

Into the Wild: Framing the Book of Numbers/*Bemidbar*
Dr. Erica Brown



James Tissot, “Moses Smite the Rock in the Desert” c. 1896-1902, gouache on board, 7 3/8 x 11 1/16 in.

Nature as Character in *Bemidbar*

Nature – in its terrifying rawness – rarely conforms to human manipulation. It may for a time, and with constant human vigilance, bend to our desires. Yet, when we least expect it, hurricanes devastate human habitations and manicured gardens. Tidal waves crush villages. Entropy seeps into cities. Buildings fall apart and get covered in moss and trapped in vegetation as nature gradually takes back that which man builds. Shocked by nature and angry at its wrath, humans rail about cyclones and tsunamis, but these natural disasters are completely indifferent to the presence of human life. The wilderness with its arid stretches of land, its mountainous passes, and its flash floods was a daily and constant challenge for the Israelites; it was also a compassionless challenge.

Amitav Ghosh, in his historical fiction, *The Glass Palace*, writes about the rubber plantations tended by the British in Burma before the Second World War. One of his central characters reflects on the difficulty of clearing space for human need and greed:

This is my little empire...I made it. I took it from the jungle and molded it into what I wanted it to be. Now that it's mine, I take good care of it. There's law,

there's order, everything is well run. Looking at it you would think that everything here is tame, domesticated, that all the parts have been fitted carefully together. But it's when you try to make the whole machine work that you discover that every bit of it is fighting back. It has nothing to do with me or with rights and wrongs. I could make this the best run little kingdom in the world and it would still fight back. It's nature; the nature that made these trees and the nature that made us.

(Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (New York: Random House, 2001), 202)

We try to control nature. We tame it. We clip it and shape it. And it fights back. Ferociously. Or worse: it ignores us. We humans become wholly insignificant to its plans.

Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of *The New Republic*, writes about the day he discovered the indifference of nature in his article on the response to the 2004 tsunami. Out in a small fishing boat with a friend, the motor gave out as a fierce squall approached. The boat was tossed, and Wieseltier says that, at that moment, he was introduced to terror. In the midst of his "blackest moment," a gull landed on the side of his boat and stared at him coldly: "I will never forget the equanimity in that bird's eye. No, I did not expect the creature to be moved by my ordeal; but I had never before been regarded so inhumanly, never before had I imagined how I might appear exclusively from the standpoint of nature." Leon Wieseltier, "The Wake," *The New Republic* (January 17, 2005): 34).

Werner Herzog exposed this feeling of the indifference of nature to human beings in his documentary *Grizzly Man*. Herzog adapted footage taken of wild bears in Alaska by Timothy Treadwell, a troubled young man who believed himself to be the bears' friend and protector. Treadwell spent thirteen summers living in the Alaskan bush. Filming himself commenting on his natural surroundings, he once exploded with emotion for his bear friends: "I will die for these animals, I will die for these animals, I will die for these animals." But these vicious animals were not his friends. Treadwell and his girlfriend were mauled and killed by a bear while his video camera, lying in the field, captured the sounds of him screaming. He did die, not for the animals, but through the violence of the very animals he sought to befriend. Herzog observed in the movie,

And what haunts me, is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature. To me, there is no such thing as a secret world of the bears. And this blank stare speaks only of a half-bored interest in food. But for Timothy Treadwell, this bear was a friend, a savior. (Werner Herzog, *Grizzly Man*, 2005).

The blank stare. The half-bored interest. The raging sea. The fierce wind. All of them are indifferent to the humans in the landscape.

Erica Brown, *Leadership in the Wilderness* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013).

Numbers 10: 29-33

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹבָב בֶּן־רְעוּאֵל הַמִּדְיָנִי חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה נֹסְעִים | אֲנִיחֶנּוּ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר יְהוָה אֵתְּךָ לָכֶם לָכֶּה
אֲתָנּוּ וְהִטַּבְנוּ לָךְ כִּי־יִהְיֶה דִבְרַטֹּב עֲלֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לֹא אֵלָךְ כִּי אִם־אֶל־אֶרֶץ וְאֶל־מוֹלַדְתִּי אֵלָךְ:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־נָא תַעֲזֹב אֲתָנּוּ כִּי | עַל־כֵּן יִדְעֶתָ הֲנִתַּנּוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר וְהִנִּיתָ לָנוּ לְעֵינָיִם:

וְהִנֵּה כִּי־תֵלֵךְ עִמָּנוּ וְהִנֵּה | הַטּוֹב הַהוּא אֲשֶׁר יִיטִיב יְהוָה עִמָּנוּ וְהִטַּבְנוּ לָךְ:

וַיִּסְעוּ מִהָר יְהוָה דְּרָךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים וְאָרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה נֹסַע לִפְנֵיהֶם דְּרָךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לְתוֹר לְהָם מְנוּחָה:

Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place of which the LORD has said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will be generous with you; for the LORD has promised to be generous to Israel."

"I will not go," he replied to him, "but will return to my native land."

He said, "Please do not leave us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and can be our guide.

So if you come with us, we will extend to you the same bounty that the LORD grants us."

They marched from the mountain of the LORD a distance of three days. The Ark of the Covenant of the LORD traveled in front of them on that three days' journey to seek out a resting place for them.

The Song of the Ark

וַיְהִי בְּנֹסַע הָאָרֶן וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה קוּמָה | יְהוָה וַיִּפְצְרוּ אֲיִבָיִךְ וַיִּגְסוּ מִשָּׁנְאֶיךָ מִפְּנֵיךְ:

When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance, O LORD! May Your enemies be scattered, and may Your foes flee before You!

Leadership and Uncertainty

Moses' conversation with Hobab is the first indication of real leadership insecurity, of a fissure in the mission. God moved through the camp as a cloud of glory by day and a pillar of fire by night, but the Israelites were seeking a human source of guidance. They were in great need of advice. Moses asked twice in four verses for Hobab to stay and reap the benefits of the Promised Land with them. In ten chapters of organizational direction, only four lines indicate that the choreographed structure was not enough to battle the wilderness. The chaos of the midbar would soon reign.

...When Moses asked for Hobab's help he also revealed the chink in his own leadership armor. He did not know where to go. He saw the long-term vision but could not navigate the short-term challenges. He asked for another set of eyes. They were denied.

To thrive, organizations need rules, and they also need vision. One without the other will either lack the discipline or lack the dream. To lead, you need both direction and inspiration.

Erica Brown, *Leadership in the Wilderness* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013)

Clock Problems Versus Cloud Problems

“The great philosopher of science, Karl Popper helped us understand that all problems are either like clocks or clouds. To understand a clock you only need to take it apart. It is mechanical, you can remove each small part and study it. You can count the teeth on the gears, you can measure the size of its parts and by studying the pieces you can understand how it works. In fact, it is predictable by design. If it breaks you can find the problem and fix it. Cloud type problems, on the other hand, are complex and dynamic. You cannot take apart a cloud the same way you can a clock. Cloud type problems are more difficult to understand, they are unpredictable and constantly changing. Since you cannot break it down to look at each piece, you have to study it as a whole. In fact, you have to look beyond the cloud itself to understand the weather patterns, seasons, and factors that created the cloud in the first place.”

<https://onetroy.org/blog-collection/2018/6/19/clocks-and-clouds-emergent-issues-require-emergent-thinking>

Resilient Leadership

“Resilience is often described as a personal quality that predisposes individuals to bounce back in the face of loss. Resilient leaders, however, do more than bounce back—they bounce forward.”

Elle Allison, “The Resilient Leader,” *The Resourceful School* (December 2011/January 2012) 69:4, 79-82.