

In the Wilderness

Years ago, I took a job at Yellowstone National Park. In the late afternoons, or on my days off, I would explore the wilderness. One day, I climbed to the top of a mountain and it stands out as one of the most electrifying and holy moments of my life. From a ridge at the top, I looked out over a panoramic view of the park - a herd of bison wandered through the clearing below while a distant thunderstorm sprayed bolts of lightning down on distant peaks. I heard nothing but the wind whipping around me. I took a deep breath, said the Shema, and I spoke to God from that mountain. And God spoke back to me.

Throughout the journeys and movements of my childhood, I noticed a peacefulness that arose inside me whenever I would wade in the ocean, when I looked out over Yosemite Valley from the top of Half Dome, or when I stood among a grove of redwood trees.

I associated that peacefulness with God. God was an ever-present home; a source of tranquility and predictability that could be accessed from the four corners of the earth.

But something happened on that mountain in Yellowstone. Up until then, my theology had been oriented around the natural order; around peaks and valleys; waterfalls and lakes. But on that day, what I breathed in wasn't just the oxygen and the sun, it was an elixir of primordial air – it was a creation moment. There was a change, as if on a cellular level. The blood rushing through me was no different than a waterfall. The wind mirrored the steady rhythm of my breathing. Something dissolved between me and the world. God went from being an external source, only to be accessed through the five senses, to an internal force that could be found within. God's wilderness became a place within me; a place that can be scary, but also a place of possibility, potential, and power.

We shy away from God. We are much more comfortable exploring spirituality. Spirituality is the search for meaning in our lives, it is self-transcendence; it is those moments when we feel connected to something greater than ourselves. You might call that a hike in Malibu, a night of incredible music at the Hollywood Bowl, or Bikram yoga. You may even call it meditation or mindfulness. However, if we separate the God-concept from spirituality, we fail to recognize that our search for meaning, for self-transcendence, is really a search for God. Spirituality is like a warm blanket wrapped around you, it is the multi-colored sunset over the ocean. But God is the wilderness.

It is tough, it is rugged. It is the place where you're forced to address the challenging questions – why did my wife get sick? What kind of God would allow him to die at such an early age? The search for God is the hard work of *honestly* going into the wilderness. But the wilderness is also a place of possibility, of expectation, of exposure. It is not just a desert through which we wandered for forty years. It is a way of being. A place that demands being open to the flow of life around you. A place that demands being honest with yourself...A place that demands being present with all of yourself.¹ When we genuinely encounter wilderness, the sacred and transcendent qualities of the natural world enrapture us. We feel God's love. We are ethically commanded. We are transformed².

I took God with me when I went down that mountain; when I went back to the sleeping bag and stuffiness of my cabin; when I cleaned hotel rooms the next day; when I got in my car and left the park. From the pantheism of Spinoza, in which all of nature is Divine, I was slowly moving towards the

¹ Rabbi Lawrence Kushner

² Rabbi Mike Comins, "A Wild Faith: Jewish Ways into Wilderness, Wilderness Ways into Judaism," pg. 41-42.

Buberian notion of I and Thou. I began to recognize that the indescribable experience of God can occur through relationships, through intentional interaction with other human beings. From a place of recognizing the wilderness within myself, I can begin to recognize other peoples' wildernesses – their brambles, their thunderstorms, their wide-open plains, their mountaintop moments. The words of consolation I receive in difficult times have become synonymous with the word of God. The laughter of my children is the laughter of God. The tears of the person I visit in the hospital or the mourner at graveside are the tears of God. I understand God's response to the angels as they celebrated while the waters engulfed the Egyptians at the Red Sea: 'My creations are drowning and you are singing before me?'³

The biggest and most incredible wilderness is the search for meaning. That search is also the search for God. It is a wild and dangerous search. It is circuitous and dramatic. But it is exhilarating and rejuvenating. It is spectacularly brilliant and it is dizzying.

Join me in the wilderness.

³ Megillah 10