



## SHABBAT MORNING SERMON

*Howard Cooper*

This time he left us for just a few days. Not the 40 days and 40 nights of olden times – before I was born – it was only 4 days or so before he returned. No time for golden calves to be crafted, not time enough for loss of hope, or disappointment to grow into rebellion. Some did not even notice his absence.

But now he's back and he's gathered us together one last time before – at last! – we're due to leave this memory-haunting place. He's speaking to us now – I'm sure they'll make a book of it one day – our leader's last, great speech, telling us the story of our lives these last 40 years we've wandered in this place, this dream-filled space, filled with desire for a destination always deferred. They say he'll speak for hours, this final time, he'll speak at Castro-length, hour after hour, maybe day after day, throwing in some poetry along the way, perhaps he'll even finish with a song. Who knows? We're here to listen. To wait and listen. It's the least we can do, after all we've put him through in these long, harsh desert years.

What a journey it has been. Round and round we've gone ever since I was born, in fact before I was born: I am, you see, a wilderness-child, unsettled, diasporic, a desert-child born in freedom (so-called). No Egypt in my soul. No narrowness of vision. Everything in front of me, everything to live for, the future belongs to me ... Frightening to hear that, to think that. Frightening, the responsibility. The possibility of hubris. All that could go wrong.

But that's what his message is: we are all responsible now, responsible for ourselves and responsible for each other. That's what he keeps reminding us, as he drones on, hour after hour, rehearsing our history. We have heard it all before – yes, our people have been defiant, yes we have been tested, and testing, yes we have endured hardships and deprivation, *but it is all for a purpose*. He insists on this. (I am suspicious of such insistence, but let that go for now). As he recounts our awful, awesome journey to this place, he insists that all is preparation, refining us for the tasks ahead. We are being taught, it seems, about responsibility. And – here comes the paradox – it seems that in order to grow into our responsibility, as individuals, as a community, we have to learn to become dependent. I'm not sure I understand this yet. I'm not sure I'll ever understand it. Sure, we have been dependent, these desert years. We learnt to follow the cloud and the fire, day and night, they never left us. Whenever and wherever they moved, we moved too, *schlepping* around this fraught, forsaken place – the parching thirst ... the serpents ... and, ugh, the scorpions! – following as best we could those enigmatic signs of grace, those signposts of meaning. Though I have to admit that over time we grew a bit blasé: they were always there, you see, the cloud and the fire, like Nature. And the miraculous became ordinary, everyday – as it does.

And then there was the manna, at sunrise, regular as clockwork, six days on, one day off, the rhythm of our days established through this gift. In the beginning it taught dependence in a form we all could grasp: “man does not live by bread alone” (Deut. 8:3) but life comes from another Place. And yet our human nature takes its course and this manna we still receive each day, we do forget its source.

How quickly our palates become jaded, how swiftly we seek other flavours, newer delights. Remember how those boys from Judah, always quick to make a buck, cornered the market for a while, and started selling manna back to us: ‘57 varieties of Heaven’ in a tin. It didn’t last of course – but they saw the future, and the need we have for always something new, something different. Our gratitude for what we have wears thin, and we do forget the wonder of it all.

I sense the crowd grow restless now – he does go on and on – but none will leave this place until his words are done. Those few days he was gone just now he left his shoes behind – his favourite pair, blue suede with crocodile skin, placed outside his tent. The ones that legend says he once was told he must take off, for the ground on which he stood was holy ground. The memory of this is burned into us all: at any moment we might have cause to turn aside, like him, and see illuminated the way ahead and hear what we, and we alone, are called to do. The children here, they danced around his tent, daring each other to try on for size these famous shoes. But no-one had, or has, the measure of the man.

And now I stand here, at the edge of the assembled crowd, and hear his voice, unfaltering and strong, declaring the ways in which we are to walk. He says that *if* we listen well (*ekev tish’m’un*, Deut. 7:12) we will be blessed, but that if we forget the ‘One Who Is’, or put our faith elsewhere, we will be doomed to perish from this earth because we did not listen (*ekev lo tish’m’un*, 8:20), we did not pay attention to the voice of our Eternal One.

It sounds so easy. He always makes it sound so easy. So simple and clear, so certain. And yet we desert-wanderers know how hard it is, how much uncertainty there is in life. The highway is never straight, the crops do fail – whatever we believe, and sickness strikes us all, whatever we confess.

I am a late-comer to our history. I missed out on all the excitement: crossing the Sea, the voice at Sinai, the wars, the rebellions, all that stuff that now is legend. Almost all of us here are in the same boat. That’s why I suppose he has to tell it to us one last time, the whole story in one go, the trials and temptations of the journey, the triumphs and the tears, the voices and the visions, all the laws we received – though I’m sure he’s slipping in some new ones, just to keep us on our toes. And we the next generation have to know our story, how we got here, so we can move on from here, towards that sacred promise, long-delayed. For years it’s been rumoured we are nearly there: the dreamed-of land, over on the other side, away from here. This land of milk and honey is always just over the horizon. Oh the seduction of it, this beautiful land, just outside our grasp, luscious as a ripe fig, fertile with desire and hope. A blessed place never yet reached but always close at hand. He tells us of it now, the speech waxes lyrical on the richness of this always-promised land.

And we will go in, I hear him say, as conquering heroes, in the name of our God, in the name of our history and our destiny, the promise of old and the purpose of our days. Oh fate-filled land, you will give us such joy. He tells us this again. But why do I shiver when I hear these words? Perhaps it is merely the evening chill wrapping itself around this desert-born child, offspring of a still and always stiff-necked people.

Sometimes at night I lie outside my tent, and play the waiting game. I let my mind go free and see what comes, what voices speak within. I hear the stillness as the desert breathes. I feel my body moulded to the earth. I listen to the breath of life. All is alive, and now, and filled with mystery. I listen to the stillness, the majesty of life whispering in me as I breathe. Be still. Be still and know. 'Be still and know that I am *Elohim* [God]' (Psalm 46:10).