

Our Guide in the Wilderness
Bamidbar/Shavuot, 5781
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When they were in the desert (bemidbar), there was a yeshiva with them, as it is stated: "Gather for me seventy men from the Elders of Israel" (Numbers 11:16; Yoma, 28b).

Our portion begins with the phrase that Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Wilderness (*bemidbar Sinai*).

In Midrash Rabbah it states, "The Torah was given in three ways—fire, water, and in the wilderness."

Why was the Torah specifically given to the Benei Yisrael in a *midbar*—a place of wilderness.

One answer to this question is offered by Ben Ish Chai, who taught a parable.

There was once a very wise man who was the son of very wealthy parents. This man was looking to marry and so he sought an appropriate wife. He went to the matchmaker who told him, "I have an amazing wife for you. The only thing is that she lives in a small village and she is the daughter of extremely poor parents." The wise man set out to meet this possible wife and her family. He was very impressed with her good nature and brilliance. He asked her family for permission to marry her. Her family was willing but only on the condition that the new couple would hold the marriage ceremony in the bride's village and spend the first part of their marriage living in the bride's village. The village was small and barren and the husband himself lived in a big and wealthy city, but nevertheless out of his great desire for the marriage, the husband agreed to this condition. On the eve of the marriage, the father of the bride approached the groom and asked to speak with him privately. The father then took out a large box and showed him that it was full of beautiful and rare jewels. Indeed, the bride's father was far wealthier than the groom and his family. The father explained, "We are a very wealthy family but I wanted to give all my wealth to my daughter and her new family. It is very important to me that she marries someone who loves her for who she is and not for her money. That's why we never told anyone of our enormous wealth."

Explains the Ben Ish Chai, this is why Hashem gave the Torah in the wilderness. The Benei Yisrael had just departed from Egypt, a place of all the finest delicacies in the world. Before giving them the Torah, Hashem brought them to the wilderness, a place of desolation. There Hashem tested them to see if they really would accept the Torah under such difficult conditions. Once the Jewish people accepted the Torah, only then did Hashem reveal all the treasures and delights that are associated with the Torah (*Vekarata Leshabbat Oneg*, Volume 3, 296).

A second explanation of the Midrash is that the reason why the Torah was given in the wilderness is to teach us that when we are lost in the wilderness of life then the Torah must be our guide—our path out of the wilderness.

This can be seen from a passage we came across in this week's daf yomi studies in which the Talmud discusses that Abraham alone knew exactly when it was midday and was therefore able to daven mincha at the exact right moment, i.e. when it became midday. The Talmud explains that Abraham knew this because he was a scholar who sat in yeshiva and studied the ways of the world. The Talmud argues that throughout our history wherever we traveled, what kept us connected to our roots was that there was always a yeshiva -- a place in which to sit and study Torah and the ways of life.

*Abraham was different because he was an Elder and sat and studied Torah in a yeshiva, where the Divine Presence rests. There he developed the expertise to determine the precise hour. As Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: From the days of our ancestors, yeshiva never left them. Our ancestors were leaders of their generations, who taught Torah to students who came to them. When they were in Egypt there was a yeshiva with them, as it is stated: "Go and gather the Elders of Israel" (Exodus 3:16), indicating that there were Sages among them who studied Torah. **And similarly, when they were in the desert (bemidbar), there was a yeshiva with them, as it is stated: "Gather for me seventy men from the Elders of Israel" (Numbers 11:16).** Abraham our Patriarch was himself an Elder and would sit in yeshiva, as it is stated: "And Abraham was old, advanced in years" (Genesis 24:1). From the apparent redundancy of the terms old and advanced in years, it is derived that old means that he was a wise Elder and prominent in Torah, and advanced in years means that he was elderly. Similarly, Isaac our Patriarch was an Elder and sat in yeshiva, as it is stated: "And it came to pass when Isaac was old and his eyes were dim" (Genesis 27:1). Similarly, Jacob our Patriarch was an Elder and sat in yeshiva, as it is stated: "And Israel's eyes were heavy with age" (Genesis 48:10). Eliezer, servant of Abraham, was an Elder and sat in yeshiva, as it is stated: "And Abraham said to his servant, the elder" (Yoma, 28b).*

What does Avraham sitting in Yeshiva have to do with determining the proper time of midday? Rabbenu Eliakim explains that when a person sits in yeshiva and studies Torah the mind becomes clearer and one is able to determine the nature of the world with greater clarity (Yoma, 28b, s.v. *yoshev*). A yeshiva is a space to sit and ponder the ways of our Creator and gain insight into the ways of the world. Through Torah study, the true yeshiva is able not only to influence its own students but also all the people in the world who are affected by the rays of light emanating from the yeshiva.

According to Maimonides, the foundation of our faith was a yeshiva begun by Avraham and passed down from generation to generation all the way to the current period.

As soon as [Abraham] was weaned he commenced to busy his mind, in his infancy he commenced to think by day and by night, and would encounter this enigma: How is it possible that this planet should continuously be in motion and have no leader—and who, indeed, causes

it to revolve, it being impossible that it should revolve itself? Moreover, he neither had a teacher nor one to impart aught to him, for he was sunk in Ur of the Chaldeans among the foolish worshipers of stars, and his father, and his mother, like all the people, worshiped stars, and he, although following them in their worship, busied his heart and reflects until he attains the path of truth, and, by his correct thinking, he understood when he finally saw the line of righteousness. He knew that there is One God; He leads the planet; He created everything; and in all that is there is no god save He. He knew that the whole world was in error, and that the thing which caused them to err was, that their worshiping the stars and the images brought about the loss of the truth from their consciousness. And, when Abraham was forty years old he recognized his Creator. After he came to this comprehension and knowledge he started to confute the sons of Ur of the Chaldeans, and to organize disputations with them, cautioning them, saying: "This is not the true path that you are following", and he destroyed the images, and commenced preaching to the people warning them that it is not right to worship any save the God of the universe, and unto Him alone it is right to bow down, to offer sacrifices, and compound offerings, so that the creatures of the future shall recognize Him. Moreover, it is right to destroy and break in pieces all of the images, so that the whole population of the future be not led to an error like unto these who imagine that there is no God save these images. When he had them subdued by his well supported contentions, the king tried to put him to death, but he was saved by a miracle, and went hence to Haran. There he stood up anew and called out in a great voice to the whole world, to let them know that there is One God for the whole universe, and unto Him it is proper to render service. And thus he went onward with his proclamations from city to city, and from government to government, until he attained the land of Canaan amidst his outcry, even as it is said: "And called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God" (Gen. 21.33). When the people who congregated about him asked him concerning his preachments, he replied by imparting knowledge to each and every one according to his mentality, to the end that he was able to turn him to the path of truth, until there congregated about him thousands, even tens of thousands, and they became the people of Abraham's household, in whose heart he implanted this great cause, concerning which he compiled books, and which he imparted to his son Isaac.³ Isaac, from his seat of learning, gave instructions and admonitions. And Isaac, in turn, imparted it to Jacob and appointed him head master, who, at his seat of learning, gave instructions and supported all who flocked to him. And Jacob our father instructed all his sons, but separated Levi and appointed him head master, and established him in a seat of learning where to instruct in the path of the Name and in the observance of the charges of Abraham. He, moreover, commanded his sons not to interrupt the succession of the sons of Levi to the presidency of the school so that the learning be not forgotten. So did the movement advance intensely among the sons of Jacob and their followers that the world saw a God-knowing nation called into existence, until Israel spent a long time in Egypt, when they turned to be instructed in their practice and to worship the stars as they did, save only the tribe of Levi, which remained faithful to their ancestral charge; for the tribe of Levi at no time worshiped stars. Verily, in but a short space of time, the root which Abraham had planted would have been uprooted, and the sons of Jacob would have turned to the universal error and wandering; save because of the Lord's love for us, and because He observes the oath of covenant with Abraham our father, He appointed Moses our Master lord of all prophets, and made him His messenger. After Moses our Master was endowed with prophecy and the Lord

chose Israel as an inheritance, He crowned them with commandments, and made known to them the way to serve Him, and what will be the judgment rendered against idolatry and all its erring devotees (Mishneh Torah, Avodah Zarah, 1:3).

The midrash states about the words, “*bemidbar Sinai*” that Hashem did not wish to rest the Shekhinah on the sea or on the mountains, but rather specifically in the wilderness. The intent of this is that Hashem only wanted to place the Shekhinah on someone who imagines oneself to be a wilderness, i.e. that one knows that no matter how much Torah one has studied there is a need for more and that the surface has barely been scratched. One must be aware that if one does not commit to Torah study with great effort it will not be able to be attained, and no one else will be able to do the task for us—just like in a wilderness where we are all alone without anyone to help. Only a person who recognizes this is worthy to receive the Torah and the Divine Presence (*Ohel Torah*, Bamidbar 1:1).

This is the essence of a yeshiva. It is a place where one realizes how little one knows about life and how much more one has to learn. It is a place where a person commits with all one’s strength and energy to gain insight into our Creator.

In the Midrash Rabbah it states, “The Torah was given in three ways—fire, water, and in the wilderness. Why was the Torah given in these three ways? Just as these three things are free to everyone in the world, so too, the words of Torah are free to the entire world. As it states in Isaiah: “Let all who are thirsty go and drink water” (Isaiah 55).

In his youth, the great Rabbi Yaakov Galinsky studied in a small yeshiva in Kranik. The young Yaakov wanted to improve his Torah studies so he asked the Rosh Yeshiva what he could do in order to improve. The Rosh Yeshiva told him to travel to the Navardok yeshiva and study there as the yeshiva was known for helping people improve their piety and devotion to Hashem. He told the young Reb Yaakov that the students of Navardok would give him strength. The Rosh Yeshiva gave him an introductory letter and told him to deliver it to a specific person who was a long-time student of Navardok and an expert in self-improvement. Reb Yaakov came to this student and gave him the letter. The student read the letter carefully and said, “So you want to improve? Well, you need to know that if you don’t work on yourself, nothing else will help.” Reb Yaakov asked: “What should I do?”

The student responded that Reb Yaakov should go to a nearby synagogue named, “*Liba Rachel*.” During the day the synagogue is empty and so he told Reb Yaakov to go there and for an hour he should read a book of mussar and think about how he can improve himself. When Reb Yaakov walked into the empty synagogue, he was surprised to hear a voice coming from the upstairs women’s section. He quietly walked upstairs and discreetly looked for the source of the voice. He was surprised to see a student there bending over a text of the Talmud and reading the text in a loud voice. He kept repeating the words of the Talmud, “Keen scholar, grab and eat, grab and drink, as the world from which we are departing is like a wedding feast, whose joy is only temporary” (Eruvin, 54a). He kept saying, “grab and eat, grab and eat,” with greater and greater intensity. When Reb Yaakov heard this, he understood that his

responsibility in life was to study as much Torah as possible. He quickly ran back to the Navardok yeshiva, packed his bags, and ran back to his old yeshiva. Years later, he revealed to his students that the student in the synagogue who he had heard that day was the great, Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky (*Vekarata Leshabbat Oneg*, Volume 3, 297).

You can now watch a Youtube recording of Rabbi Herzfeld's D'var Torah:

<https://youtu.be/UF6BHIP9ISE>