

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

In English, the book we begin this week is called Numbers, for an obvious reason. It begins with a census, and there is a second count toward the end of the book. On this view, the central theme of the book is demography. The Israelites, still at Sinai at the beginning of the book, but on the brink of the Promised Land by its end, are now a sizeable nation, numbering 600,000 men of an age to embark on military service.

Within Jewish tradition however, it has become known as Bemidbar, "in the wilderness," suggesting a very different theme. The superficial reason for the name is that this is the first distinctive word in the book's opening verse. But the work of two anthropologists, Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, suggest a deeper possibility. The fact that Israel's formative experience was in the wilderness turns out to be highly significant. For it is there that the people experience one of the Torah's most revolutionary ideas, namely that an ideal society is one in which everyone has equal dignity under the sovereignty of God.

Van Gennep in his *The Rites of Passage* argued that societies develop rituals to mark the transition from one state to the next—from childhood to adulthood, for example, or from being single to being married—and they involve three stages. The first is separation, a symbolic break with the past. The third is incorporation, re-entering society with a new identity. Between the two is the crucial stage of transition when, having said goodbye to who you were but not yet hello to who you are about to become, you are recast, reborn, refashioned.

Van Gennep used the term liminal, from the Latin word for "threshold," to describe this second state when you are in a kind of no-man's-land between the old and the new. That is clearly what the wilderness signifies for Israel: liminal space between Egypt and the Promised Land. There Israel is reborn, no longer a group of escaping slaves but "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The desert—a no-man's-land with no settled populations, no cities, no civilizational order—is the place where Jacob's descendants, alone with God, cast off one identity and assume another.

This analysis helps us understand some of the details of the book of Exodus. The daubing of the doorposts with blood (Ex. 12:7) is part of the first, separation, stage during which the door through which

you walk as you leave your old life behind has special symbolic significance.

Likewise the division of the Red Sea. The division of one thing into two, through which something or someone passes, is a symbolic enactment of transition, as it was for Abraham in the passage (Gen 15:10-21) in which God tells him about his children's future exile and enslavement. Abraham divides animals, God divides the sea, but the movement between the two halves is what signals the phase-change.

Note also that Jacob has his two defining encounters with God in liminal space, between his home and that of Laban (Gen. 28:10-22, and 32:22-32).

Victor Turner added one additional element to this analysis. He drew a distinction between society and what he called *communitas*. Society is always marked by structure and hierarchy. Some have power, some don't. There are classes, castes, ranks, orders, gradations of status and honour.

For Turner what makes the experience of liminal space vivid and transformative is that in the desert there are no hierarchies. Instead, there is "an intense comradeship and egalitarianism. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenised." People cast together in the no-man's-land of the desert experience the "essential and generic human bond." That is what he means by *communitas*, a rare and special state in which, for a brief but memorable period, everyone is equal.

We now begin to understand the significance of Midbar, "wilderness," in the spiritual life of Israel. It was the place where they experienced with an intensity they had never felt before nor would they easily again, the unmediated closeness of God which bound them to Him and to one another.

That is what Hosea means when he speaks in God's name of a day when Israel will experience, as it were, a second honeymoon: "Therefore I am now going to allure her; / I will lead her into the wilderness / and speak tenderly to her... / There she will respond as in the days of her youth, / as in the day she came up out of Egypt. / 'In that day,' declares the LORD, / 'you will call me 'my husband'; / you will no longer call me 'my master.'" (Hos. 2:14-16)

We also now understand the significance of the account at the beginning of Bamidbar, in which the twelve tribes were encamped, in rows of three on the four sides of the Tabernacle, each equidistant from the holy.

Each tribe was different, but (with the exception of the Levites) all were equal. They ate the same food, manna from heaven. They drank the same drink, water from a rock or well. None yet had lands of their own, for the desert has no owners. There was no economic or territorial conflict between them.

The entire description of the camp at the beginning of Bemidbar with its emphasis on equality fits perfectly Turner's description of *communitas*, the ideal state people only experience in liminal space where they have left the past (Egypt) behind but have not yet reached their future destination, the land of Israel. They have not yet begun building a society with all the inequalities to which society gives rise. For the moment they are together, their tents forming a perfect square with the Sanctuary at its centre.

The poignancy of the book of Bemidbar lies in the fact that this *communitas* lasted so briefly. The serene mood of its beginning will soon be shattered by quarrel after quarrel, rebellion after rebellion, a series of disruptions that would cost an entire generation their chance of entering the land.

Yet Bemidbar opens, as does the book of Bereishit, with a scene of blessed order, there natural, here social, there divided into six days, here into twelve (2x6) tribes, each person in Bemidbar like each species in Bereishit, in his or her rightful place, "each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house" (2:1).

So the wilderness was not just a place; it was a state of being, a moment of solidarity, midway between enslavement in Egypt and the social inequalities that would later emerge in Israel, an ideal never to be forgotten even if never fully captured again in real space and time.

Judaism never forgot its vision of natural and social harmony, set out respectively in the beginnings of the books of Genesis and Numbers, as if to say, what once was could be again, if only we heed the word of God. (The books referred to are: Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, University of Chicago Press, 1960. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, Transaction Publishers, 1969. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, Cornell University Press, 1974) *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* ©2024 *The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

## Torah Lights

“**A**nd God spoke unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they were come out of the Land of Egypt.” (Numbers 1:1) Bemidbar, or “In the Desert,” is the name by which this fourth of the Five Books of Moses (Pentateuch) is most

popularly known – an apt description of the forty years of the Israelite desert wanderings which the book records.

Indeed this desert period serves as the precursor of – as well as a most apt metaphor for – the almost two thousand years of homeless wandering from place to place which characterized much of Jewish history before the emergence of our Jewish State in 1948.

The Hebrew word for desert, *midbar*, is also pregnant with meanings and allusions which in many ways have served as a beacon for our Jewish exile. The root noun from which *midbar* is built is *d-b-r*, which means leader or shepherd. After all, the most ancient occupation known to humanity is shepherding, and the desert is the most natural place for the shepherd to lead his flock: the sheep can comfortably wander in a virtual no-man's land and graze on the vegetation of the various oases or their outskirts without the problem of stealing from private property or harming the ecology of settled habitations. And perhaps *d-b-r* means leader-shepherd because it also means word: the shepherd directs the flock using meaningful sounds and words, and the leader of people must also have the ability to inspire and lead with the verbal message he communicates; indeed, the “Ten Words” (or Ten Commandments, *Aseret HaDibrot*) were revealed in the Sinai desert, and they govern Israel – as well as a good part of the world – to this very day.

Moreover, it must be noted that wherever the Israelites wandered in the desert, they were always accompanied by the portable desert *Mishkan*, or Sanctuary, which is derived from *Shekhina*, Divine Presence. However, God was not in the Sanctuary; even the greatest expanse of the heavens cannot contain the Divine Presence, declared King Solomon when he dedicated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem (I Kings 8:27). It was rather God's word, *dibur*, which was in the Sanctuary, in the form of the “Ten Words” on the Tablets of Stone preserved in the Holy Ark, as well as the ongoing and continuing word of God which He would speak (*vedibarti*, Exodus 25:22) from between the cherubs on the ends of the *Kapporet* above the Holy Ark. It was by means of these divine words that even the desert, the *midbar* – a metaphor for an inhospitable and even alien exile environment which is boiling hot by day, freezing cold by night, and deficient in water which is the very elixir of life – can become transformed into sacred space, the place of the divine word (*dibur*). And indeed those words from the Desert of Mount Sinai (*diburim*) succeeded in sanctifying the many Marrakeshes and Vilnas and New Yorks of our wanderings! God's word can transform a desert – any place and every place – into a veritable sanctuary; indeed the world is a *midbar* waiting to become a *dvir* (sanctuary) by means of God's *dibur*, communicated by inspired leaders, *dabarim*.

Postscript: A Story

Allow me to share with you a story from my previous life (in the exile of the West Side of New York

City) which taught me how the word can bring sanctity to the most unlikely of places. In the early 1970s, a disco opened up in a window storefront building on 72nd Street and Broadway. Despite the fact that it was called the Tel Aviv Disco and was owned by

Israelis living in New York, it remained open every night of the year, even Kol Nidrei night. I must have placed at least two dozen calls to the owners to try to persuade them to close at least on the night of Yom Kippur, only to have finally received a message from their secretary informing me that the owners would not speak to rabbis!

During this period, Rabbi Yitzchak Dovid Grossman – a beloved and respected friend who is the rabbi of Migdal HaEmek – spent Shabbat with us at Lincoln Square Synagogue. A recipient of the Israel Prize, he is a charismatic religious leader who is well-known for the many prisoners and other alienated Jews whom he has brought back to religious observance. After a delightful Friday evening meal at my home, replete with inspiring Hasidic melodies and words of Torah, he suggested that we go for a “shpatzir” (Yiddish for leisurely walk).

I tried to explain that the general atmosphere of the West Side streets of Manhattan were hardly conducive to Sabbath sanctity – but to no avail. His steps led us in the direction of 72nd Street and Broadway, right in front of the window revealing the frenzied disco dancers. “Did you ever see a mosquito captured in a glass jar?” he asked me in Yiddish (our language of discourse). “The mosquito moves with all sorts of contortions, and appears to be dancing. In reality, however, the mosquito is gasping for air. That is the situation of those ‘dancers’ in the disco. They are really gasping for air, struggling in their search for a real Shabbos. Let’s go in and show them Shabbos.”

Before I could say “Jackie Robinson,” he was inside the disco – and as a good host, I felt obliged to follow him. He sported a long beard and side-locks, and was wearing a shtreimel (fur hat) and kapote (silk gabardine), and I was dressed in my Sabbath Prince Albert, kippa and ritual fringes out. As we entered the disco, the band of Israelis immediately stopped playing. I recognized three young men from the synagogue, who seemed totally discombobulated; two ran out covering their faces, and the third tried to explain to me that he wasn’t really there, that his mother had had some kind of attack and he thought that her doctor might be at the disco.... Rabbi Grossman began to sing Sabbath melodies. Almost miraculously, the men danced on one side, the women on the other. After about twenty minutes he urged me to speak to them in English. I told them of the magical beauty, the joy, and the love of the Sabbath, and they listened with rapt attention. Rabbi Grossman led them in one more song – and we left.

I cannot tell you that the miracle continued; it didn’t take five minutes, and we could hear the

resumption of the disco band music. However, before the next Yom Kippur, the Tel Aviv Disco closed down. I don’t know why; perhaps because the owners wouldn’t speak to rabbis. And for the next two years, at least a dozen young singles joined Lincoln Square Synagogue because they had been inspired by our disco visit, because God’s words had the power to transform even a disco into a sanctuary, if only for twenty minutes of eternity...*The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin’s book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid. © 2024 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

### RABBI BEREL WEIN

## Wein Online

I have always been fascinated why this book of the Bible and this week’s Torah reading is called Bamidbar – in the desert. The rabbis of Midrash have stated that the lesson involved here is that the Torah only remains in a person who empties all other causes from one’s midst, and is as open and unoccupied as is the desert.

Nevertheless, there may be other insights that may be gleaned from the use of the desert as the backdrop for the events and laws contained in this fourth book of the Torah. One of these different insights has to do with the ability of water to transform a barren desert into a productive place of lush fields and orchards.

Here in Israel, the Negev desert that began fifty years ago just south of Chevron has now expanded many kilometers far south of Beersheba. This is due to the national water carrier system and other means of bringing water to that area of our country. Literally, the desert has bloomed in fulfillment of the ancient prophecies of Isaiah.

Water can overcome the arid dryness and barrenness of the desert of the Negev. In California, desert valleys have been transformed into America’s vegetable basket by systems of water diverted from the Colorado River. Again, in that case water was the key to transforming a desert into a garden and orchard. There are plans afloat all over the world to transform deserts into arable land. However, fresh water is a valuable and oftentimes scarce commodity and the struggle to discover and harness more of it for agricultural and human use is a continuous effort.

Throughout the books of the prophets of Israel and as well as within the Talmud, the Torah itself is metaphorically compared to and even called water. Just as water has the ability to convert desolate and nonproductive desert land into a veritable Garden of Eden, so too can Torah fill the void in our hearts and souls and make us productive holy people. Torah, like the water that represents it, has this enormous regenerative power. The book of Bamidbar will, in its narrative of the many sad and tragic events that befall Israel in its sojourn in the desert, constantly reminds us

of the powers of water/Torah to restore the Jewish people to a purposeful existence with greatly productive achievements in spite of all of its failures and backsliding.

No matter how bleak and barren the desert landscape in which we currently find ourselves, we should always be cognizant of the ability of Torah to refresh and renew us. The Jewish people are an old nation and yet our powers of rejuvenation have never waned. We were and are constantly nourished by the waters of Torah irrespective of whatever desert we found or find ourselves in. The choice of Jewish tradition to call this book of the Torah by the name of Bamidbar - in the desert – is meant to convey to us this message of hope, constant redemption, and rebirth. ©2024 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

### **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**T**he Torah, in the Book of Numbers, explains pidyon haben (redemption of the firstborn son; Numbers 3:40–51). Originally, the eldest son in each family was designated to serve in the Temple. After the eldest in the family faltered by participating in the sin of the golden calf, the Temple work was transferred to the tribe of Levi, who were not involved in the sin. The Torah required the redeeming of each firstborn at that time for five coins. But if the redemption already occurred, why is it repeated for firstborn sons to this day?

In Egypt, the firstborn functioned as priests. In this way, every Egyptian family was connected to the Egyptian system of belief. The Egyptian firstborn were killed in Egypt, as they were the religious “visionaries” most responsible for enslaving the Jews.

Once they were killed and the Jewish firstborn saved, the Jewish firstborn were similarly designated to dedicate their lives to religious service (Exodus 13:15). This was done not only in recognition of having miraculously escaped the slaying of the Egyptian firstborn but also as a means of binding each Jewish family to the Holy Temple.

From this perspective, it can be suggested that the ceremony today of redeeming the firstborn reminds families that there was a time when one of their own was connected directly to the Temple service. Such a reminder, it is hoped, will result in a commitment by the entire family to a life of spiritual and religious striving.

During the pidyon haben, the Kohen (Jewish priest) asks the parents of the child if they prefer to keep the child or to pay coins for the redemption. As a Kohen, I always wondered what would occur if the parents decided to keep the money rather than take their child. Jewish law insists that regardless of the response, the child remains with his family (Kiddushin 29a; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 305:15). If the end result is the

same, why is this question posed in the first place?

When the Kohen asks, “What do you prefer, the money or the child?” what he is really asking is, “What is your value system? Is it solely based on money, or does it have at its core the essence of the child?” With the response to this rhetorical question, the family reaffirms that spiritual and ethical values are the highest priority in raising a child.

Note that if one of the child’s grandfathers is a Kohen or Levi, he is not redeemed. It would be unnecessary, as even today, the Kohen and Levi are, to some degree, involved in public Jewish ritual life. They are, if you will, already in God’s service.

Thus, pidyon haben is an educational tool to remind families celebrating a firstborn son to identify Jewishly and walk with God throughout their days. ©2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

#### **ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT**

### **Going Up the Mountain**

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**W**hen the Jewish people received the first set of Tablets, they were warned: “Beware of ascending the mountain or touching its border” (*Shemot* 19:12). Similarly, before G-d gave the second set of Tablets, He instructed Moshe: “No one else shall come up with you, and no one else shall be seen anywhere on the mountain; neither shall the flocks and the herds graze at the foot of this mountain” (*Shemot* 34:3). This second warning was even more sweeping than the first. This time, the people were warned away from the entire mountain, even its base (where they had stood the first time). Furthermore, even cattle were prohibited from grazing. Finally, the first time the elders ascended part-way with Moshe, while the second time no one else joined him.

The first warning about the mountain continued: “No hand shall touch it” (*Shemot* 19:13). The *Mechilta* offers a homiletic reading: “No hand shall touch it” – this applies to the mountain only, but not to the Tabernacle and the Temple. Thus, according to this view a person is allowed to touch the stones of the *Kotel*, which is the remnant of the retaining wall around the Temple. Even though it is possible that it is forbidden to enter the area behind the *Kotel* as we are all impure, touching is still allowed. Some, though, are so strict about not entering that they avoid getting too close to the *Kotel*. This is because then they might end up putting their fingers between the stones of the wall, which might count as forbidden entering.

It should be noted that some interpret the *Mechilta* as saying that the admonition “No hand shall touch it” comes to include the Tabernacle and the Temple in the prohibition of touching. However, the

straightforward reading of the *Mechilta* is as we explained above, that these are excluded from the prohibition. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

**RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ**

## Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd the Levites, according to their father's tribe, were not included amongst them." (Bamidbar 1:47) Sefer Bamidbar, in English, is called Numbers, because the Jews were counted three times during their sojourn in the Wilderness. Our Parsha begins with Moshe and Aharon commanded to take a census of each Tribe, which was done via a half-shekel coin which each would provide.

The population of each tribe is recorded, and then this verse appears. It tells us that though they counted everyone else, they did not count the Tribe of Levi. Why not? Well, the next verses find Hashem telling Moshe that He doesn't want the Tribe of Levi counted along with the rest of the Jewish People.

There are numerous reasons for this. First of all, as the vanguard of Hashem's service, they deserved to be counted separately. Secondly, the decree of death after the sin of the Golden Calf would devolve on those counted from the age of twenty and above, and the Levites shouldn't be counted amongst them so they be exempt from the decree for the sin they had no part in. Additionally, they would be counted according to their ages of existence and service.

But these pesukim apparently came AFTER the census. It seems that Hashem didn't immediately tell Moshe not to count the Levites, so why did he not do it?

The Ramban explains that Moshe was given a tribal leader to assist in the counting of each tribe. When he didn't get an assignment of one for Levi, he understood that for whatever reason, Hashem didn't want them counted along with everyone else. Therefore, he waited for further instruction.

Then, when Hashem commanded him to count the tribe of Levi, and assigned Aharon to be the tribal head to assist with it, Moshe completed the census of the nation.

What we see from here is the behavior of a true "eved Hashem," a real servant of G-d. It is a person who does what Hashem wants because that is what Hashem wants. He seeks to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of Hashem's will, as we discussed in Parshas Bechukosai about toiling in Torah.

Moshe could have assumed he didn't need another tribal head since he, himself, was a Levite. He could have understood that Aharon was the appropriate head, and he was already involved in the census, so Hashem didn't need to appoint him further. But what Moshe truly understood was that he didn't know exactly what Hashem had in mind, and therefore he did not take action until he was told what Hashem wanted from him.

*Before the days when kids were taught Mah Nishtana in school, parents used to do unusual things at the Seder to get children to ask questions. One Seder night when the Imrei Emes was a little boy, his father, the Sfas Emes of Gur, started his Seder and waited expectantly for his young son to start inquiring about odd happenings. However, the boy sat quietly without the slightest hint of a puzzled look on his face. The Sfas Emes did all sorts of strange things in order to get the boy to ask, but to no avail.*

*Finally, the Sfas Emes asked his son if he noticed anything different about that night's meal. Avraham Mordechai said that of course he did. "Then why," asked the concerned Sfas Emes, "did you not seem alarmed and ask any questions?"*

*The youth answered with pure innocence, "Because I know my father is smart and whatever he does he has a very good reason for doing. Why should I be the slightest bit disturbed?"* ©2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

**RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

## Warning to Kehat's Sons

**S**efer Bamidbar is known in English as Numbers because of the census taken at the beginning of this Sefer. As much of this parasha is devoted to this census, even more of this parasha is devoted to the Leviim who would serve alongside the Kohanim in the Temple. In several places within the parasha, the Leviim are singled out among the other tribes. Even within the tribe of Levi, there is more specialization of tasks than we find within any of the other tribes. The tribe of Levi was divided among Levi's three sons, Gershon, Kahat, and Merari, and each of these families was given a specific task when constructing or taking apart the Mishkan and its vessels and transporting them in the desert to the next location where Hashem would lead them. The most important responsibilities for these tasks were given to the family of Kahat. The responsibilities of only the family of Kahat are in our parasha. The responsibilities of the families of Gershon and Merari are discussed in next week's parasha.

At the beginning of chapter four, Hashem tells Moshe and Aharon, "Take a census of the sons of Kahat from among the sons of Levi, according to their families, according to their fathers' households; from thirty years of age and up, until fifty years of age, everyone who comes to the legion to perform work in the Tent of Meeting." The Torah goes on to describe the holy task of the families of Levi who were also part of the sub-family of Kahat. When it was time to deconstruct the Mishkan and prepare it to be moved to another site, Aharon and his sons (the Kohanim, who also were part of the sub-family of Kahat) would take down the Parochet, the curtain partition between the Holy and the Holy of Holies, and use the Parochet to cover the Aron Kodesh, the Holy Ark. The other holy vessels were also

prepared by the sub-family of Kahat for transport to their new site. Yet the Torah only warns the tribe of Kahat about gazing only at the Aron Kodesh and not the other holy vessels of the Mishkan.

The term for “take a census” here is “naso et rosh,” literally “raise up the head.” The Ohr HaChaim asks why this term is used for the sub-family of Kahat. When a census was taken after the sin of the Golden Calf, the Torah used the term “naso et rosh” for each tribe of the B’nei Yisrael but not for the Tribe of Levi. The term used for Levi was “pakod et B’nei Levi,” literally “assign (number) the sons of Levi.” The reason given by the Rabbis for the different terms after the Golden Calf was that there were people in each tribe who had sinned, but the entire tribe of Levi did not sin. Thus, each tribe was “raised up” to indicate that Hashem forgave them for the sin of some members of their tribe. The tribe of Levi did not need raising up, since none had sinned. Yet, here (not much later) the sub-family of Kahat appears to have needed “raising up.” The Ohr HaChaim explains that Gershon was the firstborn, yet Kahat was chosen for the greater task of the inner Holy objects of the Aron Kodesh, the Menorah, the Table of the Show-breads, the golden Altar and the Altar for the sacrifices. Kahat was chosen because his family produced the two “givers of light,” Moshe and Aharon. Kahat, therefore, had to be raised over his older brother, resulting in the use of the term, “naso.”

At the end of our parasha, the Torah states, “And Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon saying, ‘Do not let the tribe of the Kehatite families be cut off from among the Levites. Thus shall you do for them so that they shall live and not die when they approach the Holy of Holies. Aharon and his sons shall come and assign them, every man his work and his burden. But they shall not come and look as the holy is inserted, lest they die.’” The translation of the last sentence is disputed, primarily based on the word, “k’bala” from the word “bala, swallowed.” The Ramban’s approach indicates that the translation should read, “as the Holy is swallowed,” not simply “inserted.”

The Ramban further explains what is meant by the “Holy” and “swallowed.” He first brings Rashi’s interpretation that this refers to the object being placed in its container. This means that the Kahatites should not watch as the Aron Kodesh is placed under its cover for transportation. A second interpretation from the Ramban is from the Gemara Sanhedrin, which states that “this verse is a warning against one who steals a Temple-service vessel, that he is liable to death, and zealots might kill him.” This is an indication that theft and robbery are considered “swallowing.” The ibn Ezra explains that the actual meaning is that the Kahatites should not enter the area of the Aron Kodesh while the curtain is taken down and the Aron Kodesh would be visible. They must wait until after the curtain is used to cover the Aron Kodesh before they enter to transport it.

In this case, the word “bala, swallowed,” is based on its usage in the Book of Job, “Hashem tore down (va’t’vaineini) without pity all the dwellings of Ya’akov.” HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the Rashbam felt that the problem in viewing the Aron Kodesh was not the viewing of the Aron itself, but the viewing of the Shechinah, the characteristic of Hashem which dwelled (shochein) between the angels on the top of the Aron. This could have caused death as occurred when the people of Bet Shemesh saw the uncovered Aron after it was recaptured from the Philistines.

HaRav Sorotzkin asks how it was possible that Aharon and his sons, the Kohanim, could view the Aron Kodesh when they were covering it. Were they not also forbidden to view the Aron Kodesh, which even the Kohein Gadol could view only once a year on Yom Kippur, and then only when he brought incense with him? The incense produced a smoke which would prevent Aharon from seeing the Shechinah. Aharon was also cautioned against gazing upon the Shechinah under penalty of death. Yet Aharon and his sons had permission to both view the Aron and to touch it as they covered it. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that when the Kohanim entered the Kodesh HaKodoshim, the Holy of Holies, in order to cover the Aron or establish the Aron in its proper place, they were considered to be like artisans, specialists, who had permission to enter the area to build or to fix anything within. This was true for the preparation of the Aron for transport, but only for the Kohanim, as they had no choice but to take down the curtain and cover the Aron Kodesh. This was not true for the Leviim. Kahat and his descendants did not have permission to enter the Holy of Holies until the Aron was covered, as they were not needed until that time. Thus, the warning in the Torah went to the tribe of Kahat and only for the Aron Kodesh.

Kahat was “raised up” for this task. He willingly accepted the extra responsibility. May we also be willing to accept whatever responsibility Hashem assigns for us.

© 2024 Rabbi D. Levin

#### **RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## **Jewish Geography**

**S**efer Vayikra ends with G-d communicating with Moshe on Mt. Sinai, while Sefer Bamidar begins with G-d communicating with Moshe in the Sinai Desert, in the אהל מועד. This transition occurs because after the Mishkan was built G-d communicated with Moshe there rather than on Mt. Sinai (see Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni). However, Mt. Sinai is also in the Sinai Desert; moving the place of their communication to the Mishkan – which was near Mt. Sinai – was not a major location change. [It was still significant, because the Mishkan traveled with the nation, and G-d would continue to communicate with Moshe within it.] It was therefore unnecessary to mention the Sinai Desert (just אהל מועד), leading the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 1:7)

to say that the desert is mentioned to teach us that one must be like a desert, ownerless, in order to acquire wisdom and Torah.

Although the Sinai Desert is located on the Sinai Peninsula, they are not synonymous, as the Sinai Peninsula contains several deserts. Currently, the Sinai Peninsula includes the area between the two forks of the Red Sea (the bottom of the triangle), up to the Mediterranean Sea (its northern border) and east to the Negev (its eastern border, which is also Israel's southwestern border). Originally, much of the Negev was also considered part of the Sinai Peninsula. The Talmud (Shabbos 89a) seems to say that the various deserts on the peninsula are all one and the same, with the Sinai Desert being just one of its names. However, as Tosfos points out, this can't be true, as one of the names (מדבר קדמות) refers to an area east of the Jordan River, which is clearly not on the peninsula. Maharsha explains the Talmud to be referring to the different deserts where the Mishkan was (over the 40 years of wandering), not that the same desert had five different names. Midrash HaGadol (Bamidbar 1:1) says explicitly that the Sinai Desert is not the same desert as other deserts mentioned by the Talmud.

Even though the Sinai Desert is distinct from the Paran Desert, which was the nation's next stop (Bamidbar 10:12), other named deserts seem (at least at first glance) to have been part of the Paran Desert. For example, the scouts left from the Paran Desert (13:3), and when they returned, it was to Kadesh, which was in the Paran Desert (13:26). Yet, there is also a Kadesh Desert (Tehillim 29:8), indicating that the Kadesh Desert was part of the Paran Desert. It is possible, though, that over time what had been known as מדבר פארן became known as מדבר קדש, rather than the Kadesh Desert being a subset of the Paran Desert. Although Dovid fled to the Paran Desert after Shmuel died (Shmuel I 25:1), he might have started referring to it differently afterwards. It's also possible that he wasn't using a proper noun, but referring to the desert that included Kadesh, i.e. the Paran Desert. It should be noted that when Midrash HaGadol lists the 10 deserts, Paran is listed, but Kadesh is not, indicating that Kadesh was not considered its own desert.

Kadesh is also described (33:36) as being in מדבר צין, but most suggest/assume that there was more than one Kadesh, so having the Kadesh the spies were sent from be in the Paran Desert and the Kadesh where Moshe hit the rock be in the Tzin Desert is not necessarily an issue. The Tzin Desert mentioned in 13:21 refers to part of the Promised Land that was scouted, so even though this desert included areas both inside and outside the land, the Kadesh the spies left from need not be in the Tzin Desert. Despite this, Yoel Elitzur (Places in the Parsha, Behaalotekha) posits that the Kadesh Desert and the Tzin Desert were both parts of the larger Paran Desert. That doesn't impact the Sinai

Desert being distinct from the Paran Desert, with the Sinai Desert covering the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula and the Paran Desert covering most of the peninsula to its north.

There are/were other deserts on the Sinai Peninsula as well. Northwest of the Sinai Desert is/was the Sin Desert (Shemos 16:1, Bamidbar 33:10-11), with four stops between מדבר סיני and מדבר סין (Bamidbar 33:11-15). [We know that the Sin Desert is/was northwest of the Sinai Desert because the nation was traveling south, close to the eastern bank of the Gulf of Suez.] In the upper northwest corner of the Sinai Peninsula was the Shur Desert, where the nation emerged from the Red Sea after it split (Shemos 15:22). However, it's also referred to as the Eisom Desert (Bamidbar 33:8). Here too, though, it is possible that this isn't a proper name, but refers to "the desert that Eisom is in." They had been at Eisom before they crossed the sea (33:6), and the Torah may be pointing out that they had already made it onto the Sinai Peninsula before turning back to trick Pharaoh and lead him into the sea, emerging back on the peninsula after crossing it. Nevertheless, there may be another explanation why the name of this desert changed from מדבר שור to מדבר אתם.

One of the things that impressed Yisro was that "no slave had been able to escape from Egypt, as it was a closed land, [yet] 600,000 were able to leave" (Rashi, based on the Mechilta, on Shemos 18:9). Ancient Egypt was known for its fortresses, e.g. Tjaru on the major road between Egypt and Canaan, which prevented foreign attacks as well as preventing slaves from getting out. As Itzhak Beit Arie put it in the the May/June 1988 issue of BAR ("The Road Through Sinai: Why the Israelites Fleeing Egypt Went South"), "the Egyptians had constructed a fortification line called 'Shur Mitzrayim,' the Wall of Egypt, to protect the Delta and to control the movement of nomads coming from the other side." "Shur" means wall; the desert that was on the other side of this "wall of fortresses" was therefore called the Shur Desert. However, after this "wall" was breached during the Exodus, this name/description wasn't valid anymore.

Whether that desert was no longer referred to as the Shur Desert by anyone, or the Torah no longer referred to it that way, when the מסעות were listed in the 40th year, it wasn't called the Shur Desert, but the Eisom Desert. Either way, despite being on the Sinai Peninsula, it was not part of the Sinai Desert (מדבר סיני), which was limited to the southern part of the peninsula. © 2024 Rabbi D. Kramer

### **RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON**

## **Perceptions**

**T**he desert is an unforgiving place, unless God is leading you through it with great miracles. To most of the world, a desert is a symbol of death because little grows there and even less may survive. And this is exactly why the Jewish people were made to endure it

for 40 years altogether, as an integral part of becoming a Torah nation.

The reason is simple. A desert is ownerless, a place that can be trampled by all. For this reason the desert is a symbol of humility, the key trait for accepting and living by Torah. So much so that we are told that the mountain on which Torah was given, Har Sinai, was chosen over other mountains because it was small and "humble."

This is interesting, since we place such an emphasis on Kavod HaTorah, honoring the Torah. We go to great lengths and have many halachos to protect the honor of Torah. And yet, at the very time we were to receive Torah, God chose the lesser of the possible mountains on which to give it. It's a powerful statement about humility.

The Gemora explains why. Torah flows down to the world from above, and like water, it can only flow from a higher level to a lower one. At least metaphorically. The physical world does not usually defy gravity. The spiritual world is unaffected by it, but the point is the point: you have to be humble to learn Torah.

Do you? The world is filled with people who lack humility but who learn Torah on a regular basis. Or do they? They seem to. Or do they? How can you know? By the effect it has on a person. To the extent that Torah learning makes the person spiritually better, that is the extent to which they have "learned" Torah.

Torah is not just another textbook that you open, read, and put down again. It is not only "just" the word of God. It is a stream of Divine light that flows to a person whether they are reading from an actual Sefer Torah, a Chumash, a Gemora, or a sefer based upon it. The Source is God Himself, the medium is whatever a person learns, and the recipient is the person who can be a vessel for it.

But if you pour water into a full cup, the water will run off. If you pour anything into a container that is closed, nothing will enter it. You can just keep pouring but it will not change the end result, just make a bigger mess. The same thing is true about Torah as well. A person who lacks humility will deflect the kedushah of the Torah they learn to the outside world, feeding the Klipos and making evil stronger.

But there may be more to humility than meets the eye, which may be the lesson of the following unusual statement: "When Rebi Yehudah HaNasi died, humility and fear of sin ceased. Rav Yosef said to the tanna: Do not teach humility, for there is still one: me." (Sotah 49b)

What a seemingly very unhumble thing to say. Usually humble people are the last to say anything good about themselves, let alone that they are humble. If you heard someone say this about themselves, what would you conclude about them? It is the Torah that tells us about Moshe Rabbeinu's great humility, not Moshe himself.

But if you had asked Moshe who the humblest

person in the world is, he would have told you that he was. But it would not have been self-praise at all, just a statement of fact. Humility does not mean you have to lie about your greatness, just that you realize its source, God Himself. Therefore, when you talk about it, it is as if you are referring to someone else, even though you know you are talking about yourself.

Which is very hard to do. It is very hard to talk positively about yourself and not feel some sense of pride inside, even if only a little. But to the extent that one feels pride is the extent to which they, as a vessel, are filled with something else other than Torah. That sense of pride is not lifeless like a desert, but alive like an inhabited city, which is crowded with other people and personalities.

That is fine, if being your own physical self rather than a conduit for the light of God is more important to you as your soul yearns to be. We think that giving up our pride to serve God takes away from our sense of self and therefore, our ability to enjoy life. After all, how exciting is a humble desert compared to a proud city?

Not very exciting at all. Until that is, God transforms the desert and makes it bloom beyond any level of life a man-made city could ever hope to achieve, in this world and the next one. Then all of a sudden, life and death seem to change places. ©2024 Rabbi P. Winston and torah.org

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

### **Weekly Dvar**

**T**his week's parsha, Bamidbar is always read on the Shabbat prior to the Shavuot holiday, suggesting that this Torah reading teaches us important lessons about the holiday.

Bamidbar begins by telling us that G-d spoke to Moshe in Midbar Sinai. Rabbi Nachman Cohen in 'A Time for All Things,' maintains that the confluence of Bamidbar and Shavuot is to underscore the great significance of the Torah having been given in the desert -- no man's land. Rabbi Cohen points out that the location of the vast expanse of the wilderness is significant for it teaches us that the Torah is not the exclusive property of given individuals. Living a desert existence makes us feel vulnerable. Giving the Torah in the desert also teaches that Torah can only be acquired if a person humbles themselves. ©2014 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

