

**Steampunk Torah: Bamidbar      Numbers 1:1-4:20    May 28, 2011**

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*Major source of d'var Torah research for these midrashim: Rabbi Shefa Gold's Torah Journeys.*

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**Into the Wilderness**

“The woods are just trees/the trees are just wood...” -Little Red, Into the Woods

**“Midway on our life's journey, I found myself**

**In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell**

**About those woods is hard -- so tangled and  
rough**

**And savage that thinking of it now, I feel**

**The old fear stirring...” -Inferno, Dante (translation: Robert Pinsky)**

As she stepped out of the deep bath, Mari visualized all her fears and the traumatic encounter of the morning being washed out of her, staying behind in the fragrant water. She wrapped herself in one of the thick, voluminous towels that hung on an ornate rack on the wall, turned and reached back into the bath to pull the plug; as she watched the water drain away for a moment, she let herself be emptied of worry. She quickly re-braided her damp hair, coiled the braids in a lump at her neck, shoving hairpins back in until it felt secure. She scrubbed her body a bit with the pleasing,

homespun-rough-feeling towel, then let it pool on the floor at her feet as she reached for her kippah. Placing her kippah on her head, she stood there naked, and met her own eyes in the mirror. "I can do this," she told her reflection, then reached for her clothing. She decided to leave off her corset; she took great delight in kicking it with more viciousness than necessary until it lay in the corner, a small cream-colored tangle of thick fabric and laces. She chuckled as she thought how she must look: a naked woman with decorously braided hair, wearing a kippah and kicking viciously at her corset. In truth, the action made her feel gloriously daring and defiant; it awakened her warrior spirit.

She dressed quickly, for some reason glad now that she had always gravitated toward earthy, rich dark tones in clothing- her scuffed, thick but soft brown boots, shiny with use and supple; her fine brown wool skirt, which could be clipped up to give her legs more freedom to climb, run and move; her thick leather belt which she had adapted herself, adding a pouch and leather thongs for tying all kinds of useful tools; her shirtwaist simple, comfortable dark plum coat; all of it felt comforting and made her think she'd be able to blend into the shadows more, should that be required. Buckling the sturdy belt at her waist with its reassuring weight and jangle of useful tools, she felt strong, fortified, confident. As ready as she ever would be, Mari opened the bathroom door and stepped out into the passage accompanied by a cloud of scented steam.

Is stood in the hall outside the door, leaning against the wall, arms folded, looking determinedly, violently patient. He unfolded his arms and looked her over as though assessing her for battle. "Ah yes. You look refreshed and ready. This way," he turned

stiffly and led her back down the hall and into the cavernous “forest” room again, walking so fast she had to practically trot to keep up.

Mari hardly saw the bright wonders of the cavernous great hall this time; she was too focused on what possibly lay ahead. She tried to consciously deepen her breathing, relax her shoulders; she remembered what it was to feel calm, cool, competent...when she was walking away from home with her few possessions on her back, she had felt equal to anything; but then, she was on a road with ordinary challenges ahead- she was not facing unknowns that weren't even in her realm of experience.

“Take heart, Mari,” Is had stopped at a small, round wooden door down a flight of steps that Mari had not noticed before. “you are more than equal to this task.

Remember that everything that occurs in this room is all a matter of your perception.” Is took out a handkerchief and patted his brow.

For someone who keeps telling me not to worry, he sure looks awfully tense, Mari thought.

He put the handkerchief away, took Mari's hand, bowed over it, pressed it briefly to his lips, then took her hand in both of his own, opening her fingers wide and placing her palm on the doorknob. Mari felt a warm throbbing in her palm as her fingers wrapped around the knob, almost as if she held a living heart in her hand.

“There. You've imprinted. The way is open to you now, Mari. I will, “ His voice grew suddenly rough. He cleared his throat and looked sheepishly down at his shoes, “Have tea ready for when you get back.”

Mari blinked, nodded, and turned her back on him, slowly turning the handle and pushing the door open. There was a slight sucking sound as she pushed the door in, as though the chamber had been sealed, airtight.

She stepped over the threshold, trembling, and let the door fall closed behind her. she saw satiny-smooth rock walls that undulated in places glowing faintly amber, as though the substance itself had flowed like lava at some point, and trapped the molten light of torches. She ran her hand along the wall; it was faintly warm- again she felt as though she were touching a living thing. She removed her hand and rubbed the palm, shuddering slightly. It wasn't exactly comfortable feeling like she was inside something that pulsed with life.

The ground under her boots was hard, packed earth, and gave slightly with each step. That was all...walls and floor, a single hallway stretching in front of her. She was not so foolish as to let down her guard; she rested one of her hands loosely on her belt of Useful Items, ready to grab a tool or weapon at a moment's notice.

"Mari," she heard his voice, then, coming from up ahead where the cave tunnel curved out of sight. He didn't sound urgent; she had heard this note in his voice a thousand times, a note of welcome, of relief, when she'd been away too long. Even as her steps quickened toward the bend in the tunnel, her heart, which had lurched at the sound of his voice, picking up speed until she could hear it drumming in her ears, even as she picked up her skirts in one hand in order to move faster toward that voice, her mind was busy building walls: no, this wasn't possible. No, this was a trick. No, it could not be him.

The corner was sharp; she put her hand around it, feeling the sleek warmth of the wall unchanged, and edged her shoulder and her face around, to peer into what lay ahead. Abruptly, her thoughts of caution fell away, and she was starting forward; she could not move fast enough.

“Grandfather. Grandfather. Grandfather,” she was moaning quietly, reaching out for him, the dearest man in all the world. He was, inexplicably, there: sitting in his old study chair; she was there, in his study, not a book or a paper out of place. Her fingers closed around his shoulder and it was solid and real, the rough wool of his old sweater exactly the same, the sweet spicy smell of his bay rum exactly the same- he took her trembling hand in his own, and it was his hand, with a small blue mark in the thumbnail where he had hit it with a hammer. He stood slowly, just as he always had when he had been studying too long and was stiff at the joints; he unfolded himself to his full height and took her in his arms then, and her head lay on his chest just as it always had, his glasses in the pocket of his shirt poking her chin a little, his chin nestling in her hair and on...her kippah.

The kippah. His kippah. The kippah that he would be wearing, if he were alive. She pulled back to look at his face, and there his eyes were, blue and clear and unaccountably- yes, that was the familiarity- very much like Is’ eyes. His curling, iron-grey head was hatless. He smiled at her then, and placed a hand on her kippah. It felt like a bird settling on her head, and reminded her, with a flipping over of her heart, of those hands on her head that had meant to harm earlier today. Could that have only been today?

“You are wearing it, my girl,” he said, and his voice was the same, rough and quiet and rumbly in his chest. “and if I am not mistaken, it nearly was the cause of grave harm to you. Your loyalty and stubbornness are going to cause you harm along the way, but they will serve you well if you learn how to harness them.”

“You...Grandfather,” she began, stopping in confusion as he began that near-silent chuckle of his; it shook his body and rumbled low in his chest, making tears gather in the corners of his eyes.

“Please, Mari, don’t say, ‘but you’re dead,’ I thought I had taught you to write better dialogue.”

“But,”

“Yes, child, I am dead. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, as that ass William said. Says, rather: he likes to quote himself all the darned time. Cheats at cards. Drinks too much. Can’t abide him, but he certainly knows how to write. He’s working on something now, some fool thing about Peter Pan and Oscar Wilde. Starring Oscar Wilde, of course. We’re all to see it at Christmas.” Hearing her gasp, he chuckled. “Yes, child, Christmas. Do you remember, you used to long for a tree as a child. How you clamored! the ‘deals’ you thought up, the things you tried to bribe us all with! ‘here comes the end of December, it’s time for Mari’s ‘deals’, we would say to each other; to tell you the truth, we became so entertained by your increasingly extravagant bids for a Christmas tree, we wouldn’t have given you one simply because we would so have missed seeing what you’d come up with next.”

He grew sober then, and smoothed her cheekbones with his thumbs, cupping her face in his hands. “Oh my dear one. If I had had any idea of what awaited after death, and how much more important love is than any separation of creed and holidays, I would have given you a thousand bright, sparkling Christmas trees, and put your menorah beside them.”

Tears sprang into her eyes as it dawned on her that he was not somehow alive, that it was not a mistake or a joke, that she was seeing him here now, hearing him and feeling him and smelling him, but that her Grandfather was truly dead.

“Listen now, child. You have a challenge ahead of you. You will talk to many others before the day is through. I have made sure to be here, acting against the rules of this place, because I wanted to warn you. You can trust me, but after this, do not take at face value anything you hear or see. The challenge before you is great, and has been of old; all Apprentices come through here in order to be approved and bonded with the Manuscripts. The difference this time is,” he put a firm hand on her kippah again and lowered his already soft voice, looking earnestly down into her eyes, “there is a breach in the Archives. All is not as it should be, here. Your master-to-be, Ismael, is not aware of this: there is a great darkness growing here. I am not aware of the source, and can’t tell you any more, but you are the one who can find it out. When an Apprentice bonds with the Manuscripts for the first time, she sees them as they will never be seen again. You are stepping outside of time, now, and you are seeing, not just the past existence of the Manuscripts, but the present and future. You are seeing the layer that you will bring and add to this place. It is why the task is different for each

Apprentice- you are seeing yourself. You are taking a census, in a way, of yourself and what you will be to this place.

Normally, the only dangers you face are those in your own mind, heart, spirit. All Apprentices who came before you saw things of their own making, and saw if their time here would be so brief as to add nothing, or very long, indeed. It is how Ismael knew when it was time to go and find you, and it is how he knew where: he was told many years ago, when he became an Apprentice. He was told by the Manuscripts.

Your challenge here today is different, because something from outside has entered the Archives, and made this place its home. I do not know what it is. I have felt it on several occasions and it has been...cold. It has been spreading, and some of the Manuscripts have been affected by it.”

“You ... live here?” she asked, taking his big, warm, square hands in her own.

“Yes, child, all who are a part of you are here. I am ...I am the part of your Grandfather that was your own creation: your understanding, your belief, your love; I am your Grandfather, but I am also...you.” his eyes searched her face, and he continued, “This doesn’t make sense now, my dear, but it will, someday.”

“Will I see you again?” her voice was small, as though she had climbed back into the body of her nine-year-old self.

“Not in this form, my dearest one, unless a great crisis calls for us to be Reawakened. It can be done, but has never happened in the history of this place.”

“Grandfather, I...”

“I know, my dear. I love you too. I am more proud than I can say.” His great, solid hands took both of her shoulders, and turned her around gently to face a door in the

wall of his study that she had not noticed before. "Continue on through that door, dear one. East faces the rising sun, you should find some answers there; the shadow has not yet blocked the light, and has had least power in that direction so far. West is a vision of where your path must lead you: the future. I do not know what you will find there, as it changes every moment, and the shadow may try to deceive you. South is constancy; it is your home. It is both past and future. South is the direction you go when all feels lost. North," he chuckled, "well, North is here: the wisdom of your ancestors. There are two more directions, but you must find them, and find out what they are about, on your own."

His hands pushed her forward. She tried to turn, say one last thing, but he held her firmly. "don't look back now, my dear. It is urgent now that you complete your Bonding and hurry back to the Archivist. He must be told about the shadow that seeps into this place, getting stronger by the day. I do not know how you will find your way back; there was always a way for Apprentices to get back safely, but this place has become a wilderness and there is no clear way back for you. All I can give you is this knowledge: in the South lie your keys home. Light, and the silver trumpets of sound- they will lead you out of the wilderness of this place. And Mari...I am always with you." His hands came down and closed around one of her own, and, just as he had, he opened her hand and placed it palm first on the door handle, which pulsed slightly and seemed to begin turning before she had exerted any pressure.

Her fingers closing around the warm metal handle, she leaned her forehead against the small wooden door, her throat feeling tight. "I am not ready. I am not ready to say goodbye, Grandfather. Not again."

His hands came up to her shoulders again, then patted her back, and she tried to memorize, to carry with her, their square, solid feel, warm through the fabric of her coat.

“We’ll meet again, my dearest one. Be brave. Nothing should have any fear for you, if you only knew what awaits...just be glad you get to miss that ass William’s collaboration with Oscar Wilde and James Barrie, about Oscar Wilde,” he muttered crankily. She thought she felt a small pressure on her kippah, as though he had dropped a kiss there, and, with the nostalgic scent of Bay Rum still in her nose and bringing up so many forgotten feelings of comfort, safety, of haven she thought she could always count on, the man she thought would live forever, the man she thought she would always be able to talk to, had pushed her through the door, and was gone.

She turned quickly back to the door, wanting to open it, talk to him, stay longer- but there was no longer any door. Behind her was simply solid cavern wall, smooth as before.

She was in a small, circular cavern, lit by the same smooth, softly glowing walls. The light was not steady; it shifted and flickered, as though the room was lit by a bonfire or torches. A mosaic of stones in shades of sand blending to soft green rippled in a spiral pattern around the entire circumference of the room. There were several doors set in the cavern, all different shapes and sizes. Straight across from her was a very small door, round, shiny and purple, inset with a large dull bronze Hebrew Aleph symbol. She walked into the middle of the spiral and looked up. The ceiling was low, curving up to make the room feel very round and contained, like she was standing in an amber-lit snow globe. In the center of the ceiling, corresponding with the center of the

spiral on the floor, there was an inlaid, fiery bird- a phoenix, or a Raven made of living fire? She could not tell.

She turned in place, to look at the door to the left of the Aleph door. It was arched and tall, made of roughhewn grey stone that reminded her of the Academy doors. She kept turning, past the blank place in the wall that had been the door to her Grandfather's study, to face the last door: this was the door that pulled her most. It was made of metal and had beautiful, ornate gears all over it that made her feel like she was peering into the inside of a giant clock. She moved toward it and touched it gently, tracing the interlocking gears with her finger. She followed the gears until she found what she thought was the handle: a small wheel with a spiral inside it instead of spokes, it looked to be the thing that would set the gears turning. She placed both hands on it and tried to turn it: nothing happened. She pulled, and the door stayed shut.

“Well, maybe it's not time yet to go through this door,” she muttered, and turned back to the small round door to the South, marked with a gleaming Aleph. She contemplated the letter, remembering her Grandfather's teaching that Aleph was the beginning, the letter that has the sound of an opening of the mouth, an intake of breath; it was the letter of potential. “Aleph,” he said, as she hung over his shoulder and watched him carve the lovely, crisscrossed letter out of wood, “is the letter of both inspiration and completeness. In the potential for sound lies the complete sound as it will be. Aleph teaches us to embrace both sides of life- the bitter and the sweet; both are necessary and beautiful things, if we are to have the fullness, the undivided completeness of our lives.” His hands were big and square, the strong, rough fingers making delicate

movements, coaxing the shape out where it lay dormant in the block of wood. It was like magic, watching the Aleph come to life with the gentle encouragement of his hands.

“The waters of your life won’t flow, Mari, unless you make space and have compassion for the times when they need to ebb,” he reached up and clasped her hand where it lay on his shoulder.

Mari opened her eyes again. He had said to take this door when all seemed lost. She didn’t feel desperate yet, so she paused and bit her lower lip, her hand brushing the smooth letter. He had also said, though, that through this door lay her home, and that it held the seed that was both beginning and end. “Okay, Grandpa, I’m ready. The joys and the sorrows. The bitter and the sweet. I embrace them.” She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and pressed her palm into the center of the gleaming, beautiful Aleph.