



Parshat Beha'alotecha
June 6, 2015—19 Sivan 5775
Another Us
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There is a hot new book—H is for Hawk by Helen Macdonald, a New York Times Bestseller, the winner of prestigious prizes like the Samuel Johnson Prize and the COSTA Book of the Year—that is propelled by a central mystery at its very heart.

Helen Macdonald is a British woman in her 30s, doing a fellowship at the University of Cambridge. She is a naturalist, a historian, and a poet. One day her father, whom she loved very much, died suddenly, an unexpected loss that plunged her into darkness. The loss of her father made her think about other things that were also missing in her life. In her words:

There was no partner, no children, no home. No nine-to-five job either.

Her fellowship was ending. She was all alone. She could not sleep. At one particularly low point, she wanted desperately to speak to her father, who was her best friend, and she goes to pick up the phone to call him, only to realize that he has passed on. She laments: “My heart is salt.”

What to do for her broken heart? She decided to adopt and train and live with a vicious predator hawk, in fact *the most vicious* predator hawk called a goshawk. The goshawk was, as she put it, “bloodier, deadlier, and scarier” than any other predator. When she first sees this vicious predator, she writes that her “heart jumps sideways.” She brings the bird home, flapping its violent wings, and it fills her “house with wildness as a bowl of lilies fills a house with scent.” When the bird hears a sudden sound, like a door open, it automatically goes into kill mode, and its talons latch onto whatever is nearby. One afternoon Helen Maconald is listening to Joan

Sutherland sing an opera on the radio, and when the singer hits a high note, the hawk's muscular predator body contracts and lunges, its talons out, its whole being ready to pounce, kill, eat.

Why do this? Answer, strangely enough: as a balm for the pain of losing her father.

Which raises the obvious question at the heart of the book: what is the connection between losing a father and adopting a vicious bird of prey?

We are familiar with other responses to grief.

We lose somebody we love. We pray. We say Kaddish. That we understand.

We lose somebody we love. We write about our love and our loss, as Joan Didion did in The Year of Magical Thinking. That we understand.

We lose somebody we love. We try to channel the loss into productive energy. We pedal for a cure by riding the Pan Mass Challenge. That we understand.

We lose somebody we love. We try to perpetuate their ideals through our work. They loved Israel. We support Israel. That we understand.

Praying, writing, channeling, carrying on ideals—all those are responses to the pain of a loved one's death that we understand. But how does bringing a bird of prey into your house help with the pain of losing your father?

We are in the midst of reading *Bamidbar*, in the wilderness. What does it mean to be *in the wilderness*?

The Israelites were moving from slavery to the promised land. From a past trauma to a future redeemed.

But in order to lay claim to that new future, the Israelites *themselves* had to change.

They have to become stronger. They have to overcome their fear. A constant troupe is *chazak ve'ematz*, be strong and resolute. Do not be afraid, for the Lord your God is with you.

And, they have to be softer, more compassionate. The Torah commands the Israelites to love the stranger as we love ourselves because we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Stronger, softer. More fierce, more compassionate. As Micah Goodman has taught us, the point of these dualing impulses is never again were we to be slaves. Be strong. And never shall we become Egyptian taskmasters. Be compassionate.

The Israelites were supposed to change in the wilderness so that they could earn their future.

Which brings us back to Helen Macdonald. Her father had died suddenly. Why bring in a bird of prey?

Macdonald explains that after she lost her father, she could *not* find another *father*. So she had to find *another self*. Her first self was the one that had been blessed to have a father. Her second self was the one that now had to figure out how to live without her father. But why a hawk? She explains:

I was in ruins. Some deep part of me was trying to rebuild itself, and its model was right there on my fist. The hawk was everything I wanted to be: solitary, self-possessed, free from grief and numb to the hurts of human life.

If she wanted to become like her hawk, she succeeded. She withdrew from human company and spent literally all her time hunting with her goshawk. She unplugged her phone. She told her friends not to call or visit. One Sunday morning a friend named Christina knocks on her door with two cups of coffee and the Sunday paper, and Macdonald just wants her to go away. She was changing in her wilderness, becoming harder like her bird.

And then one day, she looked at her own hands. She used her hands as a launching pad for her bird, and because her bird had these sharp talons that clutched and scratched and clawed,

her hands were scarred. One day it dawns on her that “hands are for other human hands to hold. They should not be reserved exclusively as perches for hawks.”

It also dawned on her that she and her hawk did not really have the kind of reciprocal relationship that loving human beings have. Her hawk loved her next meal more than her handler. At the end of the book, Helen Macdonald feels like her experience training the hawk has healed her, made her stronger, made her more at peace with her father’s life and death. She brings her hawk to another bird handler and moves on, more open to reconnect with other human beings.

Her hawk made her stronger and then made her softer.

At some point all of us wander in our own wilderness, like the Israelites, like Helen Macdonald.

We wander in the wilderness when somebody we love dies.

We wander in the wilderness when we feel loneliness.

We wander in the wilderness when we feel stuck.

We wander in the wilderness when we look at our life and feel that it is not coming together.

When we wander in the wilderness, can we find a new us: stronger and then softer?

That combination of strong and soft was the beautiful voice of Sheryl Sandberg this week, who posted reflections upon reaching the *sheloshim*, the thirty days, after the passing of her husband Dave Goldberg.

Today is the end of sheloshim for my beloved husband—the first thirty days....

A childhood friend of mine who is now a rabbi recently told me that the most powerful one-line prayer he has ever read is: “Let me not die while I am still alive.” I would have never understood that prayer before losing

Dave. Now I do.

I think when tragedy occurs, it presents a choice. You can give in to the void, the emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even breathe. Or you can try to find meaning. These past thirty days, I have spent many of my moments lost in that void. And I know that many future moments will be consumed by the vast emptiness as well.

But when I can, I want to choose life and meaning.

When we find ourselves wandering in the wilderness, may we choose life and meaning by becoming both more strong and more compassionate than we were before. Shabbat shalom.