

Rosh Hashanah Sermon

Rabbi Josh Winston

We think we live in America, but we don't, we live Bamidbar, in the wilderness. Bamidbar, the wild, the uncultured, the vast expanse that can either kill us or transform us. How do I know we are living Bamidbar? Just three weeks ago we observed the 18th anniversary of September 11th. Eighteen years ago, our world was already beginning its transition into the digital revolution, an ongoing revolution of information and technology that continues to leave us feeling both deeply connected and utterly alone — greetings to everyone around the world watching our Livestream right now. The mass shooting crisis in our schools was in its first few years with the Columbine shooting occurring two and a half years early. The warming effects of climate change were just beginning to be felt by human beings as according to climate scientists, 18 of the 19 warmest years on record have occurred since 2001. Yes, we are living Bamidbar, in the wilderness, even though we pretend we are living in America.

Three weeks ago, on September 11th, we were in the middle of our weekly staff meeting, and Melissa, our executive director, asked, “Do you mind if I read something? It is what my husband Aaron wrote about the morning of September 11th.” Of course, I said. “I remember every waking minute of that day. There was the ever so slightest early autumn crisp in the air that morning, the sky was so remarkably blue until it became black and grey. I walked from my subway stop at Bryant Park toward my office in a building right next to Grand Central, like those other New Yorkers around me, I paused, and stood on the corner of 42nd Street and Fifth Ave to watch the smoke billowing from the North Tower as it burned, then United Airlines Flight 175, what some thought a rescue plane, made a sharp turn mid-air and crashed into the South Tower. The innocence was shattered. We now all knew the first plane was no accident. This was an attack. People around me screamed out, sobbed, some ran, but we were in between the Empire State and Chrysler buildings, and Grand Central —likely targets if there were more planes— there was nowhere to run. The subways had stopped by then, Taxis vanished. The world, as I had known it, as anyone had known it, would never be the same. The burning smell would last for weeks. The city below 14th Street and Brooklyn Heights, Red Hook and Cobble Hill were covered with a grey silky sooty dust. It was on the cars, the trees, the buildings, the people, we all breathed it in.”

There was nothing to say. How awful? I'm sorry? Wow? Eighteen years later, and I have nothing to say. No, I wasn't in New York on September 11th, I did not experience the trauma of being present, of watching the towers explode first from

airplane missiles and then from their own weight. I did not breathe in the cloud of dust and air and bodies and steel. I was watching it on tv from my bedroom in San Diego, woken by my mother, listening to the television announcer unwilling to confirm if the first tower had gone down, even as we all watched it happen on live tv. No, most of us didn't breathe the thick air of New York City that day, but we all took a collective breath in, and we have not released it since. There was nothing to say to Melissa because I am empty. Our country is empty and heartbroken. We are living Bamidbar, in the wilderness and we don't even know it.

September 11th was catastrophic for our country, for sure, but it was also an inflection point for the Jewish community. For many Jewish communities, September 11th meant guards, getting buzzed into the building, a wall, sometimes physical, sometimes psychological and often both. And while the terrorists we worry about today are not likely Islamists, the anxiety we experience over security in our synagogues can trace a direct line to September 11th; there has been no break.

In her book, *Hope in the Darkness*, Rebecca Solnit writes about a wave of despair coming over the country, she says, “[The] recent despair was over the presidential election in the United States...he won, despite the opposition of most of the people in the world, despite the polls, despite the fact that a majority of US voters did not choose him—or his opponent; 40 percent of the electorate stayed home, despite a surge of organization and activism by progressives and leftists...The pain was very real, and it was generous-hearted, felt by many people who would not suffer directly but would see that which they loved—truth, their fellow human beings, as the shut—out in the Unified States...the fish in the sea and the tree in the forests—assaulted even further...” Her words help encapsulate so much about our current political situation. But I had to edit Solnit's words, ever so slightly, because they weren't written about our current political climate, they were written after the election in 2004. I bought *Hope in the Darkness* in preparation for these High Holy Days, hoping to find some inspiration to bring to you, but reading her words, with the feeling that they could as much be about today as they are 15 years ago, needless to say, didn't leave me inspired.

This past March 15th, my family and I were attending a vigil on the Diag for the victims of the Christchurch massacre. We had probably been there for 30 minutes or so, and I was waiting for my turn to take the stage and offer a prayer for the victims and the Muslim community at large. My kids and wife were many yards away from me near the back of the crowd. Without warning, a wave of people started moving toward me, there was screaming, a cop was running through the

crowd, arm swinging over his head, “RUN, RUN, RUN.” I looked for my family. Where were my wife and kids? A few seconds later I spotted Mollie and began running after her, she was alone and running. She heard me yell. She stopped, and I caught up. We started running together. “Mollie, we are ok, we are ok, we are ok, we are ok.”

We didn’t know where Sarah, Eva, and Ori were. I texted and called frantically. It would be a few more minutes before I heard from Sarah with the assurance they were safe. We figured out a place to meet and waited. We went to Sweetwater’s, thinking we could get the kids hot chocolate and help calm them down.

It was one of the most surreal moments of my life. We were running for our lives, and pedestrians just a few blocks away were going about theirs. The Diag and surrounding buildings were on lockdown, and East Liberty was having a lovely spring day. We would learn that the active shooter was a false alarm in a few hours, but the experience wasn’t a false alarm, the experience was very real. The experience is illustrative not of overreaction, but of how close the trauma is to the surface. Balloons popping, panic exploding. We are living Bamidbar, in the wilderness, but everything is fine, at least on East Liberty.

When the shooting at the bar in Thousand Oaks, California happened last year, I remember hearing that some of the survivors also survived the shooting in Las Vegas the year before. It was shocking to think that there are Americans who have been through two mass shootings. It was even more surprising to learn that I know one of them, the child of a colleague in California. And when the shooting in El Paso happened this summer, it took me a few days, but I came to realize that I had been in that Walmart last year, buying supplies for a shelter that was caring for migrants. Ironically, this actually gives me some hope for a political solution for the gun violence epidemic, as more and more of us have been in the place where they’ve happened or know survivors and victims, maybe the political class will finally do something. Of course, it’s the mass shootings that we worry about; everything feels so out of control when we hear about them. But the mass shootings shouldn’t terrify us that much. Even though with each one, the likelihood of knowing someone increases, most of us will never be touched directly by a mass shooting. No, it guns in our homes, accidental shootings that should scare us most, or our loved ones that choose to end their own lives with guns that are the real threat. Yes, we are living Bamidbar, in the wilderness and our guns aren’t protecting us, they are helping to keep us there.

As gun violence claims over 30,000 lives each year in America and our sense of security churned into political chum, climate change has arrived. In Michigan, we may not be feeling it daily in profound ways, but we all can tell it's happening. But, climate change is having it's more dramatic effects in the developing world. This past March, I was in Honduras for a week meeting with local people along the Guatemalan border, we were there learning about their struggles with industry taking their land. They told us of hydroelectric dams that were making it impossible to live in their villages and mining that was polluting the water. Those were the stories I went there to hear, but the stories of failed crops are what shocked me. Subsistence farmers telling me that beans they once grew and relied on for food are failing. They just won't grow anymore. As much as anything else, this is why they are coming north, and no matter what laws we implement or how the Supreme Court rules on issues of asylum, or how big the wall, they are going to keep coming. Even the actual wilderness is in the metaphoric wilderness.

We are Bamidbar, in the wilderness, and the worst part is, we have no Moses. It has been close to 60 years since Americans last really trusted the political class. We keep hoping they'll save us, but our hopes are never realized. Our political system is broken, don't get me wrong, we all should vote, we all must vote, but we are leaderless when it comes to healing from the trauma inflicted upon us over the last 20 plus years. We are leaderless, and as a society, we do not know what to do with the trauma.

When I am working with bereaved families and individuals, they almost always say to me in one way or another, "Rabbi, I'm doing ok, I am staying busy." Or, "There is so much to do, calling the funeral home, taking care of paperwork, going through the apartment, it is helping me keep my mind off the loss." When I hear this from folks facing a loss, I try to say to them, don't let doing all that stuff get in the way of your mourning. If you confront the loss now, it is less likely to creep up on you some other time when you are least expecting it. At least when it comes to 9/11, we didn't even wait until shloshim was over, the first 30 days, before we went to war in Afghanistan. We got right to work doing something without taking the necessary time to address the trauma that we were and are suffering.

Yes, we are Bamidbar, we are in the wilderness, and thank God that is where we are because we could be in Egypt.

Some of you may know that I try and go backcountry camping at least twice a year. A good friend and I paddle a canoe and portage from lake to lake to find campsites in remote locations of the Canadian wilderness. I do this to hear the

silence of voices, to completely disconnect from the world we live in and to find something I lose with all the news and information and voices. I get to hear the world; I get to hear the wilderness talking. It isn't silent, it isn't even close to silent, but it is a reminder of what is possible. It takes a few days, it doesn't happen right away, but eventually, I do feel a sense of calm come over me. In the wilderness, anything is possible. In the wilderness, we can start over. The wilderness is a place of becoming.

The wilderness is the Jewish story; it is where we received the Torah. Our rabbis tell us that revelation could not have happened in the promised land or any other claimed territory, God needed to give the Israelites the Torah in the wilderness to say, this can belong to anyone who would claim it. During revelation, as our people stood at Sinai's foot, we saw eternity before us, a covenant established between a people and God. After the covenant at Sinai, all was not easy, and it didn't mean all problems solved. We wandered another 38 years until we finally made it to the promised land, but we would have never made it to the promised land if we had not formed the covenant with God at Sinai.

We living in the wilderness and we are going to experience another Sinai moment. There is no other way to get to the promised land, but before we can stand at Sinai again, to experience the healing that that moment precipitates, we must recognize that we are in the wilderness. The wilderness is not a place we can fix just as our collective trauma is not something we can bomb our way or even legislate our way out of. Now is no time to run from our trauma or wallow in our trauma, it is time to draw near, to examine, and even to atone for the hope that this would heal some other way or on its own. Our catharsis won't come with impeachment, and it won't come with a new election. It is time to begin releasing that breathe of New York 9/11 air. Let it out. Not because all is ok, not because the world is at peace, and not because we are sure of the next step. Exhale because if we don't we can't move forward and nothing ever will be ok.

We have a tradition in Judaism especially for this day of the birth of the world; we go to a body of Mayim Chayim, living water. By this we mean water in a natural setting, water that has not been captured or run through human-made pipes, in other words, wild water. We go to this wild water and throw breadcrumbs into the lake, river, or ocean. The crumbs represent our sins for the year that we are symbolically removing from ourselves. This year at tashlich, take a breath in when throwing your breadcrumbs, and think about exhaling the trauma of the last 20 years.

We are living in the wilderness, and if we are going to make it to the promised land, it is time to reestablish our covenant. Reestablishing our covenant means living in a community that truly knows us. It means being vulnerable. It means hearing each other. It means embracing disagreement. As Jews, reestablishing our covenant means prayer; it means learning; it means searching.

We are living in the wilderness, and the wilderness is uncertain. I, for one, am hopeful that we can surmount that uncertainty and find our Sinai once again.