



Parashat Devarim

Out from the Mountain: Finding the Good Land

by Marisa James on Saturday July 21, 2007

6 Av, 5767

Deuteronomy 1:1 - 3:22, Shabbat

And God said unto Moses: it is time for a travelogue, so that the Israelites may see where they have been, and what they have done, and that you have been a good and worthy tour guide to them. Remind them that there is no refund if they are not satisfied with their 40-year tour of the desert of *mitzraim*, nor do they have the option to change the route of their tour. They must stay with the group, or else God and Moses are not responsible for what might happen if they piss off the locals, or eat their food without paying for it.

And God and Moses said unto the Israelites: Look forward! Get up! Keep moving!

When we find a safe place, we want to stay there—it's scary to give up peace and quiet on the chance that an unknown place might be better. But in this week's parsha, D'varim, the Israelites are close to the end of their journey. "It was in the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month" (Deuteronomy 1:3) when Moses tells them that they must keep moving. Most of these Israelites were born in the desert; they are in their 20's or 30's and have lived their entire lives in transit, in between countries, constantly moving. How can Moses expect them to press forward when they have no memory of God's promise of "the good land" (1:35) and they only know shifting sands?

Our queer ancestors did just this, without a Moses to rely on. God speaks at Horeb to Moses and the Israelites, saying "You have stayed long enough at this mountain," (1:6) but in every generation, gays and lesbians and bisexuals and transgender folk have figured out when it was time to leave the shadow of the mountain on their own. We don't have ancient scrolls to tell us their names, but in every place where humans have tried to understand their own existence, there have been people who understood the message coming from their own hearts. Many of us have heard it in our lifetimes; the little voice that says: Look forward. Get up. Keep moving. And our GLBT elders and ancestors did this even knowing that most of them were not going to inherit a promised land by coming out of the closet, or by quietly living their lives on their own terms.



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The promised land, the good place where God leads us, is not an end in itself, but a difficult and necessary team effort. Moses tells the Israelites, “How can I bear unaided the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering!” (1:12) Even with the help of God, the pain of being constant wanderers is overwhelming, and the feeling of growing up lost in the wilderness makes for a community of people who are frequently troubled and searching for home.

We have to raise the children of our communities to be wiser than we are, to know the history of our troubled, burdened, bickering people who have been wandering for generations, to understand that safety cannot be a goal without freedom. We must reflect on where we have been, and teach the story of our exile and our journey through the desert to every generation, but without forgetting to keep moving forward and up.

When this parsha is chanted at services all over the world, emphasis is placed on the names of the only two Israelites who left Egypt and are permitted to enter Canaan; “Kalev ben Yefunneh” (1:36) and “Yehoshua bin Nun.” (1:38) Kaleb and Joshua are given the responsibility to care for the land because each looked past their lives in the desert and saw a vision for a future where others saw only their own fears. But when Moses laments that he will not enter the land himself, there is no interesting trope, no different way of singing the text that calls attention to his statement; “God was incensed with me too, and said: you shall not enter it.” (1:37) It’s not worth dwelling on the sadness of coming so close to the promised land without being able to enter. But it is worth calling attention to those who continually looked toward the future without succumbing to the bitterness of life in the desert. David and Jonathan. Oscar Wilde. Marlena Dietrich. The women who dressed and lived as men in every century. The fierce and fabulous drag queens who made Stonewall an integral part of our vocabulary.

“You have stayed long enough at this mountain,” God told us. “Up now! Cross the wadi Zered!” said Moses.

If we were blessed with scrolls full of wisdom from our GLBT ancestors, if we chanted their stories every week to learn from their lives how to live our own, what would we hear? We have been wandering in this desert for too many years, and too many days of too many months. You may not enter the good land yourself, but don’t stop at the foot of this mountain. Look forward. Get up. Keep moving.



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