

Daydream Believers

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Parashat Masei 5783

July 14, 2023

This week I started watching the show *1883* on Hulu. It's a prequel to the hit show *Yellowstone*; an origin story about how the family that would someday be headed by Kevin Costner's iconic character John Dutton built their ranching empire in Montana.

I'm five episodes into the first season of *1883*. At this point in the story, John's ancestor, a Civil War-veteran named James Dutton, his wife, and his two children are in the middle of a long journey from their home in Tennessee in search of a new life out west in Oregon.

Their journey is on horseback, and it's a hard one. Many of the people in their party are lost along the way, killed by bandits, or drowned in the river. Fights break out among members of the ragtag band of European migrants and the gritty cowboys who are trying to shepherd them safely.

Travelers accused of stealing food are forced out of the group and left to make their own way. Migrants are compelled to abandon cherished possessions in the wide-open plains, so their wagons won't be dangerously heavy when they cross water.

Elsa, James Dutton's teenage daughter and the narrator of the story, paints a vivid picture of the journey when she says, "The world doesn't care if you die. It won't listen to your screams. If you bleed on the ground, the ground will drink it. It doesn't care that you're cut." ... "No matter how much we love it, the land will never love us back."

I imagine the Israelites' journey from Egypt to the Promised Land was similar: hard, painful, a lot of loss, a lot of uncertainty, a lot of fear.

Like the pioneers making the journey to Oregon, a place none of them had seen with their own eyes, our Israelite ancestors were driven by a dream: a dream of a better life, a life of freedom and prosperity and *possibility*.

And their faith in that dream is what pushed them forward, even through the worst of it.

As Elsa put it, "We were leaving a place and seeking another, and the journey was the necessary miserable road between the two." I imagine the ancient Israelites felt the same way.

The opening chapter of Parashat Masei lists all the many segments of their arduous trek through the wilderness.

Because the journey would take 40 years, many of the people were born in transit. All they knew was constant movement from one encampment to the next. Throughout their childhood, they never had a permanent home.

I find that sad, especially when I think about what my own childhood home meant to me.

As the philosopher Gaston Bachelard so elegantly puts it: "The house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. ...

"The house's entire being would open up, faithful to our own being. We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way in the dark to the distant attic. The feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands. ...

"We are very surprised, when we return to the old house, after an odyssey of many years, to find that...the earliest gestures suddenly come alive, are still faultless."

"The house we were born in," Bachelard says, "is more than an embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams"¹—because it's in the comfort and security of the house that we feel free to let go and drift away into our imagination.

Our Jewish story, though, teaches something quite different.

Not only in the Torah, but throughout our history, the Jewish people have been on the move.

Yes, we have settled in different places, sometimes for generations, but in the grand view of history, permanence has eluded us.

We tend to think of that as tragic because our wandering from place to place throughout Europe, where many of us have our family origins, was usually due to antisemitic persecution.

But in the story told by the Torah, wandering through the desert is not a misfortune.

Indeed, the Torah itself was given in the midst of our journey through the desert.

"It is no accident," writes Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, "that monotheism, the belief in the one God, emerges from the desert and that the three great monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all emerge in the desertlands, not in the temperate zones and not in the tropics."

This is because it is only in the harsh environment of the desert, "bereft of all the necessary and simple material supports of life, that the human being can encounter the ultimate and real source of life, the Creator."²

Permanence, coziness, predictability: As pleasant as these things might be, they actually hinder our spiritual development and our ability to encounter the presence and the call of God.

On the spiritual plane if not the physical one, Judaism teaches us that our natural home, paradoxically, is *on the journey*.

The journey is inscribed in our spiritual DNA, and the desert, with its burning winds and blistering sun and uncaring terrain, is the place of our dreams.

Lacking in the comforts that make us complacent, it is the environment in which we can imagine something better—where we can envision what the eye can't see, where we can find the inspiration and the faith to push ahead beyond the horizon toward a new frontier.

The desert—the *midbar*, in Hebrew—is the landscape of the soul. And to journey through it is the human condition.

This is among the most profound contributions of the Torah: to give us this metaphor of life as a perennial journey, of the desert as the spiritual homeland of the human being.

Though the Israelites journey toward a Promised Land, they don't actually reach it in the Torah itself. (That only comes later, in the *Book of Joshua*; and through the rest of the *Tanakh*, our presence in the Promised Land is always only temporary and tenuous.)

Perhaps this is to teach us that while it is the dream of reaching our destination that drives us, getting there is not the point.

More than that: Maybe there really is no such thing as "getting there" at all.

"Getting to the Promised Land" would mean you've made it; now you can kick back and bask in the comfort and safety of your accomplishment. What more is there to do?

To me, that kind of final resolution is neither possible nor desirable for a person who lives spiritually—because no matter how far we get, we know there's further to go. Our soul cannot rest and *will* not rest; it will never settle for the easy security of "good enough."

To reach the Promised Land is to stop dreaming of the possibility of being better and living better.

But to *journey*—to journey is to dream, to persist on the way, even through the hardships, and not let them defeat you because you have the faith that you are capable of surviving and even transcending them.

As the Dutton family and their band of travelers move further away from civilization into the uncharted frontier, Elsa, the narrator of *1883*, says ominously: "What began as a journey had become a retreat into the unknown."

Isn't that the perfect description of life?

From the moment we're born, we're cast into the unknown, and the further we go along, the more treacherous and mysterious and fascinating and frustrating and terrifying and beautiful it can be.

But it's not ominous, because we've been here before. If we close our eyes and think back real hard, we can feel the hot sand and the hard rocks under our feet.

And it all comes rushing back, so familiar.

The desert, the journey—this is *home*. We were formed as spiritual beings here, and we know how to inhabit it and how to survive it. We'll do it with faith and with the help of God.

This journey doesn't have to be "the miserable necessary road between" where we were and where we're headed.

The journey will test us and define us. It is opportunity; it is *magical*.

Because here, we dream big—and our dreams drive us forward.

Always forward.

1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 14-15

2 Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, unpublished manuscript