



SIEBENQUELL

In Search of Elim!



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In the book of Numbers, chapter 33 begins with a marvelous line: »These are the stages of the people of Israel, when they went out of the land of Egypt by their companies under the leadership of Moses and Aaron« (Num 33, 1). The story then goes on to summarise the long journeying of Israel from the day it left Ramses in Egypt to the day it arrived in the steps of Moab, across the Jordan from Jericho. It is a travel itinerary of 42 stopping points. To borrow the phrase from Nelson Mandela, this is the story of *the long walk to freedom*.

If we chart these places on map, it quickly becomes apparent, that they journey from Ramses to the steppes of Moab, from Egypt to Israel are no great distances. Even at an easy pace, it would take only a matter of weeks, but never years. Reflecting on this fact, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks points out: »The real journey to freedom, however, is not a physical one. It is a mental, moral and spiritual one. It is long, arduous and demanding, and there are challenges and failures along the way.«

Tucked away in the folds of the story is verse 9. There we read: »And they set out from Marah and came to Elim; at Elim there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they camped there.« (Num 33, 9) After crossing the Red Sea the People of Israel pause in Marah. Elim is then only the second stop they make in the wilderness. But it was not just one more stop among many, because here the story teller stops to recount the details of the place. And then laconic storytellers stop to add details, they are also asking us to pause and take note of something of significance and value. And Elim is also recounted in the same detailed way in the book Exodus. »Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water.« (Ex 15, 27).

Elim is the place of water and refreshment, the first real oasis Israel comes upon. After finding no water during the first three days of travel through the wilderness, they come to Marah and find the water brackish and undrinkable. Only the miraculous intervention of God through Moses, makes the water potable. But Elim is different. It is a place that restores hope and strength. It is a place that is encouraging the people after a rough part of the journey.

I entered in the forty days of Lent, of the Holy Spring, by reflecting on this passage, and not my chance. Together with many other people, I have experienced the last two years as a *long walk to freedom*. And the outbreak of the war in the Ukraine, has deepened by sense of a long journey through the desert. Therefore, I am spending this Lent in search of Elim.

Elim is the place we need after wandering through long desert stretches. Our journey is also arduous and punctuated with disappointments. Deserts and wildernesses are like that. Dry, barren, hostile to life, inhospitable, because they are places where life is stripped down to its bare bones. But deserts as well as wildernesses can be navigated. The experience of the wilderness can be mastered. It is possible to find and fashion life in the barren wastelands. But only if you know how to find and make use of the oases.

This is, as Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks puts it, a spiritual journey, rather than a physical one. If we are not careful, we become obsessively focused on the desert, and forget that we must be on the lookout for oases. In these days of war in the Ukraine, too many people sit glued to the television news for hours on end, soaking up the images of destruction and death while devouring every little tidbit of news or gossip along the way. It leaves them panicked, fearful, anxious and often deeply depressed. They are failing to stop in Elim, where there are twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees.

There are the tens of thousands of people who offer assistance, money, aid, and shelter to the streams of refugees. Here we see a tremendous generosity of spirit bubbling up like a spring of water. There are courageous men and women of faith staying behind in Kiev, refusing to leave their fellow citizens to their fate. We witness a greatheartedness, a magnificent depth of spirit like a spring breaking through the desert of self-centeredness, rugged individualism and narcissism to which we have grown so accustomed. Men and women of peace repeatedly march and demonstrate for peace within Russian cities, defying arrest. Moral and civil courage, as well as deep human solidarity are breaking through in the same place where others have fostered war, devastation and injustice. Major Archbishop Shevchuk, head of Greek Ukrainian Catholic Church, has sent his priests into the bunkers and subway tunnel to celebrate the Liturgy with his people, to pray with them and comfort them. In a time when we are bombarded with stories about the Church as her worst, here the Church is showing herself at her very best. And it fills me with pride and determination, like a palm tree in the desert. Moreover, people are praying, seeking opportunities to pray and speaking of prayer. That is also a refreshing wellspring in a desert of sheer secularism that has disguised the fact that there is more faith in the world and in human hearts than we care to acknowledge.

These moments are Elim. There are places that restore hope and strength, places that encourage us during rough parts of the journey. We must be on the lookout for them, otherwise the desert will swallow us. God has interspersed them through the arduous rigours of the wilderness we are traversing, but we must choose to seek them and stop there, making use of the refreshment and life they offer our spirits. Hope will not abandon us, but if we do not stop at Elim, we will abandon hope.

In this time of war and pandemic, I can think of no better way to mark and celebrate Lent. I, for my part, will be in search of Elim for every one of the forty days of the Holy Spring.

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