

Birobidzhan

Tomer Dotan-Dreyfus

Introduction

Tomer Dotan-Dreyfus's *Birobidzhan* brings back to life the Stalinist experiment to create a Jewish autonomous zone in the Siberian Far East, only this time with a twist - the experiment is successful.

It is the second decade of the twentieth century, and the Shtetl, Birobidzhan, is getting ready for the Bundist youth movement's annual trip to Moscow, when a series of weird events cracks the gentle fabric of the peaceful place.

First, two foreign men appear in the town, bringing outside money into the circulation of the Birobidzhaner enclosed economy. Then, a brutal murder occurs in the woods and the oldest Birobidzhaner is found both beaten up and shot. Later that day, a little girl appears, who cannot or does not want to speak.

Birobidzhan follows two main storylines. The first is that of the Leibowitz family: Sulamith and her teenage sons, Joel and Alex, as they find themselves split and bitter in light of the new happenings in town. The second takes place in 1990 shortly after the fall of the USSR, when Sascha takes his best friend Gregory on a road trip to try to take care of his depression. The novel also follows the stories of Dmitri, the only person in Birobidzhan to own a rifle, making him the immediate suspect of the murder, Rachel, a bold teenager whose boredom drives her to test the limits of herself and those of everyone else, and finally the story of Smidowitch, an even smaller, more remote village founded one hour away from Birobidzhan by those who aspired to a religious orthodox lifestyle.

If *Birobidzhan* was a political experiment, the novel is a literary one. It experiments with time, narratology and borders; both actual geographic ones and how stretchable they can be, and artistic borders between authors and their works, exploring how far they are allowed to interfere in the magic of their own creation before it turns against them.

Birobidzhan – A shtetl tale
A novel by Tomer Dotan-Dreyfus

Translated from German by Chantal Wright

I.

In Birobidzhan everything was topsy-turvy.

The fisherman had threaded his hook through the bait and thrown the rod out into the ice hole on the frozen lake. It was one of those quiet days at the beginning of spring when the inhabitants of Birobidzhan were still worn out from the long Siberian winter and not even the infamous *bocher* from nearby Kosnikova Street had turned up to get on his nerves.

Normally they spent hours there skating, and the fishing area was their favourite spot. The fisherman assumed that their activity was fuelled by adrenalin, since the *bocher* knew only all too well that sharp skates posed a danger on thin ice.

Boris's story begins in approximately 1932 when he was five years old. But why then? Who can say where the beginning of an individual's story lies? The individual in question, of course. But since he is no longer with us and we are unable to ask, his first memory will serve as our starting point.

The winter of January 1932 was extremely harsh. Boris had been born five years previously in a field near a tiny shtetl, 150 kilometres south-east of today's border between Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. His parents, a Jewish father and a Christian mother, had to hide from all sides. And in 1932 little Boris set out on his way home through the heavy snow in the village of Liuboml after watching his father ice-fishing.

There was a snowstorm and although Boris was properly and warmly dressed, he had great difficulty making his way forward. His black and overly large coat was borrowed from the neighbour's recently deceased husband, and every few steps it got caught up between his legs and then stuck to the frozen ground. The cold burned his skin through the coat's three holes, holes that must have led to the death of its former owner. After thinking about his father and wondering how he would survive the storm, Boris decided that it was his shoes that were slowing him down and without further ado he removed them from his feet.

Carrying his shoes in his right hand and his father's sandwich tin in his left, he saw the first house on the outskirts of Liuboml. At that point he lost sensation in his body and within a few seconds he had sunk down onto a bed of ice and snow, no longer able to differentiate between the colours around him. Everything was grey. Grey and triste.

What goes through the head of a five-year-old child as it lies dying? Boris is the only inhabitant of Birobidzhan who could answer this question for us.

An hour later, or three minutes, sometimes Boris told it one way and sometimes another, he felt a little hand gently stroking his eyelids. A wave of sudden warmth flooded over him.

So, as you correctly surmised, this was the first time he saw her. Shining like the moon: her face did not move, it just looked, stared even. At first glance her skin was scarcely distinguishable from the snow, her hair was black and pleasant as she began to lovingly stroke his forehead. She had placed one hand on his mouth, her small ear and her small head rested on his chest in almost an imposition. She had listened to him for several minutes. Her scent was one that Boris had never smelled before. As though she didn't come from around here but from the shores of Greece. She was missing the smell of sweat and dirt that sometimes characterised the farmers of the region, who knew one other only all too well and subsequently felt no need to wash more than once a week – washing more frequently was not only unnecessary, it was regarded as a waste of time.

The sweet scent of spring flowers, followed by that of bees and their honey, was also in the air at that moment. Honey like the honey that Boris and his young friends would frequently steal from the hives of the Christian beekeeper. The same honey that was absent twenty-five years later when Boris met his future wife at Birobidzhan station. Her scent, which was to reveal itself to him that evening, was made up of all the lovely scents he knew, but not that of honey. He had smelled honey for the first time in the snow. It was a pure, clean scent, pure as the fresh water of a newly molten glacier.

It seemed as though the girl was listening to another voice. Whispers? Boris, who had the feeling that somewhere, between his frozen heart and the strange girl, whispering was taking place, tried in vain to get up. The girl pushed him back into the snow with her free hand, looked at him and said admonishingly, "You! If you don't want my help, I'll go! Tell me: should I go?!".

Boris, confused and surprised by her unexpected reaction, replied in a stammer: "No. No, please don't go, but stop talking about me, you two!" "Who's talking then?" "Isn't there somebody there talking to you?" asked Boris, thinking that he might have reacted too quickly. He felt a little stupid.

“Yes, there is”, said the little girl, “but I’m not replying. I’m listening to it. And you should listen to it too, then you would know that soon you will be strong and full of life and that you have no reason to be afraid.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. And felt stupid again.

“Are you sure?” she parroted back. Or asked back. He wasn’t sure what she meant but he was sure that everything would be fine again. That he wouldn’t stay in the snow, that he would make it to his feet, stand up and simply carry on home, walk the last eternity, the final two hundred metres. By the time all of his thoughts had come to an end – and he did his thinking a bit more quickly than you are doing your reading – he opened his eyes and she was already gone. He saw how she waved goodbye, her outline growing smaller as she moved further away. She left behind a trail of molten snow where she walked, as though she was actually warmer than anybody else Boris had met up until then. “That’s not a bad first memory”, Josef had said to him once, as the two were standing next to one another, fishing, two 32-year-olds in Birobidzhan, the new city of hope.

Boris and Esther had recently decided to get married and the wedding was to take place the following month at the community’s expense, though not in the large communal dining room. Boris the child got up and looked around. Suddenly he was able to run, not just walk. The three holes in his black coat had mysteriously vanished, all he had to do was choose his direction. Home, or the path left by the warmth of the small mysterious girl.

After three or four steps in her direction, Boris turned around and ran home. His mother hugged him, then she shouted at him, demanded information: Where had he been? Why had his walk taken such a long time? Who had his father been ice fishing with? What had they talked about? Had anybody seen him on the way (here Boris patently lied)? And again: why had everything taken so long?

“Mama”, he had said, “the snowstorm held me up, don’t you see?” He was proud, wanted to tell his mother how he had stood up to the weather, how he hadn’t given up in the storm.

Today he sometimes thinks of his mother’s answer when he goes to bed alone, or on cold April days when he sits among the young fishermen who converse, grumble, tell jokes that he no longer understands – or at least thinks he doesn’t understand. Or as soon as thirteen-

year-old Hannah Greenboym smiles at him and at first glance it seems as though she's flirting, though somewhere between the first and second glance Boris Kleyn remembers that hers is a pitying smile, but regardless of whether Hannah means it one way or the other, she smiles at him which means that today he will return with a good catch, or at least carrying her smile in his fishing tackle. Yes, at exactly that moment the voice of Christina Kleyn pops up in his head: "Darling, there is no snow today! Look!".

On the other side of the window there was an unusually warm and white winter sun, which had bathed the entire village in a merciful light.

"My son", she continued, to whoever might be about. "The poor thing is delusional, just like his father!" Delusional.

Spring had arrived. Plump buds were bursting open and, the old fisherman thought to himself, new petals were unfolding their way into the soul just as they were unfolding themselves into the air. Long before these buds could be described as flowers, the rumour of Boris's death would spread like wildfire. The horror that greeted the death of the famous fisherman was most out of the ordinary for the inhabitants of the village.

A shot echoed across the valley and herds of princely black and white horses could be seen careering over the greening fields, the way decomposition travels across a body. Everybody had rushed from their houses onto the street and was watching the fleeing mass on the 'big hill', eyes wide open in surprise. There was never any shooting in Birobidzhan.

On the heels of the three herds of horses, which had now completely run amok, three young herdsmen appeared. They stood next to one another on the summit of the hill like the protagonists in a Greek tragedy: they were – how human – in the wrong place at the wrong time. And all those pairs of eyes, like barbed wire tensed in the transparent ether, waited for a response to the deus ex machina-like sound. The confused boys – Simon was the smallest, he was already 15 but looked 10, perhaps because of his gentle face; Reuven and Issachar – stood there speechless. The silence of the sudden crack made by that sound that was both high and low was the only thing that forced its way into the valley alongside the swirling wind until, ill at ease with itself, it filled the valley completely. Whereas the herds of

horses had been startled by the shot, the dismay of the herdsmen had other grounds. Boris had been beaten to death and was discovered leaning on the birch, the old birch, the only birch, that had rooted itself in the middle of the forest for centuries. It was Iliya who said so, and his words broke the long silence. The inhabitants of Birobidzhan, shocked, were beginning to push through the horses to climb the hill when one of them suddenly shouted: "Stop!".

"Why was there a shot if he was beaten to death?"

"We'll find out in the forest. And take your children home, this is no place for them, damn it."

"Didn't we hear a shot? So there's somebody running around our forest with a shotgun!"

"Maybe he's psychotic."

"Of course he's psychotic, he shot Boris! Poor Boris, who never did a bad deed his entire life!"

"Boris wasn't shot, he was beaten, you hear!" "Then somebody else was shot!" "Watch what you say, there are children here." "Why are there still children here? Didn't we tell you to take your children home?" "Where's the doctor? Call the doctor."

And Isaak was running to fetch the doctor when he met Rachel on the street. A brief hello. An explanation of why he was in a rush. Silence. Rachel? Where are you going? Home. Strange. Isaak thought how calm she seemed. Too calm, given the terrible news that would have horrified any inhabitant of Birobidzhan, but casting a suspicious eye on Rachel would be much too simple for Isaak, and much too simple for us, so let's not probe any further. Rachel had just read a poem that had stripped her of any ability to experience horror.

There wasn't much for Dr Goldstein to do. He pressed down gently on the dead neck with his middle and index fingers, arranged his eyebrows into a position indicating earnestness and fixed his gaze on an undetermined spot in the distance with a look that signified import and delivered his analysis: "Dead".

Quiet. The waters of the River Amur also stopped for the oldest man in Birobidzhan. Whenever anybody died, one was supposed to fetch the Chevra Kadischa from Khabarovsk. Birobidzhan was so small that even the ever-profitable business of death didn't function as it should.

"Well, who's coming with me?" asked the doctor, with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

"Me", Sulamith said suddenly, her voice, broken by sobs, emerging from the crowd that had gathered.

"Anybody else?" barked the doctor, for whom Froy Leibowitz obviously did not suffice.

"No?" "Right then." "Sulamith, do you have everything you need? We have to get going."

(At that moment an echo of Sappho's words resonated, borne on the wings of the wind: As a wind in the mountains /assaults an oak /Love shook my breast.)

"You won't find him there, my love." Sulamith turned around and saw her mother, who was the same age as the dead man. Her kind brown eyes rested in Sulamith's, which were the same colour but almond-shaped, mother turned daughter once again.

"But I'll help you look if you like." "So you're coming too?" asked the doctor. "Right, well then, go home and get what you need, we'll meet at the town hall in half an hour", he said gruffly.

It began to rain. Soon it was pouring down in a military rhythm, as though accompanied by a battle drum. The younger of the two women put up an umbrella and held it over their heads. They met the doctor, Leonid Raphaelov Goldstein, in front of the town hall. It would take three hours to get to Khabarovsk and fetch the members of the Chevra Kadischa, and three hours to come back.

The smell of old smoke hung in Leonid's green car. It had sunk into the red cloth that covered the layer of plastic. Sulamith rolled down the window, allowing the fresh air to penetrate the car and spread itself out. A deep breath. Breathe in, breathe out. Julia watched her daughter, a strong, sensible woman who, one day, following a three-week spell of gloom and melancholia, had turned into a hopeless daydreamer. Julia would later tell me that she was proud of her.

The highway was almost empty and Leonid drove more and more quickly. After he had increased his speed for the third time, Julia finally asked whether he could slow down a little as he was making her nervous. "This is not the German Autobahn, you know. This is Siberia."

"Ach, and how do you know what the German Autobahn looks like, Froy Leibowitz?" the doctor asked wryly, not reducing the car's speed by a single kilometre. Julia, who inhabited a world of serenity, said only that she needed some air and opened her window, which was located directly behind Leonid. The sudden blast of wind surprised the driver, and he immediately dropped down to the speed limit, thus waking Sulamith, who had leaned her head against the window in exhaustion.

"Are we there yet?"

"No, not yet. We've almost reached Smidovich."

Smidovich, a small settlement an hour from Birobidzhan, was home to one hundred and three people clustered into just twelve families. It was known as the "Orthodox Birobidzhan" because Birobidzhan's Orthodox Jews, fearful that their way of life was disappearing, had founded the new settlement back in the seventies. RUMBLING. WHAT WAS THAT? RUMBLING.

The car drove on, nobody knew what had caused the sudden rumbling. Nobody dared to ask. (Once upon a time.) As they approached the exit to Smidovich they could scarcely believe their eyes. The people of the town were all standing next to the highway. Julia, who recognised the older inhabitants and was probably still in touch with many of them, looked at the rows of people with concern and said, quietly to begin with, and then more loudly: "Stop, Leon, something has happened here. Perhaps they need our help?"

Two rows, black and white, everybody looking up. Leonid stopped the car, warned them that they should be quick and swore not to get involved in any Smidovich peculiarity.

"Albert."

Albert looked at Julia with empty, glassy eyes. "What's going on, Albert?" Albert didn't answer but pointed towards the sky and said, in a barely audible voice, "Don't you see it, Julia? Don't you see it?"

"What am I supposed to see, Albert?"

In the sky the clouds were converging in a very strange manner, or rather, they were sailing in different directions. As though there wasn't just one wind, but several, each one just as strong as the next, in combat. The rumbling turned out to be unusually heavy thunder, and it precipitated an inner and completely unexpected shiver in the hearts of the three travellers. This was the first time Sulamith and Leonid had seen anything like this. The clouds collided.

All at once it began to thunder, to flash with lightning, to storm. Leonid: "Julia, Suli, we have to get going while we still can." "You won't get any further," said old Albert, pointing his finger in their direction of travel. A giant pine tree lay stretched out from one end of the road to the other, sending its wooden arms and wooden hands through the windows of the houses on the edge of Smidovich. A flash of lightning cut the sky in two and rebounded from a nearby lake, twitching, the lake itself beginning to roar.

Many people were swaying, deep in prayer, others thought their prayers might be more successful if they were in the synagogue. Albert concurred and rushed to the synagogue with them.

"Julia, are you all coming? You certainly can't remain outside. Or would you like to go to my house? I'll come back after prayers. There's some chicken soup, you could warm it up." The three of them looked at one another and Leonid said: "I'm not going to any synagogue right now. Let's warm ourselves some soup at Albert's. Thank you for the invitation. I don't want to be rude, but I wonder if, alongside your very important prayers, you have contacted the authorities in Khabarovsk and asked them to remove the giant tree from the road?"

"Of course, Mr ..." "It's Leon." "Leon, we might be traditional people of prayer, but we're not stupid. I know that for you the two sometimes go hand-in-hand. And, ironically, some people accept your portrait of us in an attempt to ingratiate themselves. But we can happily continue this conversation later on."

"Boris the fisherman. Oh, he was a nice man. Is he dead?!" asked Albert, a look of surprise on his face. Silence, he carried on talking. "Terrible. Don't tell me any more, I don't want to know. They poison the soul, these stories. But it proves my point that such a terrible deed

can only really happen *there*, among those pagans in their big cities, in their dark streets, in their train stations. It can only happen in your part of the world. It will never happen in Smidovich. Here we are faithful to God. Can you pull the door shut behind you?"

"Why bother? I would have thought that since you are so faithful to God He would uphold his end of the bargain and keep you safe from crime, or isn't that how it works?"

The short distance between Albert's house and Moyshe's was rainy and blustery. The handful of steps seemed to take an age and the doctor's heart beat loudly within his chest.

"Who's there? Rebbe Albert?" came an old voice.

"Yes, Moyshe, I'm here with a friend."

Moyshe opened the door and looked at the two visitors for a long time. "You're not from here. I don't know you."

"That's right, Moyshe, this is Leonid. He's from Birobidzhan. He's on his way to Khabarovsk and is spending the night with me. Leonid came with my old friend Julia, from my time in Birobidzhan, before I came here. He's a doctor, perhaps he can help with your problem!" Albert said. Leonid felt ill at ease.

The man in front of him was small. The woman in the kitchen behind him was also small and wore a colourful cloth on her head. In Birobidzhan women only wore a headscarf for practical reasons, when they worked in the fields, for example, to prevent the sweat from running into their eyes. But the woman behind Moyshe wore it for other reasons. She wore it because of them. She appeared to be a redhead. Her nose and cheeks were covered in freckles.

"Sarah, please make us a pot of tea." The young woman, whom he was later to introduce as his daughter when she entered the living room carrying the teapot and they had all taken a seat, so about five or seven minutes later, gave a mischievous smile and disappeared into the kitchen. Like the two of them the house was small, and made of wood. Leonid put his hands on the walls as though he wanted to test the workmanship.

"It looks fragile. But this house has survived several storms. And this one won't destroy it either. You're safe here, don't worry!"

The thick air stood still. The gentlemen sat at a round table and fedoras were removed from heads once again. A pot was filled with hot water, there were sighs in Yiddish, the man of the house was asked by the rabbi how he had found today's Maggid. "Which Parashah did you read? What does one read in the middle of May?" Leonid asked.

Each week there was a reading of a portion of text from the Five Books of Moses, the Torah, or, as it is called in Yiddish, the *Tojre* (pronounced toy-ruh).

"Oh, is it May already?" Moyshe asked, "please excuse us, we have different names for the months. A few days ago the month of Siwan began. This week's Parashah is called Bemidbar or 'in the desert'. Do you know it? Do you go to synagogue?" asked the man of the house. "You probably only go on Yom Kippur, eh?" said Albert. He teased the doctor, "and then you wonder that the Kadischa doesn't answer the phone. You probably always call them on Saturday by mistake."

"Do you know what, Albert? Thank you for your hospitality, but it's beginning to get on my nerves. You think of yourselves as these magnificent creatures devoting your lives to God, taking all of these extra steps. You think you're better than us, don't you? But at the end of the day we are driving to Khabarovsk to find the proper person to conduct the funeral, because in the end, in the very end, we are exactly the same. In death we are all exactly the same, it's just that some of us suffer in life more than others. One way or another, the grave-makers. The houses that they make last till doomsday. Just like your wooden house here."

The two Smidovichers were unmoved. "That's what you think? That we take more suffering upon ourselves? Very funny. You over there have submitted to the universal Christian secular world. That's much more difficult! Now you are carrying, ach, what do they call it? Yes, the entire Judeo-Christian tradition on your shoulders. Directly acknowledging God is much quicker and simpler than this strange roundabout way of approaching God through others, through worldly people. Do you understand? We are 'people of the book'. We are always shackled to the Word. Better to be shackled to one's Word than to be within the weave of another's text, like you. You are the history of others, rather than your own history", monologued Albert.

Leonid got up and was on the point not only of leaving but also of waking up the two women, and there and then, at almost midnight, of running away from this village and its idol worshippers. Suddenly the freckled woman came in with the teapot. She walked to the table slowly, her gait was a little mannish, thought the doctor, he liked it. He tried again to make eye contact with her, to catch a smile. But she stood there staring at the cups. "Thank you my dear. This is my daughter, Sarah. Sarah, you know the rabbi, and this is Leonid."

The woman said nothing. "Nice to meet you, Sarah", said Leonid and gave her his hand. But then he remembered that Orthodox women kept negiah, which means that they avoid any contact with men such as that represented by his outstretched hand. He withdrew the hand quickly, embarrassed. "Thank you for the tea", he said, more softly than he had a minute ago.

"Shakespeare", Sarah whispered.

For Leonid this was enough of a signal. She had listened in to their conversation from the kitchen and had recognised his reference to Hamlet. A grave-maker. The houses that he makes last till doomsday. "Your daughter reads Shakespeare?" he asked Moyshe, the corners of whose mouth smiled gently underneath his heavy, white beard. "The Torah is nicer than you think, Leonid. It doesn't forbid us from reading other literature. As long as we come back to it in the end. We have a sort of contract, you understand. You can't forbid a man from looking at other beautiful women, as long as he goes back to his wife at the end of the day, to use an example from your own life", said the old Jew, pointing at the ring on Leonid's finger with tired but lively eyes. He had of course noticed how the visitor had followed every small movement of muscle in the body and face of his daughter, as though he were a hunter and she a Siberian deer. "You are the deer, you understand?" he said, without explaining his chain of thought.

"I'm sorry?" Leonid was surprised.

"You think *we* are the poor deer caught in the headlights of a car: the Torah. But you are the ones who cannot see."

"Yes, I understand your point. You are skilled at taking a person's arguments and turning them against him. Find some new methods! And as for your claim: I don't think you're the

deer in the headlights, though I like the metaphor – it’s very poetic, really. I simply think, and this is merely my own humanist observation, so please enough with the ‘you’ and the ‘over there’ and so on, I just think that being human isn’t easy. Understanding the biology of the human body is complicated enough, believe me – and that’s before we even get to subjectivity, and politics and art, the ability to observe one’s own soul, to answer ethical questions unaided. All of that is simply very complicated. Some people look for short cuts.”

“In the form of an ideology that allows them to do anything they want?” Albert interrupted Leonid’s speech.

“No, not at all. Is that what you think? That we allow ourselves to do anything we want? If I harboured that thought about three people, I would never take them into my house, not even for a night. On the contrary, it is the person who thinks up a God for himself who allows himself to do whatever he wants. I don’t mean in the practical sense of doing everything, rather in the theoretical sense. One frees oneself from thought, the necessity for thought is lost, both in the kingdom of God and in the nihilistic sphere where you situate us with your ridiculous ‘anything they want’.”

Moyshe slurped his tea loudly. “That’s interesting. You assume that God frees me from the need to think. I think that God gives me the ability to think. Which is preferable: having the ability without the necessity, or the necessity without the ability?” And with that he placed his glass down on the table energetically.

“You’re doing it again. Thinking is not a matter of turning arguments on their head!”

The very concept of ‘arguments’ belongs to your logical world. Here we speak differently, here we connect to knowledge differently”, said Albert.

Leonid looked at the old rabbi with an amused expression. “Oh, how practical.” “Bemidbar,” Albert began, “in the desert. What do you understand by that?” he asked. Normally Leonid’s temperament wouldn’t have permitted him to take his interlocutor seriously. His pride would have driven him to strangle the conversation using a cynical sentence. Sometimes our hearts soften without good reason. Whether particular stars align along their orbits, disseminating a bashful energy throughout the universe, or an angry God finally manages to fall asleep or an intoxicated God finally awakens; whether the laughter of a distant baby is

carried by subtle sound waves, as though on an unmanned raft, into the unconscious; whether the colour of a fridge suddenly lights up before one's eyes because by chance one is looking into the kitchen, even though one is sitting in the living room with two strangers, and that colour precisely matches the colour of the dress that one's lover was wearing a few hours earlier; whether it is the death of somebody who was not important to one personally, but that death is present enough to slowly ignite a sense of memento mori in one's gut. Maybe all of this together.

The cynical doctor answered earnestly: “‘outside the Land’. In the desert means outside the Land.”

“Exactly. Outside a land there are no laws, there is the law of no man's land. Such a law can only be internal. The Torah is not a book of laws, you understand? The Torah doesn't free us from thought, it frees us from borders. First from geographical borders and therefore also from the borders of thought. The vast majority of us used to live in Birobidzhan. We were able to live out our faith there. We didn't found Smidovich to be in a new place, but rather to be outside your place”, Albert said.

Leonid was confused but the tiredness caused by the day that lay behind him conquered his taste for argument. “I understand. Honestly, one can barely call Birobidzhan a 'place'. We're at the arse-end of the world, even though you're at the arser end, if you'll excuse the expression.”

“It's not about being in the middle of things. It's about borders. The more impermeable your borders are, the less *Bemidbar* you are; the closer you are to your own laws and the further you are from God's laws. Which kind of laws are limiting and which are freeing? I think the answer is already in the question.”