

Travels and Transitions
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Yom Kippur Morning 2021/5782

I am on a lonely road and I am traveling, traveling, traveling, looking for something. What can it be?" (Joni Mitchell – All I Want)

We Jews are all wanderers. It started when God called to Abraham, *Lech L'cha*, "Go to a place I will show you." Jacob journeyed from his parents' home to Paddan-aran and then, twenty years later, back home again. Joseph was brought from Canaan down to Egypt. Moses left Egypt and settled in Midian. Then journeyed back to Egypt. And we all know the many stories of the Israelites as they wandered in the *midbar* – the wilderness. Journeys are so important that the Torah takes painstaking detail to list every single town and location the Israelites went to and set out from.

But why did it have to take forty years? I know they did not have a GPS, but God certainly knew a more direct way. Because there is value in wandering.

Sometimes in the tumult of life is where we are open to hearing God's voice most easily.

In Deuteronomy we read: "Remember the long way that Adonai your God has made you travel in the wilderness these past forty years."

Why, so God could learn what was in their hearts through the hardships they faced. God intentionally wanted the Israelites to do some soul searching, to figure out who they were, and what they truly wanted and needed, before returning to the Holy Land.

We have been living through quite a "journey" for the last 18 months – we have journeyed from the living room, to the kitchen, to the bedroom, occasionally to the supermarket, for a short while to the temple, and then back home again. We have been tested and have learned a great deal about ourselves- what is really important in our lives, who really matters to us, finding strength we didn't know

we had. We can look at these journeys as a burden but can also see them as a path towards spiritual and personal growth.

Rabbi Tracy Nathan talks about what it is like to be in the *midbar* – the wilderness. It is a place of daytime heat and nighttime cold, of dryness and disorientation, a place of fear. At the same time, it is a place of exquisite beauty, oases of water, and quiet solitude. She says that in her own quarantine *midbar*, she has experienced moments of anxiety, fear, anger, along with wonder, awe, and beauty. She found that this new landscape has provided her the ground through which to be awake and present to all of it. In the *midbar*, there is terrifying wildness **and** beauty, loss **and** unexpected discovery.

“Life is in the transitions.” This is the title of a new book by Journalist and author Bruce Feiler. “Instead of fearing changes in our lives,” he asks, “is there a way to embrace them and even welcome them?” In his new book, “Life is in the Transitions,” he says that we have been taught to create a storybook version of our lives, and when our lives don’t go according to plan, we are resentful, angry, and lost.

He calls these unexpected changes in our lives, “transitions.” We are led to believe that life is linear, we are born, go to school, get married, have good health, have children, they go off to college, we advance in our careers and then retire. But that is not reality. Life is really a complex swirl of celebrations, setbacks, triumphs, and rebirths. It is filled with chaos and complexity, periods of order and disorder. And that has been going on even before COVID.

Feiler suggests that while life used to be more linear, that is no longer true, and we need to develop the skills necessary to pass through these transitions in a way to benefit from them and become stronger and wiser on the other side. Nonlinearity though, helps to explain why we all feel so overwhelmed all the time. We expect that our lives will unfold in a predictable series of stately life chapters, we’re confused when those chapters come faster and faster, frequently out of order, often one on top of the other.

The top emotions in transitions are fear, sadness, shame, guilt, anger, loneliness.

As its core, sadness is the emotion that occurs when we've lost someone or something that we know is not coming back. That loss often leads to longing. Sadness compels us to turn our attention inward, which is exactly what we need in times of grief. We become more reflective and self-protective. We double-and triple-check that we're doing okay. We focus more on details. In this way, sadness is almost the opposite of anger. While anger prepares us to fight, sadness prepares us to protect.

Feiler asks, "As long as life is going to be full of plot twists, why not spend more time learning to master them? We have what appears to be a genetic imperative to retell our story over and over again, sometimes staying a little too long on our poorest performances or worst moments. We can't get past the wolves in our fairy tales. But you always need a wolf in a fairy tale so someone can be the hero. It is Ok to acknowledge and even welcome the wolves in our lives. Because if you banish the wolf, you banish the hero. We all need to be the hero of our own story. That's why we need fairy tales."¹

So how do we make meaning from these transitions? A big part of meaning-making is adjusting our life stories to accommodate a new life reality. The initial jolt can be voluntary or involuntary, but the transition must be voluntary. You have to make your own meaning.

Here are helpful ways to master the transitions.

1. **Accept It** - Identify Your Emotions
2. **Mark It** - Ritualize the change in some way
3. **Shed It** – give up old mind-sets, old routines, old dreams, old ways of being, adjust your personal story. Be OK with the unknown. Abraham goes forth into the unknown; Moses leads the Israelites into the wilderness; the Israelites are exiled to Babylon; Jonah disappears into the whale. What can we learn from their journeys into the unknown?

¹ Feiler, Bruce. *Life Is in the Transitions* (p. 18). Penguin Publishing Group.

4. **Create It** – try new things, at the peak of chaos, respond with creation. In the creation story we read: In the beginning there was *tohu vavohu*, chaos and void. And from that God created the world.
5. **Share it** – Gain wisdom from others
6. **Launch It** – Unveil your new self
7. **Tell It** – Compose a new life story

There is one thing about stories that most everyone agrees on: A story has no inherent meaning. Somebody has to give it meaning—the teller, the hearer, or some combination. The same applies to our lives. Our life is a story. It has multiple events, connected over time. It has problems that protagonists attempt to resolve. It has interesting happenings. But on a fundamental level, our life story has no inherent meaning. We must give it meaning, saying, “It happened for a reason.” Figuring out that reason is not always easy, but that is part of the journey.

While we hope and pray for only good things to happen to us, we can be ready to face whatever comes. As we reflect on the past eighteen months, or even further back in your life, what is the life story you want to write, or rewrite? What is the meaning you want to take from your stories?

We Jews are all wanderers. Lech L’cha. Where is God calling YOU to go?

Song- L’chi Lach