

Hope After Hope Is Gone

R. Shai Held – held@hadar.org

Rabbinic Yeshiva Intensive 5786/2026

I. Hope After Hope is Gone: The Structure of BeMidbar

1. Numbers 1:19	במדבר א':י"ט
As 'ה had commanded Moses, so he recorded them in the wilderness of Sinai.	כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפְקְדֵם בְּמִדְבָּר סִינַי: {ס}
2. Numbers 1:54	במדבר א':נ"ד
The Israelites did accordingly; just as 'ה had commanded Moses, so they did.	וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת־מֹשֶׁה כֵּן עָשׂוּ: {פ}
3. Numbers 2:34	במדבר ב':ל"ד
The Israelites did accordingly; just as 'ה had commanded Moses, so they camped by their standards, and so they marched, each man with his clan according to his ancestral house.	וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה ה' אֶת־מֹשֶׁה כֵּן־חָנּוּ לְדִגְלֵיהֶם וְכֵן נָסְעוּ אִישׁ לְמִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ עַל־בֵּית אֲבֹתָיו: {פ}
4. Numbers 3:16	במדבר ג':ט"ז
So Moses recorded them at the command of 'ה, as he was bidden.	וַיִּפְקֹד אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה עַל־פִּי ה' כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה:



5. Numbers 3:42	במדבר ג' מ"ב
So Moses recorded all the male first-born among the Israelites, as ה' had commanded him.	וַיִּפְקֹד מֹשֶׁה כָּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֹתוֹ אֶת־כָּל־בְּכוֹר בְּבִנָּי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

See also Numbers 8:4, 20, 22; 9:5, 18-19, 23: 10:13

6. Numbers 11:1-6	במדבר י"א א'-ו'
(1) The people took to complaining bitterly before יהוה. יהוה heard and was incensed: a fire of יהוה broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. (2) The people cried out to Moses. Moses prayed to יהוה, and the fire died down. (3) That place was named Taberah, because a fire of יהוה had broken out against them. (4) The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, "If only we had meat to eat! (5) We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. (6) Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!"	(א) וַיְהִי הָעַם כְּמִתְאַנְּנִים רַע בְּאַזְנֵי יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה וַיִּחַר אָפּוֹ וַתִּבְעַר־בָּם אֵשׁ יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל בְּקִצָּה הַמַּחֲנֶה: (ב) וַיִּצְעַק הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה וַתִּשְׁקַע הָאֵשׁ: (ג) וַיִּקְרָא שְׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא תִּבְעָרָה כִּי־בִעָרָה בָּם אֵשׁ יְהוָה: (ד) וְהָאִסְפָּסֹף אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבּוֹ הִתְאַוּ תֹּאֲוָה וַיִּשְׁבּוּ וַיִּבְכוּ גַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִי יֵאָכְלֵנוּ בָּשָׂר: (ה) זָכְרֵנוּ אֶת־הַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר־נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם חֲנָם אֶת הַקִּשְׁאִים וְאֶת הָאֲבִטְחִים וְאֶת־הַחֲצִיר וְאֶת־הַבִּצְלִים וְאֶת־הַשּׁוּמִיּוֹם: (ו) וַעֲתָה נִפְשָׁנוּ יִבֶּשָׁה אֵין כָּל בְּלִתִּי אֶל־הָמָן עֵינֵינוּ:



7. The Heart of Torah, vol. 2, pp. 128-129

This is, needless to say, a sad and dark tale. God has tried to breathe new life into the people, but they have been unable or unwilling to receive it. And so they die before God's promises are fulfilled. Had Numbers ended there, we would be faced with an unmitigated and irredeemable tragedy. Crucially, though, covenantal crisis is not the end of the story. After the people's second collapse into idolatry, when the last remaining adult members of the older generation have died out, something remarkable happens: Numbers launches into a census of the new generation, the people who will—despite everything—conquer and inherit the land (Numbers 26). In stark contrast to what has happened until now, in the last eleven chapters of the book, we encounter “no death, no murmurings, no rebellions against the leadership.” Something genuinely new seems to have emerged.

There is something deeply Jewish about this story. Human stubbornness and sinfulness take an enormous toll—on the people themselves, on their leaders, and even, ultimately, on God. And yet the Torah does not give these human failings the last word. “The Israelites’ determination to sin is more than matched by [God’s] determination to bless... [God] will fulfill [God’s] promise—of that there is no doubt. The only open question in [Numbers] is ‘Who will be the recipients of the benefits of that promise?’” The reader of Numbers is invited to imagine herself as part of a new generation poised to enter the Promised Land. Will we see only what seems impossible and thus spurn God and the possibility of genuine faith? Or will we trust in God, and thereby discover the hope and possibility that God continues to make possible?

II. Hope After Hope is Gone: King Jehoiachin (*Yehoyachin*) is Raised Up

8. 2 Kings 25:21	מלכים ב כ"ה:כ"א
"Thus Judah was exiled from its land."	וַיִּגָּל יְהוּדָה מֵעַל אֲדָמָתָהּ:



9. II Kings 25:27-30	מלכים ב כ"ה:כ"ז-ל'
(27) In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of King Jehoiachin of Judah, on the twenty-seventh day of the twelfth month, King Evil-merodach of Babylon, in the year he became king, took note of King Jehoiachin of Judah and released him from prison. (28) He spoke kindly to him, and gave him a throne above those of other kings who were with him in Babylon. (29) His prison garments were removed, and [Jehoiachin] received regular rations by his favor for the rest of his life. (30) A regular allotment of food was given him at the king's behest—an allotment for each day—all the days of his life.	כז) וַיְהִי בְשָׁלְשִׁים וּשְׁבַע שָׁנָה לְגָלוּת יְהוֹיָכִין מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה בְּשָׁנִים עָשָׂר חֹדֶשׁ בְּעָשָׂרִים וּשְׁבַע־לַחֲדָשׁ נָשָׂא אֲנִיל מֶרְדַּךְ מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל בַּשָּׁנָה מְלָכּוֹ אֶת־רֹאשׁ יְהוֹיָכִין מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה מִבֵּית כְּלָא: (כח) וַיִּדְבֹּר אִתּוֹ טָבוֹת וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־כֶּסֶף אֹמֶל כֶּסֶף הַמִּלְכִּים אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ בְּבָבֶל: (כט) וַשָּׂא אֶת בִּגְדֵי כְלָאוֹ וְאָכַל לֶחֶם תָּמִיד לִפְנֵי כָל־יְמֵי חַיָּו: (ל) וַאֲרָחֲתוֹ אֲרָחַת תָּמִיד נִתְּנָה־לּוֹ מֵאֵת הַמֶּלֶךְ דְּבַר־יוֹם בְּיוֹמוֹ כָּל יְמֵי חַיָּו:

10. Choon-Leong Seow, “1 and 2 Kings,” <i>New Interpreter’s Bible</i> , vol. III, p. 798
Alongside the story of God’s inevitable judgment because of human will to disobey, is a hint that the last word has not yet been spoken... The final word is an unexpected account of liberation, however tentative; after thirty-seven years in exile, there is the inexplicable good news of freedom for Jehoiachin... Though God is not mentioned in the closing words of Kings, one is invited to ponder if the reality of liberation and favor amid exile is not, finally, also a sign of divine grace. The tentative ending suggests an incomplete story that will be continued another time.”

11. David T. Lamb, <i>1-2 Kings</i> , p. 528
“Just as Joseph’s life in Egypt served as a type for what would eventually happen to his own people (enslavement followed by release from captivity), so does Jehoiachin’s for the nation of Judah (enslavement followed by release from captivity), potentially giving hope to exilic readers of this story.” Still, he characterizes this as only “a remote glimmer of hope” (528)



12. Samantha Joo, “A Fine Balance between Hope and Despair: The Epilogue to 2 Kings (25:27-30),” *Biblical Interpretation* 20 (2012), p. 242, n48

“Rarely does any book in the Hebrew Bible end on a completely dismal note. Most of the books have a promising epilogue except for the enemies of Israel who will suffer as part of the salvation for the people of Judah. The epilogues of the books dated to the exilic to immediate post-exilic period are even more promising; God promises to restore Judah, sometimes with reference not to repentance but to divine compassion. See Jer. 52:31-34; Ezek. 48:35b. This would include books in which the epilogues were added during the post-exilic period: Deut. 34:1-12, Amos 9:11-15; Obad. 1:15-21; Zeph. 3:19-20. The main exception is the book of Lamentations which ends on a very dismal note where it questions whether God will save or not (5:19-22). The authors of the Hebrew Bible have generally looked forward to the fulfillment of divine promises” (241, n48).

III. What Type of Redemption Are We Waiting for?

13. Nahmanides (Ramban), commentary to Deuteronomy 30:6

Man will return at that time to what he was before the sin of Adam, when by his nature he did what should properly be done, and there were no conflicting desires in his will... At that time it will not be necessary to instruct them [to avoid evil] for their evil instinct will then be completely abolished... in the days of the Messiah there will be no [evil] desire in man but he will naturally perform the proper deeds and therefore there will be neither merit nor guilt in them, for merit and guilt are dependent upon desire.

יָשׁוּב הָאָדָם בְּזִמָּן הַהוּא לְאִשְׁרֵי הָיָה קִדְּם חֲטָאוֹ שֶׁל
 אָדָם הָרָאשׁוֹן, שֶׁהָיָה עוֹשֶׂה בְּטִבְעוֹ מֶה שֶׁרָאוי
 לַעֲשׂוֹת, וְלֹא הָיָה לוֹ בְּרִצּוֹנוֹ דְּבַר וְהִפְכוֹ
 וּבִידּוּעַ כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רַע מִנְּעֻרָיו, וְצָרִיכִים לְלַמֵּד
 אוֹתָם, אֲלֵא שֶׁיִּתְבַּטֵּל יִצְרָם בְּזִמָּן הַהוּא לְגִמְרֵי
 יְמֵי הַמָּשִׁיחַ לֹא יִהְיֶה בָּאָדָם חֲפֶץ, אֲבָל יַעֲשֶׂה
 בְּטִבְעוֹ הַמַּעֲשֶׂה הָרָאוי, וּלְפִיכָךְ אֵין בָּהֶם לֹא זְכוּת
 וְלֹא חוֹבָה, כִּי הַזְכוּת וְהַחוֹבָה תְּלוּיִים בַּחֲפֶץ:



14. Maimonides (Rambam), *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and Their Wars, 12:1-2

Let no one think that in the days of the Messiah any of the laws of nature will be set aside... The world will follow its normal course. The words of Isaiah: "And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid" (Isa. 11:6) are to be understood figuratively, meaning that all Israel will live securely among the wicked of the heathens who are likened to wolves and leopards [Jer. 5:6] ... All similar expressions used in connection with the Messianic age are metaphorical... Said the Rabbis: "The sole difference between the present and the Messianic days is delivery from the servitude to foreign powers" (Sanhedrin 91b)

אל יעלה על הלב שבימות המשיח יבטל דבר
ממנהגו של עולם, או יהיה שם חדוש במעשה
בראשית, אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג. וזה שנאמר
בישעיה: "וגר זאב עם כבש ונמר עם גדי ירבץ"
(ישעיהו יא, ו) - משל וחיידה. ענין הדבר, שיהיו
ישראל יושבין לבטח עם רשעי העובדי כוכבים
המשולים כזאב ונמר...
וכן כל פיוצא באלו הדברים בענין המשיח הם
משלים... אמרו חכמים: "אין בין העולם הזה
לימות המשיח אלא שעבוד מלכיות בלבד".

IV. A God Who Never Gives Up Hope

15. Deuteronomy 32:4	דברים ל"ב:ד'
The Rock!—His deeds are perfect, Yea, all His ways are just; A faithful God, never false, True and upright is He.	הצור תמים מעלו כי לדרךיו משפט אל אמונה ואין עול צדיק וישר הוא:
16. Sifre Devarim 307:1	
"A God who has faith." God believed in the world and created it.	אל אמונה, שהאמין בעולם ובראו.



16. Shai Held, *Judaism Is About Love*, p. 375

Sometimes the words [of this midrash] strike me as hopelessly naive. If God has faith in this world, then God must not be paying attention. Or perhaps we should take the past tense seriously. God had faith [in the past] when God created the world, but by now God has undoubtedly seen enough to know better.

But at other times I find these words tremendously moving. God knows who we are— knows of the cruelty and callousness of which we are capable; knows how trapped many of us are within the prisons of our own egos; knows how far we often stray from the divine ideals of love and compassion and the pursuit of justice— and yet, in the face of all that, *God believes in us*. God believes in our capacity [for decency, and] for love [, and for goodness, and for justice].

God actively implants [these capacities for decency, and love, and goodness, and justice] within us. So God *knows* that we are capable of [them]. To be sure, we are capable of other things too, like hatred, and brutality, and indifference to the suffering of others [-- and even, I think we need to learn to admit, of reveling in the suffering we cause to other people]. I hear the midrash about God believing in the world and creating it as suggesting that God has faith in our capacity for goodness, and even that God has faith that we will— at least some of the time— manifest and express that goodness.

V. Deuteronomy: The Ending Remains to Be Written

17. Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah*, volume 1, pp. 136-138

Scholars have offered historical answers to our question—parts of the seder took shape, they remind us, during a time of exile, and it is only natural that a community stripped of access to the land would downplay its centrality. Moreover, there were power struggles between Jewish communities living in Israel and those living in Babylonia, and the latter often triumphed (remember that the core text of much of Jewish culture is the Babylonian Talmud rather than the Palestinian). So perhaps our arrival in the land is absent from the seder because of the historical circumstance in which the Haggadah came together, a reflection of deep-seated communal rivalries.

Perhaps. But there is likely also something deeper at play. Maybe the Haggadah seeks to teach us that the journey is often more important than the destination...



Maybe the Torah, too, wants us to know that the journey is not just a means but also an end in itself. The journey does not merely serve to lead us to the land. No, the journey itself is intrinsically holy. Think for a moment about Judaism's three pilgrimage festivals. Pesach, of course, commemorates the Exodus from Egypt. Shavuot, as our Sages understand it, commemorates the revelation at Mount Sinai. And Sukkot? Sukkot does not recall any earth-shattering or life-orienting events. It merely remembers (and re-enacts) the long journey of the Israelites through the wilderness. Strikingly, which of these holidays is considered the most joyous? Sukkot, referred to as *zeman simchateinu*, the time of our joy. The happiest days of the year, in Judaism, are the days devoted to remembering and re-experiencing the journey...

There is real beauty and profound truth in all this, and yet we should be careful to avoid naiveté. **There is something powerful about where both the Torah and the Haggadah end, but there is also something tragic about it. A promise, followed by a journey, and finally... a promise left often painfully unfulfilled.** This is the stuff of deep spiritual growth, but it can also cause great pain and suffering. Think of Moses' life: he dies knowing all too well that a journey without an ending can be disappointing and even excruciating. He journeys to the very border of the land and then dies without entering. This is not—or at least, is not only—about uplift; it is also about heartbreak and loss.

18. Shai Held, *Judaism Is About Love*, Draft Version of Chapter Entitled “Waiting for God”

I have written elsewhere about the complicated relationship in Judaism between seeking and finding, between journey and destination, and I have suggested that the journey is “not just a means, but also an end in itself.” (And yet, I have argued, we should not be wide-eyed about this: “There is something powerful about where both the Torah and the Haggadah end, but there is also something tragic about it... The perpetual elusiveness of our destination can enliven our hearts, but sometimes it can also break them.”)

But I suspect that something deeper may be going on here, both in the Torah and in the Haggadah: people who believe have no choice but to live in a long and often excruciating period of “not yet.”¹ We dream of a world in which human dignity is real and the presence of God is manifest. But for the time being, we are forced to live in a world in which, to put it mildly, that dream has not yet been realized...

Why is all of this so significant? Judaism is not just a set of abstract propositions about what is true; it is also—and arguably primarily—about a set of dreams for what will one day become true. Take the Rosh HaShanah liturgy, for example, focused as it is on the idea that

¹ I am grateful to Professor Jon Levenson for a now-long-ago discussion of this point.



God is Ruler over the world. But Rosh HaShanah is not primarily about a claim that God is *already* King; it is more about an affirmation that God *will one day become* King. A crucial piece of what faith is, then, is the capacity to wait and to live in the “not yet.”

