

In What Do We Trust?

Rabbi Sara N. S. Meirowitz (2017)

It was torture wandering in the desert, those forty years, and the Israelites let everyone know it. Over and over, throughout the books of Exodus and Numbers, God and Moses field their various complaints. Not enough food. Thirsting for water. Missing the delicacies of Egypt. Are you going to just let us die in the desert? And after one rebellion too many, these stiff-necked slave people are condemned to perish in the wilderness, their children the ones to inherit the Promised Land.

When Moses gives his final exhortations in Deuteronomy, he repeats this same story of faithlessness and murmuring to the wilderness-born children. And yet in this week's *parashah, Ekev*, a new detail is introduced. "The clothes upon you did not wear out, nor did your feet swell these forty years" (Deut. 8:4). This fantastical detail paints an intriguing picture of the travels through the wilderness – we imagine these desert waifs, 40 years wandering, their clothes still fresh and pressed.

Now the Israelites surely knew that there were many ways that God protected them in the desert. Clouds of glory, striking down snakes and scorpions, vanquishing their enemies. So why does Moses add this new detail about eternal clothing and unblemished feet? The commentators have a field day with these images, finding ways to connect them to the experience of desert wandering. Rashi¹ claims that the clouds of glory cleaned and preserved the clothes, while Ibn Ezra postulates that the manna prevented perspiration.

I wonder whether the reason these two images were chosen is precisely their connection to slavery. The word for "swell" in Hebrew is *vatseka*; the same root is used for the dough, *batsek*, which the Israelites bake into matzah during the Exodus. The clothing they wear is the same pristine clothing their parents pilfered from their Egyptian slaveowners (Exod. 12:35). Though their slave parents have long since perished, these wanderers are about to enter the Land carrying the same baggage of slavery and memories of liberation on their very bodies.

Each year, when I come to this *parashah*, this detail catches my eye, adding color to the rhetorical flourishes that characterize Deuteronomy. I hear Moses telling the Israelites that even amid panic, anxiety, the struggle to survive, the Israelites were being cared for by their Divine parent. Although they themselves may not have noticed, God was protecting the Israelites throughout their wilderness journey, preserving their clothes and bodies all the same.

And *this* is the message Moses chooses to tell the children of slaves, what he wants them to remember. Don't remember how your parents complained, suffered through the trek, longed to return to bondage. Look at your clothes – the same clothes your parents wore – this clothing did not wear out! In your very bodies, you can remember the times of liberation.

This year, when reading this image when mired in our own existential panic – health care imperiled, dangerous incompetence in the White House, unrest in Israel/Palestine, and sea levels always rising – it is much easier for me to resonate with the Israelites’ laments than with Moses’ retelling. Our hard-won freedoms are being dismantled; the past was better than the present; the future looks dim.

I find myself longing for someone to reassure me, just as Moses did for the Israelites. When we look back, will we be able to say that our clothes did not wear out – that there was a Divine parent protecting our world? How can we remember our past in a way that is both honest and inspiring for our future?

Finding this reassurance requires cultivating the trait of *bitachon*, trust – a trait which I confess does not come naturally. In his guide to the Jewish spiritual practice of *mussar* (character refinement), Alan Morinis writes of the importance of *bitachon*, of accepting that we can’t ever know the full picture of why things happen the way they do. We might each define the object of trust in our own way: an omnipotent God; the arc of the moral universe bending towards justice; the true goodness and rationality of humanity. But having *bitachon* that, ultimately, we can continue to walk on a path towards the good – that when we look back, we’ll see that our feet were not swollen – that is what can be sustaining. All we can do is trust, Morinis writes, and this can help us move forward to action without fear.²

I want to be honest about the difficulty of *bitachon* when we live in a world where the Divine hand is hard to see. We all know that terrible things come to pass in our world, all the time; we are not protected as the desert Israelites were. But by taking control of our story, by telling our story in a way to cultivate *bitachon*, we can subsume fear to hope. We can claim the narrative that our society is moving forwards towards progress. We can retell the stories of triumphs past and use them to inspire action with hope rather than anxiety.

My feet have not yet swelled from protest marches. But the wilderness journey still stretches out ahead of us. As we approach the New Year, may we learn to cultivate enough *bitachon* to keep us on the journey.

¹Paraphrasing *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 4:11.

²Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar* (Boston and London: Trumpeter, 2008), 209-19.

- ☐ In what, if anything, do you place your trust?
- ☐ What might a practice (or two) for cultivating the faith that, as Meirowitz writes, “ultimately, we can continue to walk on a path towards the good”?