though I will be attacked by some as a New-Age fool. Kabbalah claims that there is a life-birthing, life-

enabling, intelligent and moral force emanating through the universe. The River of Light. My mind thinks it far-fetched and unreasonable. My body knows it's true.

TESHUVAH

In the end, the purpose of mindfulness is not to circumvent one's story. Rather, it is to make it better. Central to the task of *teshuvah* is the ability to critique oneself accurately and honestly. Invariably, this involves a change in perspective – a new vantage point to see oneself with some dispassion and objectivity. This can happen anytime one breaks their routine and has some time to reflect. To some degree, any vacation will do. But wilderness supports the work of *teshuvah* in powerful ways.

Enter the backcountry and one does more than break their routine; one leaves civilization behind. Away from the constructs that support our usual lives, we enter a world not only devoid of job, traffic and advertising, but also without people, sports, restaurants, gardening, chores, movies and NPR. Yet, in the very conditions that we would normally find boring, we have never felt more alive. It is readily apparent just how much of our “civilized” lives are based on human conventions and inventions. And with that realization comes its corollary, the fundamental assumption of *teshuvah*: what has been constructed can be deconstructed.

As our social selves become transparent, our personalities are exposed. No longer in the environment that elicits our habitual responses, with little to defend, we see how easy it is to be a different kind of person. I have always marveled at the fact that I rarely encounter a selfish, mean-spirited person while backpacking. It could be that backpacking selects certain personality types, but I'm convinced that wilderness brings out a person's virtues rather than their shortcomings. One sees how much we humans subconsciously invent ourselves. So much of what seems to be immutable habit is really a choice.

Wilderness demands surrender, yet infuses one with the sense of infinite possibility.

This change in perspective is not a simple breaking of routine, of changing one story for another, but the fruit of mindfulness. It is the perspective that comes from recognizing the limits of one's thinking, living in the body and dwelling in the present.

I do not mean to belittle the narratives that inform our selves. Our stories – the stuff of our personalities – are crucially important. We cannot live without them. But nothing has helped me more with *teshuvah* than the knowledge that my story, in the end, is just a story. There is more to me than my personality. Another part of me – the divine part – can break through the shackles of my story at any time. My body/soul bears wisdom, not only my thinking mind. Living in mindfulness, I can see the self-serving strategies of my mind for what they are.

Add this to the exhilaration of experiencing so much beauty, then wonder, then awe... In the end, what inspires *teshuvah* more than nearness to God?

The process of *teshuvah* is different when living in wilderness trust. I used to ask God to help me change in ways that I feared I could not. (Indeed, I didn't.) Now I sense that if I can connect myself to God's good world, physically as well as spiritually, the grip of my bad habits loosens as I am drawn to the person I need to be in order to live in *devequt*. *Teshuvah* is never easy, but it is more possible than I ever knew.

CONCLUSION

For these reasons, I have come to think of "wilderness spirituality" as a useful term that denotes a field worthy of greater exploration and inquiry.

I have engaged in "extreme" spiritual practices that will never be part of a mainstream, Jewish education. This was necessary for my own growth, and to achieve the level of articulation presented in this essay. But it would be wrong to think that only intense experiences bear educational fruit, particularly in wilderness. I have learned that even an hour's walk in the woods, when properly framed in the prayer-vocabulary and God-talk of our tradition, can strongly impact a person's understanding of themselves and their world. Because such teaching sensitizes a person to the already powerful emotions evoked by wilderness, and then articulates them in ways full of personal and communal meaning, the result of this cause-and-effect feedback loop between nature and tradition is an invigorated relationship with the *siddur* and Jewish theology.

As one of the small number of Jewish educators who teach in wilderness, I know that it is still early to draw broad, educational conclusions. Too little attention, academic and otherwise, has been paid to Jewish, nature education. However, I can share the insights learned from personal experience and the experience of my students on trails, in kayaks, on skis. There is no other place that I would choose to teach about prayer and God. As a NFTY guide, I brought American teenagers to the Western Wall for five years, and found it a superb environment to teach Jewish history and identification. But when the dynamics of prayer and personal piety were on the educational agenda, I was more effective in the mountains above Eilat.

The stereotype of Jews as exclusively urban and physically frail has been eroding for some time now. Increasing numbers of rabbis and Jewish leaders know the enormous pull that wilderness has on a large and growing number in our community. Nevertheless, even educators who regularly think "out-of-the-box" have trouble thinking "out-of-the-building." Those of us involved in Jewish nature education often feel that mainstream, Jewish institutions, desperately searching for relevant ways to teach prayer and theology, are looking afar for what is already lying at their feet. We would be wise to change that situation as quickly as possible.

Translation of Hebrew Terms

devekut: cleaving (to God)

emunah: trust, the Hebrew word for "faith in God"

mekubalim: kabbalists, the Jewish mystics

minyan: prayer quorum of 10 Jews required for communal prayer

shul: synagogue

siddur: Jewish prayer book

teshuvah: turning to God, the Jewish term for repentance

yirah: awe

The Traveler's Prayer

יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ,
שְׁתוּלִיכֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם וְתַצְעִידֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם וְתַסְמְכֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם,
וְתַגִּיעֵנוּ לְמַחֲזֵז חֲפָצֵנוּ לְחַיִּים וְלִשְׁמֻחָה וְלִשְׁלוֹם, וְתַחְזִירֵנוּ
לְבֵיתֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם. וְתַצִּילֵנוּ מִכָּף כָּל-אוֹיֵב וְאוֹרֵב וְאָסוֹן
בְּדֶרֶךְ וּמִכָּל-מִינֵי פְרָעָנוֹת הַמְתַּרְגְּשׁוֹת לְבּוֹא לְעוֹלָם.
וְתִשְׁלַח בְּרָכָה בְּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ, וְתַתֵּנָּה לֶחֶן וְלַחֲסֵד
וְלִרְחָמִים בְּעֵינֶיךָ וּבְעֵינֵי כָל-רוֹאֵינוּ. וְתִשְׁמַע קוֹל תַּחֲנוּנֵינוּ,
כִּי אֵל שׁוֹמֵעַ תִּפְלָה וְתַחֲנוּן אַתָּה. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה שׁוֹמֵעַ
תִּפְלָה.

May it be Your will, Lord our God and God of our ancestors, to guide us in peace, to sustain us in peace, to lead us to our desired destination in health and joy and peace, and to bring us home in peace. Save us from every enemy and disaster on the way, and from all calamities that threaten the world. Bless the work of our hands. May we find grace, love and compassion in Your sight and in the sight of all who see us. Hear our supplication, for You listen to prayer and supplication. Praised are You, Lord who hears prayer.

GRANDPARENTS "YOU HAVE TO GO TO SHUL THE JEWISH PEOPLE"

4 Always Remember Shabbat— Even When You Don't Keep It

Frequently we are forced (because of our ambivalent priorities) to choose between celebrating Shabbat and doing something else we consider really important. Even if we make the non-Shabbat choice, we should do the other thing in a *Shabbesdik* way.

Okay. It is Friday afternoon and you have just checked into your hotel room in Orlando, Florida—at Disney World. It has been a hell of a day: airports, luggage, rental cars—and nudgy kids. You check into the hotel and hit the pool. Then comes the big decision point—it is soon to be Friday night. Will you make it *Erev Shabbat* or Friday night?

If you were a traditional, follow-the-rules kind of Jewish family, you would change into your good clothes and proceed to celebrate Shabbat for the next twenty-six hours. (Yes, for the record, even the Orthodox, who keep kosher and observe Shabbat—they, too, take their kids to Disney World and Disneyland. They just plan ahead and still follow all the Jewish rules). This could be you (but probably not).

Most Jewish families don't celebrate Shabbat even when they are at home (most weeks). They just have Friday. So, for them, Friday and Saturday at Disney World is a non-issue. They put on their gaudy vacation clothes, buy some of those

glow-in-the-dark necklaces they sell all over the park at night—and really enjoy the electrical parade.

Even if you are a Shabbat-making family, this week, with your kids chomping at the bit to ride Space Mountain, you're highly likely to take a vacation from Shabbat, too. You can argue, "After all, we're spending quality family time together—God will forgive us." You buy your glow-in-the-dark necklaces, some Mickey Mouse *kippot*—the kind with ears and your name written on them—and really enjoy the electrical parade.

This is our proactive option. When you leave the pool, take your shower, relax and then put on the vacation duds. But, while you're getting unpacked, take the candlesticks and candles out of the suitcase. You can all gather around the dresser in the "parents'" room, light candles, kiss, maybe sing a Shabbat song—and then head out to your encounter with Space Mountain.

The bottom line here is that by "keeping" this one small part of Shabbat (at least) you've taught yourself and your family an important lesson: Judaism is always with us—we always take it with us when we go on vacation, and we never take a vacation from it.

When I brought this excerpt to class, one of my adult Talmud students explained it to me. He is just a good Jewish parent who goes to adult education while his son is at Hebrew High. But he understood something none of the scholars who were my formal Jewish teachers ever taught me.

Ira Smith taught: **Why are the Ten Commandments repeated in the Torah, once in Exodus 20 and once in Deuteronomy 6?** I think it is to teach us the difference between "remembering" and "keeping." In Exodus 20 we are told: "Remember the Sabbath day, to have it holy." In Deuteronomy we are told, "Keep the Sabbath day, to have it holy." The idea could be, that even if you are not "keeping" all the rules of Shabbat, Shabbat can have a kind of holiness if it is always part of your consciousness.

Ira's insight is brilliant. He understands something the rabbis also know, but do not state so succinctly. If you follow all the Shabbat laws, then you may not touch a hammer on Shabbat. The idea (one of the fences around Shabbat) is that if you can't touch the hammer, there is no possibility of using it to do work. So the hammer, and all tools, "have cooties" on Shabbat and may not be touched—they are called *muktzeh*. *Muktzeh* is a "tool taboo" which was

imposed to protect the "work taboo." But, later, after having etched all those rules, the rabbis ask, "What happens if you really have to move the hammer?" The answer given in Jewish law, is "use your elbow." They explain that if you have to touch or move something on Shabbat (and in a sense, not keep Shabbat) you should do it in a way that makes it impossible to forget that it is still Shabbat and special conditions apply. Therefore in the "breaking" of a Shabbat rule, the sense of Shabbat is still kept. Or, as Ira has taught us, we are "remembering" Shabbat, even when we are not "keeping" it.

Joel's Fourth Law: Said in the name of Ira Smith: Even when you feel that you can't be *shomer(et)* mitzvot, a keeper of mitzvot (Jewish actions), always be *zoker(et)* mitzvot, one who remembers (and teaches) that those mitzvot exist.

Here is another truth; the more Shabbat ritual, the more likely it is to have an impact. Let's put it this way:

When your family is in Orlando, if you did your homework and found a synagogue and went there Friday night or Saturday morning, it could teach an important lesson—Jews are everywhere. It could also build the foundation of some new life-long friendships.

When I was in college, a couple of my roommates and I were fond of road trips. When there was a break, we would take off for a couple of days of camping and visiting friends on other campuses. We were living together in a private Jewish house (it was the sixties so we called it a "Jewish commune") and it became our practice to stop and hunt up a synagogue twice a day. We would hit a small town, hunt the phone book, find the synagogue and often surprise the ten or so old men who were gathered there for morning or evening services. We got a lot of great receptions and a bunch of free meals out of it. They loved meeting young and committed Jews and we loved hearing the stories of their Jewish lives.

But, let's assume that having lit candles and kissed each other, you still push on to Disney World. Once you're there, you're going to eat dinner, right? If you can get bread and wine, you can make it a Shabbat dinner. Your quick and quiet blessings won't bother anyone, but they will make a powerful Jewish memory and message. And, if you can't get the wine—Jewish law says that you can make *Kiddush* on any beverage or food except for water.

Two of my most powerful Jewish memories both have to do with unusual Shabbat celebrations.

Once, with a youth group I was advising in the Chicago area, I and a bunch of the kids went camping. It wasn't a formal youth group event. It was over a weekend, so Shabbat was there to confront. I had packed the candles, wine, and *hallel*, but they were embarrassed about performing our strange national ceremonies in a public campground. Before sundown we took a walk around and found an Orthodox family who had come to camp out for the whole Shabbat. They had taken great care to surround their campsite with an *eruv*, a ritual fence, so that they could carry on Shabbat, a heat source which would keep their water and food hot so they wouldn't have to kindle a flame on Shabbat, etc. It had a powerful impact on us, and their family and our group welcomed Shabbat together. Those candles burning in the wood are an important part of who I am as a Jew.

Likewise, later, I was the youth advisor for a Reform synagogue in the Los Angeles area which made a practice of an annual Saturday trip to Disneyland. I didn't like the idea of Disneyland on Shabbat, but there was little I could do to stop it. So, I took a lesson from an old camp director, teacher, and friend, Jerry Kaye, and brought a tin of cinnamon and a short Havdalah candle in my pocket. Saturday night, with soda in hand, I gathered my youth group in the park at the end of Main Street, USA, and discreetly made Havdalah while we waited for the electrical parade. No one minded. A lot of people were impressed and a few asked questions. We even gathered a dozen or so Jewish families around us. A good time was had by all—then the music, lights and fireworks started.

Our two lessons are: Always take your Jewish practice with you—and the more the merrier.

Jewish Vacation Opportunities

There are both "Jewish Vacations" and "Vacations with Jewish Elements." Jewish Vacations are Israel and the Lower East Side, Eastern Europe and the Touro Synagogue in Newport. There is just about nowhere you can go (except maybe certain mountain ranges in North Dakota) where there isn't something Jewish to see, do, eat, or meet. By the way, even if you don't visit something Jewish in North Dakota you can still light Shabbat candles and make *ha-Motzi*.

1. Make a point to take some Jewish vacations. Every possible Jew should get to eat Gus's Pickles (the Lower East Side), see a concentration camp (Eastern Europe), put a note into the *Kotel* (Israel), etc.
2. Find out what is available and Jewish wherever you are. I've made little old men open wonderful little synagogues in Athens, in Cheltenham,

England, in little cities in northern Texas, and several other places, and have had great experiences each time. In all cases the synagogue was worth seeing and the little old man was worth meeting. There are Jewish museums and Jewish cemeteries—all kinds. I've never been there, but I hear wonderful stories of a synagogue in Curaçao with wonderful white sand floors. Did you know that there is a Jewish children's museum in Wilmette, Illinois?

3. Collect stuff from your Jewish visits. Postcards are good. So are slides, snapshots, or even videos. Revisit your Jewish vacations.
4. And, the central message of this chapter, do the regular Jewish stuff on your vacation.

An Epilogue: Two Stories

One of my Talmud students brought me this problem, his own *Talmud 2000* question.

A teenage daughter asks permission to go to Club Med in Mexico with her best girlfriend during spring break. The parents say, "Yes." It's a little expensive, but there are no conflicting family vacation plans. Later, when they do a calendar check, they find that Seder falls during the week she will be gone. They want to ask her not to go, but she has already been given permission—they won't make it an order. Instead, they urge her to change her mind (because it is important to them that Seder be a whole-family thing, and because it is important to them that she "do" Seder). She is moved but not convinced. They search for a compromise. The brilliant solution they come up with is this: The daughter will be given a box of matzah and told to "eat it" during the week. The question of what else she will eat or not eat is left open-ended and not discussed. She rejects the solution, saying, "I hate matzah," but then offers her own compromise, "I'll take a Haggadah with me and read from it while I'm there." Her compromise was accepted. The question: Did they do the right thing?

The Moral of the Story: The Jewish calendar was designed to be a window through which we viewed time and staged our lives. We shouldn't fall into Passover; we should build to it. But, that isn't the way most of us live our lives. The big mistake was obviously "not checking the calendar" but the more profound problem was not feeling the tidal pull of the calendar and

"knowing" when Passover would be... That's a good polemic, but not necessarily the real-life solution.

If we do the box scores we learn the following:

- * The parents were not into Passover enough to check out the dates of spring vacation—even though they regularly conflict. Deduct one point.
- * Once they do *grok* the problem, they try for a mid-course correction. Give them a point. You'll have to evaluate the point total for "urging" rather than "commanding" on your own.
- * Their daughter rejects their intervention—deduct another point.
- * They then try for a compromise which keeps the Jewish tradition from "losing altogether." Add five points. However, you may deduct as many points as you feel appropriate (zero to three) for the nature of the compromise.
- * The daughter then rejects even the minimalist compromise. Deduct more points.
- * But then the daughter cares enough to suggest her own compromise, feeling the need to "remember" Passover in some way. Add some points.
- * If we were objective, we would want both the matzah and the Haggadah. It's a deconstruction of Judaism to make a choice between them (like choosing between giving up all of your blood or all your bones) but still it is interesting that the daughter chose "Jewish meaning" over "Jewish eating." Evaluate this choice. Total your points and give a final "survivability quotient."

This was a real life Jewish dilemma in which a friend, student and teacher of mine—a good, committed, caring Jew—sincerely struggled to be both a "fair parent" and a "force for Jewish continuity." Real life is sloppy—and doesn't lend itself to clear paradigms except in self-help books. I don't know the full meaning of this story, I only know that the second story feels better.

I used the Club Med Passover "dilemma" in a workshop and heard this story from Susie Dworetz in return.

In 1990 our family scheduled a spring vacation to Carlsbad Caverns. Then we realized that the vacation included the first Seder night. We called our temple and the federation, but learned that the nearest organized Jewish community was more than 100 miles away. We went anyway, but when we got to town, I opened the phone book to

the medical section and started calling doctors. Eventually I found a Jewish doctor who invited us to Seder.

Now this, too, is a rich and wonderfully ambivalent story with a beautiful ending. Write your own pithy summation line to this entire epilogue.

5 Have Shabbat Candles Mean Something

The act of lighting and blessing candles on Friday night is not enough—to be effective you have to do it with both feeling and meaning.

As I am writing this book, we are busy celebrating the journey of Columbus and remembering the Spanish Inquisition. It is a '92 kind of thing. Lots of Jewish money has been spent celebrating and studying Sephardic (Spanish) Jewish culture.

The great discovery, amid all this frenzy, is the presence of hundreds of Marrano families among the oldest Hispanic families in the American Southwest. Marranos are Jews who did not flee Spain when every Jew was offered the choice of leaving, converting, or dying. To retain their money and their family homes, many Jews elected to stay and make their Judaism less obvious. We understand those decisions, because many of our ancestors made the same choice—downscaling their Jewish traditions in exchange for economic advancement. Marranos are hidden Jews, hidden since the Inquisition.

Over the years we have learned that some of these families have been in hiding so long that they have forgotten what they are hiding. There have long been stories of Spanish Catholic families who had strange family rituals. Several such families used to light candles inside deep pitchers every Friday night. They had long since forgotten both the reason and the connection to Shabbat—they just knew that it was a secret family practice, an obligation they had to pass on.

accidentally, would boil a kid in the milk of its own mother. The Torah doesn't say chicken is meat, by the way. But God forbid you should mistake a chicken cutlet for a veal cutlet and mistakenly boil the veal in its mother's milk, so the rabbis placed chicken in the meat category for just that reason. That's how a "fence around the Torah" works. It often seems arbitrary, and in some cases Jews have gone much too far, but the principle is sound.

The rabbis had little trust in human nature. They had good reason. They lived in a time where people had little self-control. Not much has changed.

Today, Crosby is a very happy dog, except that he now has a sister, Chloe, who bosses him like crazy. He has his fence; he has his crate; he loves them both, but he is nobody's slave.

TAKE YOUR BLESSINGS
WITH YOU

Mensch • Mark 19

2003

THE POWER GRID

Recognizing the Limits and Potential of One's Power

In August 2003, my family took that great journey Americans have undertaken since the days of Lewis and Clark. We went to the national parks out West. Then for a change of pace, we spent a couple of days in Las Vegas, following in the pioneering footsteps of Lewis and Martin.

During those two weeks, we experienced immeasurable expressions of divine power and countless wonders, enough to make you shake with trepidation and bend the knee with awe. I carried around cards containing many Hebrew blessings to be recited upon seeing amazing natural phenomena, and my challenge to my kids before the vacation was to see if we could have the chance to recite every blessing of wonder found on the card before the trip was done. They told me to "chill" (we *had* to take this trip with a rabbi?) but then joined me in the quest.

The first stop is Yellowstone and we find ourselves standing in a living, bubbling caldera. The earth is literally breathing, it is spitting up water, it is gurgling, it is making the most godawful gaseous smells—like a baby. The land, quite literally, is coming alive.

All around me is devastation, the most beautiful devastation I've ever seen: miles and miles of ashen, burned-out trees destroyed by the wildfires of 1988; fires that became catastrophic because generations of our hubris prevented nature from taking its course. In the brush are young trees, sprouting amid the devastation, fragrant and pure. I recite the blessing on fragrant trees, *boray atzei besamin*, "Blessed are you, Lord our God, who creates fragrant trees."

I stand by Yellowstone Lake looking out on Saturday night as wildfires rage over the east entrance to the park. Two intermingled bursts of flame lighting the distant sky with God's power look like some heavenly Havdalah candle, the large candle with intertwined wicks and an enormous flame, which is lit as part of the ceremony ending the Sabbath. I hum the Havdalah melody as the smoke hovers overhead.

We see lots of glorious creatures in Yellowstone, bald eagles and falcons, and herds of bison all across the hillsides. We actually see a place where the deer and the antelope play. So I recite the blessing for extraordinary creatures.

We drive through the Grand Tetons, where snowcapped mountains pierce the sky, good for another blessing. The first one, *oseh ma'ase breisheet*, "Who makes the works of creation." Mountains have the power to awaken an overwhelming sense of the sacred. We stop in Jackson Hole, where they thank God daily for designer cowboy boots.

A few days later we are on our way to Zion National Park, driving through southern Utah into some mountains where the clouds are ominous and thick, and the lightning perilously close. The rain clouds engulf the mountains out West, something I'm not used to seeing in Connecticut, though I've seen it in Jerusalem many times. And with the

wind kicking up something awful, we stop at a Dairy Queen along the interstate and ask the cashier if there are tornadoes in these parts. She says yes, but don't worry, they are usually not too bad. At this point I'm ready to pick up Toto and run for cover. We make it through the storm, but we later find out that the same storm flooded Las Vegas, turning The Venetian into Venice. Coincidentally, when we left Yellowstone, we had just missed an earthquake.

I'm feeling very lucky but keenly aware of my own smallness. Daily I am witnessing earthquakes, floods, wildfires, and the most gorgeous sunrises and sunsets I've ever seen. To be standing at Bryce Canyon with these human-looking rock formations, which the Native Americans call "legend people" (hoodoos), who were turned to stone because of their sins, is to be reminded of how sin can turn human hearts to stone. And to be in at the canyon floor of Zion National Park or at the rim of the Grand Canyon is to know what it must have been like to be at the shores of the Red Sea.

What's totally natural appears supernatural, perfection and balance painted on an enormous canvas. As the author Linda Hogan wrote, "The cure for soul sickness is not in books. It is written in the bark of a tree, in the moonlit silence of night, in the bank of a river and the water's motion. The cure is outside ourselves."

By the time we reached the Grand Canyon, we had been able to recite nearly every blessing on the card, including that all-important one for going to the bathroom. We even drove through some hail, which has a different blessing not on the card, and we saw Mars closer to earth than ever before. We'd experienced every blessing except the one for a rainbow. All we needed was the rainbow.

Looking over the South Rim, I could see a beautiful sunset, and right next to it, a thunderstorm. There had to be a rainbow, somewhere. And sure enough, Mara noticed it first, over to the right, miles and miles from the thundercloud, there it was. It was about seven on

a Friday evening. We recited the final blessing, and the Sabbath began. Now I could put the blessing card down and God could rest. But the miracles never stop, and they never fail to shock and awe.

Back on the first day of the trip, just after I watched Old Faithful burst out with steam shooting up into the sky, I tried to call home for messages, but my machine didn't pick up. Only later did I find out why. While I was in the midst of experiencing the greatest power display on earth, the entire East Coast had been thrown into darkness. Fifty million people stood helpless in the August heat back in 2003, victims not of divine power but of a terrible man-made hubris.

Where were you when the lights went out? I was at Old Faithful, where there were no subways, no high-rise elevators, no TV. I was at Yellowstone, where the sky was being lit up by the stars and the forests illuminated by a thousand degrees of conflagration. And I felt vulnerable but empowered, knowing that a power far greater than I has bathed me in enormous responsibility.

Where were you when the lights went out? Were you in the subway? In an elevator? In the kitchen with suddenly nothing to cook but a lifetime to thaw? Were you sweating, exposed to the elements with no A/C? Were you at the airport, grounded? Or stuck in the air? Were you in a hospital, at the mercy of tightly rationed auxiliary generators? Did you feel vulnerable? Did you fear terrorism? Did you understand, did you finally understand, just how limited we are? The power grid is a perfect symbol of our hubris, of our presumed power, and of how instantly it all can come tumbling down.

Yes, in 2003 Americans were humbled by the limits of our authority. The world's greatest superpower had failed to defeat small guerrilla armies of terrorists despite its military capability to shock and awe. We had touched the moon and seen through Hubble's eyes the farthest reaches of the universe, but we lacked the wherewithal to check the underside of Columbia's wing before reentry. We had developed the

ability to create artificial life, but we couldn't save a set of adult conjoined twins. We had seen loved ones suffer and die, we'd seen the rich and famous succumb to these same diseases as well, and we were powerless to prevent it. Again and again we were reminded of our limits.

Power and its limitations are a prime concern of a central prayer of the daily liturgy, known as the *Alenu*. This magnificent prayer speaks of a future time when all humanity will be united under a single standard of morality and goodness, enhancing the prospects of harmony and peace. It doesn't promise that we'll get there soon but asserts that it is our responsibility to make progress toward that end. That's what the word *Alenu* means: "it is up to us." But that responsibility is a long-term, multigenerational contract requiring patience and persistence.

And the prayer gives us enormous license to exercise that power. We too often speed through the second paragraph of the *Alenu*, but there we see a prime goal of Judaism as being "*I'taken olam b'malchut shaddai*," "to repair the world, to perfect the world, under divine sovereignty." It is from this passage that we get the expression for world repair, *tikkun olam*, that has become increasingly popular among activists of all stripes.

We have been given incredible power to do good, as long as we recall that the ultimate source of our power comes from somewhere else.

A Hasidic master once said that every person should carry two pieces of paper, one in your right-hand pocket and the other in your left. On one of the pieces, you write the verse "For my sake the world was created." On the other piece, you write a very different verse, "I am but dust and ashes."

We are so powerful and yet so humbled.

And that is why, even as we exercise enormous power, we need to pray.

How I wish I were back at Yellowstone right now, bathed in the mist of the geyser, warmed by the glow of a hundred-acre inferno a

couple of miles away. Things were a lot less complicated there, where the deer and the antelope play, cradled in the womb of God. How terrifying it is to have the world on our shoulders. I feel the weight of the burden.

But I'm a big boy now. We're all big boys and girls. And God has given us the keys to the Hummer. God has given us the intelligence to split the atom and recork a wine bottle. God has given us the power to topple dictators and build towers that reach beyond the clouds.

We pray for guidance that we can forge a better world for our children. And we give thanks. For it is good to give thanks unto the Lord. For God's power is everywhere to be found. In each mountain, each lovely creature, and each rainbow. And it is the power of kindness, the power of love.

17

Mensch • Mark 20

1989

PARADISE IN A SANDBOX

Recovering the Pure Faith of a Child

Deuteronomy proclaims that the Torah "is not in the heavens." On the contrary, as I learned early in my career, everyday holiness is as earth-bound as the nearest box of sand. In these untethered times, the sandbox is where a sense of order can begin to challenge the new norms of political incivility. When I ask little Celia to speak in complete sentences, or to use her indoor voice, or not to accuse the synagogue next door of sending us their rapists and murderers, I feel downright insubordinate and out of step with the Trump era. It's time to return to our roots.

It is said by some skeptics that too many baby boomers brought up their children to be "snowflakes," each one unique and special, worthy of participation trophies even when they've lost the race. But the Talmud teaches that all humans are, in fact, unique; each is special in his or her own way and that each human life is of equal value before God. And,