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Walking Inside the Sphere of an Idea

Rabbi Rebecca Milder | Shavuot / Bamidbar 2015 | Bronfman Torah

Rabbi Rebecca Milder ('91) is the Founding Director of the Jewish Enrichment Center, where children play with big Jewish ideas and recreate them, as part of the long tradition of Jewish conversation. The Jewish Enrichment Center does serious, creative text study with children and families on Sunday mornings and after school. Right now we're exploring Sh'mitah: jewishenrichment.org/blog/. She is a two time Alumni Venture Fund Grantee.

The child comes to us, whole: an integrated mass of sinews and tendons and impulse and desire, overflowing with *yetzer hara* of leaping and arguing and with *yetzer hatov* of singing and snuggling.

The child is hidden behind skin and bravery and what he believes to be true and what I cannot see.

We hold hands. A fugue, a thousand fugues, all playing at once with their demands, insistence on primacy, and it is hard to hear this child.

We walk.

We are *bamidbar*.

For four years now, I've been engaged in a gorgeous project of seriously creative text study with young children. The child - each individual child, with all her fascinations and fears, his hopes and sensitivities - is at the heart of my work. It's terribly hard to express what we do in words. We're nearing the end of our fourth year and my explanation still regularly falls flat.

But the place itself, overflowing with the children and their ideas - it is the

children who tell our story, through their words and art. And our story is an old one, recreated for today, for our community, from each family, and each child. Ours is the story of *Zeman Matan Torateinu* - the Time of Giving of Our Torah - and it is the story of *Bamidbar*, of Jews worldwide entering the fourth book of the Torah to walk *bamidbar* (in the wilderness), together.

We all take part in the unfolding of Torah in every generation: giving and receiving, wrestling, recreating. At the Jewish Enrichment Center, a child knows, *I matter here*: my voice matters in the ancient and ongoing Jewish conversation.

We take three themes a year and explore them in depth, listening to children's questions and steering our exploration into those arenas. Children explore with their whole selves, express their ideas in clay, song, conversation, movement, touch, costume, blocks, and a hundred more "languages." Children ask and grapple with questions they truly care about; they create their own meaning.

What is it like to open a theme, to walk inside the sphere of an idea, and not have a set idea we're handing the children? Not to *tell* children what to think and believe, but to trust in the ancient conversation and each other, to say out loud every day that I, the grown-up, do not know? It is like journeying *bamidbar*. The weeks of a theme launch are filled with an anxiety of not knowing, of testing different paths, of accidental burns so we know where to set up safety nets.

And walking inside a theme is to have the strictures of a journey: to know that every day, every person must pick up and move; there is no option to remain in the same place overnight, except on Shabbat, except during Sh'mitah. We build into our journey moments of reflection, for ourselves as individuals, for our teaching team to share together. Today, every day, the children and families will come to the building and I will need to be prepared with my best guess about which supplies we need, how we might share our ideas and our journey. I prepare myself to hear beyond the noise of posturing and daily demands to our diverse family values and the authentic voice of the child. Our pace varies.

What can we do with our parents, our grandparents - those generations who will not enter the Promised Land? Knowing as they do that the future is not theirs, will they still trust their own voice? Will they walk on the journey with us?

And what is this Sinai we are walking towards? A promise of clarity, that all of our wanderings *bamidbar* will make sense: Asher's journey to Asher, and Channah's journey to Channah, and mine to yours, and ours to our grandparents; that I, and you, might emerge with an understanding of our theme - of Torah - at once personalized, communal, historical, rising from who you are as an individual and who we are as a community and who we are and will be as a people. Every theme offers the possibility of arriving again at Sinai. And from every theme, we

might take forward our echo of that moment, in clay, costume, building projects, line drawings, newly recognized connections with each other and text.

This work is not for the faint of heart. You who would open your heart so wide as to admit every child and her wondering and insight - the child and the text will change you, press your heart to change its shape so you show up differently for every fresh journey.

At least there is familiarity to this work. The giving and receiving, the wrestling and recreating, is something that Jews do in every generation, in every country. My journey is with the children and families in Hyde Park, Chicago, and I am privileged and humbled to walk *bamidbar* with them, and with the Jews who have come before us.

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Where are we? What are we doing here? What do you mean? I am asking and the child is asking and we wonder where Sinai is, with its promise that all of Torah will be known, grasped, 70 faces into one

We are walking *bamidbar*, wrestling, grappling, feeling our feet press into the shifting sands and slipping, regaining our balance and hope, turning to each other again, waiting for that moment when we will recognize Sinai,

stretched out sand before us, nothing on the horizon but more sand and our hope of Sinai, reflected in the eyes of my neighbor, my stranger, my resident alien, my widow and orphan, my mom, my child - of all of us walking together *bamidbar*.

The children place their own feet in the shifting sand, dream of Sinai, create and recreate it, hurl the clay in frustration, clean up the broken glass and take out

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the oil pastels and mix the colors again. The child is whole. She walks her wholeness alongside us *bamidbar*. She discovers what she carries, hears her voice, forms her vision

as we carry together the echo of our last visit to Sinai. And what is Sinai, but the ever shifting image - the artist's painting, the child's sculpture, this stained glass window from 5-year-old Eliyahu - and the connection of our images, our hopes, our first grade dialogue with each other through Exodus. Our ongoing task is to capture that moment of nothingness which is entirely full, capture its transparency so we might hold it, turn it, peer inside, grasp its contents so we might carry them forward

for after Sinai, in the empty rush of sound after my breath returns, I see once again that I am standing *bamidbar*. The color of that rock, the edge of your foot, the beat of your heart - they startle me. I reach for your hand, see your young face reflected in the rising of the sun, and we step forward into the sand

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