

Why was Torah Given in the Wilderness? *Bamidbar & Shavuot*

Wilderness, Torah, and ownerless-ness

1) *Adonai spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai...*(Numbers 1:1): Why [was Torah given] in the wilderness of Sinai? From this the Sages taught: Torah was given to the accompaniment of three things: fire, water, and wilderness...Why was the giving of the Torah marked by these three features? To indicate that as these are free to all in the world, so also are the words of the Torah free...Anyone who does not make herself as open [*hefker/ownerless*] as the wilderness, is not able to acquire wisdom and Torah. (Numbers Rabbah 1:7)

2) *The Israelites marched on and camped at Ovot; they marched on from Ovot and camped at Iyvei Ha-avarim, in the wilderness that faces Moav...And from the wilderness—[to] Matanah* (Num.21:10-18): What is meant by, “*and from the wilderness, Matanah* [lit. “a gift”]? When a person makes himself like the wilderness, free/open (*mufkar*) to all, Torah is given to him as a gift, as it says, “from the wilderness, a gift.” (Talmud, *Nedarim* 55a)

3) The Torah was given to [the Israelites] in the most deserted place in the world; for if it had been given in the land of Israel, the inhabitants of the land would have said “It is ours!” and had it been given somewhere else the inhabitants of that place would have said “It is ours!” Therefore it was given in the most deserted place in the world, where whoever wanted to take it could do so. (Mekhilta d’RaShBi, quoted in *Present at Sinai*, S.Y. Agnon)

Wilderness and material possessions

4) God led them around in the desert for forty years. Said the Blessed Holy One: If I lead them the direct way, every person will take hold of his field and his vineyard, and will not engage in Torah. Instead I will lead them through the wilderness, and they will eat the manna and drink the water of the [miraculous] well, and the Torah will settle in their bodies. (Midrash Tanhuma, *Beshallah*, chap. 1)

5) The desert is not a home. There are no cities. There is no property. It is the place of nomads who have that which they need, and all that they need is life’s essentials, not belongings. . . Life in the desert is preparation for a life of freedom. (Erich Fromm, *Ownership or Self-Realization*)

Wilderness and the human mind & spirit

6) Another reason that the Torah portion of *Bamidbar* is always read right before Shavuot, the time of the giving of Torah: to teach you that if you want to merit receiving Torah, you must make yourself like the wilderness, to have a great measure of humility and to feel no reason for pride, to know that you are bare and lacking all, like the wilderness. (Rabbi D. Shoham, in *Iturei Torah*)

7) The word “*bamidbar*” is often translated as desert. This translation does not capture the landscape of the biblical region in its entirety...Anyone who has travelled in the south of Israel knows that the region is better captured by the word “wilderness.” It is mountainous and cavernous, often struck by flash floods and hardly monochromatic in color. Images of nature created by our prophets confirm both the danger and the unsettling sensations of being in the wilderness...There is something about the expansiveness and simplicity of the environment that makes people contemplative and aware of their insignificance. The enormity of the terrain highlights our smallness and often, in place of fear, religious awe arises. Wisdom, too, like a spring or sudden flood, rises where least expected. But it is not only this spiritual rawness which is possible in the vastness of the wilderness that leads to knowledge. It is the desire to put order in the chaos, which leads to the acquisition of Torah. Because humanity feels dominated by the landscape do we try to overcome this impotence by building structures of human intelligence. (Erica Brown, “Into the Wild,” *Jewish Advocate* May 2001)

Wilderness as inner journey

8) The wilderness is the place of our journey...The harsh inner reality of the wilderness purifies whatever traces of enslavement we still carry. This wilderness is the midwife of our new life, after long and hard labor. The wilderness forces us to face the resistance, ambivalence and self-delusion that has kept us from whole-heartedly receiving our birthright: the promised flow of milk and honey that is given to us, and through us, with each moment of life. The wilderness will scare out all our old ghosts and send them forth from the shadows into the full light of awareness. In the wilderness we are stripped of disguises. Defenses fall away. Each part within us is forced to show its true face. (Rabbi Shefa Gold, *Torah Journeys*)

- ❖ Which, if any, of these teachings corresponds to your experience of being in a wilderness, actual or figurative?
- ❖ Based on these teachings, how do you understand the notion that Torah was received by the Israelites “in the wilderness,” as opposed to some other setting?
- ❖ What would your midrash on “in the wilderness/*bamidbar*” be?