

Today I'd like to offer a midrash—a Jewish term for a contemporary interpretation of a portion from Torah, first five books of Hebrew Bible. Noah read it for us today—the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that led the throngs of liberated Hebrews in their 40 years of wilderness wanderings. Out of Egypt to a place unknown to them.

The wilderness wanderings provide in story-form how the Hebrews developed their spirituality.

Nothing comes out of nothing, including religious traditions. Israel adapted elements that were common to their Near Eastern neighbors: temples, sacrifice, priesthood, law codes. Many stories in Scripture—like the Noah flood—have their counterparts in the myths of neighboring nations. [The scholar who de-coded an ancient Babylonian tablet and found a story of a flood with an ark that animals entered 2x2, so excited he ran naked through the British Museum—after hours.] So they weren't starting from scratch. But they were developing a fresh take on all these elements—and it was all happening on the fly in a time of great uncertainty. They knew where they'd been but not where they were going or even how to get there.

Ironic: So often the adjective “biblical” is really an attempt to create an illusion of certainty in a world of uncertainty and impermanence. Whereas our sacred writings bear witness to a spirituality forged in and suited to uncertainty. When the 40-year-wandering time was over, the Hebrews had the makings of a such a spirituality featuring: a portable sanctuary, a simple code of ethics (requiring interpretation, revision, elaboration over the years as they faced new situations), and attention to a pillar of cloud by day/fire by night. Which we will get to soon.

The pandemic has stripped away many of our illusions of certainty—like the idea we can easily predict the future. So many things about our situation that were once givens, have been taken away—and we don't know yet what will take their place. When our illusions of certainty and permanence are stripped away, we enter a state of disorientation. We're not going from known Point A to known Point B. We're wandering.

It feels a lot like getting lost. I have a gift for getting lost. One of my pre-school memories: separated from my mother in a department store in Detroit. Next thing I knew I was sitting on a counter with a nice lady asking for my name. A harbinger of things to come. I got lost on a retreat center golf course. [details.] I got lost visiting my daughter Amy at her new home in Connecticut. Went out for a walk while Amy was at work. Lost my bearings, realized I didn't have her address, hadn't paid close attention to the street name even. Hmm. Called my son, who had me read nearest intersection street sign, located intersection on google maps, read off street names in the area until one rang a bell, and walked me home by phone. If you are not directionally challenged you might think, "how is that possible?" I prefer to focus on my calm in the situation.

Now picture a throng of thousands of refugees from Egypt, rushing away from their captors into a wilderness, without any roads, signs, maps, or GPS devices. What I love about the tradition of Jewish midrash is that irreverent questions are encouraged. Like: if the people were led by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, why did a journey of 400 miles take them 40 years? Was God lost too?

Maybe getting from Point A to Point B in the shortest possible time wasn't the goal here.

If the task is developing a new spirituality from existing elements, maybe it takes 3 generations—parents, children, grandchildren—or roughly 40 years, to do that. So both realities can co-exist: they were led by a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day, and, they were wandering around for 40 years.

In our goal-focused, plan-your-life-out, mode we think in linear terms. In my 20s I'll figure out what to do with my life, in my 30s I'll have that figured out and settle down, in my forties I'll be well into mastery of whatever it is. It doesn't tend to go like that. We experience life more in a wandering than a linear mode. Isn't there a thing called spiral dynamics?

This wandering model comports with our experience, especially when our comforting illusions of certainty and permanence are stripped away as they have been lately.

The wandering part we get, but where does the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night come in? What if these are mystical symbols—as they are in Jewish and many other

traditions. A sense of divine or transcendent connection is associated with fire and cloud. Abraham encounters the Voice that has been guiding him in a nighttime encounter that involves fire & cloud. Moses on Sinai encounters the Voice with fire & cloud. Jesus on Mt. Tabor along with James, Peter, John, hear the Voice surrounded by fire & cloud. Ezekiel saw the wheel—fire & cloud. Isaiah saw the Lord in the Temple, fire & cloud.

Neither fire nor clouds have sharply defined boundaries. Certain modes of human understanding don't either. Anything involving intuition, gut feel, anything hard to name, is a mode of being that we engage with a part of our mind in concert with our body--the part that doesn't do arithmetic (although advanced math can be kind of mystical) and that doesn't do spelling or excel spreadsheets. This is a mode of our being that we engage with things like imagination, stories, dreams, intuition.

For 500 years much of Western Culture has been suspicious of all this, even held it in contempt.

Colonialism trampled indigenous cultures steeped in intuitive wisdom—highly refined and field-tested old-way wisdom that went back to our deep past as hunter-gatherers, where your life depended on being highly attuned to your body, and to things like intuition.

Heard an interview with Annie Murphy Paul [!] author of *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain*. That line from the Sarum Prayer, *God be in my heart and in my thinking* is thinking outside the brain. Annie Murphy Paul says there is so much data streaming at us at any one time, that our conscious brain can only register a small portion of it. The rest comes through the non-conscious mind and registers in the body. She calls it **interoception**: awareness of internal states of the body. The body is registering patterns and all sorts of meaningful things that are not part of our conscious brains. So how do we access what registers with the unconscious mind and the body? Through things like intuition, which requires attention to the body.

We have a gut feel—that's the body signaling us with something the body noticed that the conscious brain wasn't paying attention to. Or maybe it pops up a dream. 2 weeks ago I had dream of my departed wife Nancy—lovely dream because she was telling

someone off who needed it, and I didn't have to chance to. Nancy had a Nancy-esque way of telling someone off. For me the dream functioned like a chiropractic back adjustment—something clicked for me psychologically. I wrote the details down and it wasn't until a week later I realized I had that dream on July 11 (anniversary). The body knew what the conscious brain didn't: Interoception.

Doesn't it make sense that the divine wisdom would show up on this dance floor? The realm of clouds by day and fire by night. For me intuition feels different during the daytime than it does at night. Daytime intuition is like a flash of inspiration. At least for me, nighttime (except for dreams like I mentioned) it comes when I wake up in the middle of the night and have to ponder something I've been ignoring. When you're facing big life decisions, transition, puzzling problems, when you're on the verge of some new thing, you just have with the body how the body works. I can't just sit down with a yellow pad, write out pros and cons and think my way through it, consciously. (The phrase, "I need to sleep on it" is a way of saying, "I can't just think my way through this.")

Annie Murphy Paul calls this "looping" (or she quotes a philosopher of mind who calls it looping.) Maybe you write something down but then you're stuck. So you take a walk, focus on something else, and your body and non-conscious brain do their thing. Later you pass your half-formed thoughts by someone else. You pass it through their brains, and something they say in response sparks a new insight. And then you set it down for a week or a month. You're watching something on Netflix, and it moves you, and realize it's clarifying something. We're not computers that operate in a linear fashion—input the data, work the complex algorithms, and generate the response. We're biologically evolved, embodied beings—so we loop. A lot like the Hebrews looping their way to the promised land rather than walking in a straight line.

And the divine presence (fire by day, cloud by night) was with them in their loopy lives.

There's a meditative practice that helps us to tune into the wisdom that comes to us through interoception, involving the unconscious mind and that registers in the body. Spiritual practice is like gardening, or farming, or parenting. Growth through recurring practices that you just do. Oh sometimes there are growth spurts. But mostly they are

things that you do because you learned that it necessary, usually from someone else, and so you just do them. The meditative practice that aids interoception—that tunes us into our bodies so that we pay attention to things like intuition rather than ignoring this mode of our being, this realm where divine influence, where inspiration, seems to show up, is a very simple body scan.

MEDITATION