

Finding God in the Wilderness

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The granite rock summit towers over 7,500 ft. above sea level. But before one reaches the summit, a pretty harrowing climb comes first. Bedouin desert dwellers attempt to sell weary climbers camel rides to the top of the mountain. Oftentimes the path is anything but smooth...covered with boulders and jagged outcroppings of rock. The nearly three hour ascent to the summit has to start long before sunrise, in order to avoid the scorching desert heat. The mountain I am talking about is none other than Jebel Mousa as the locals call it, the Mountain of Moses; or as we refer to it, *Har Sinai*, Mt. Sinai. Mt. Sinai stands more than five times taller than Masada, for those of you who have climbed Masada. And when you finally reach the top—whether on foot or on camel, there is a small mosque and a Greek Orthodox chapel. I remember being surprised that there was nothing recognizing that place as a sacred Jewish site. No synagogue, no shrine, not even a plaque (we Jews love plaques!). Sari and I climbed Mt. Sinai at a rare moment in modern Middle East history, the summer of 1997, just weeks before our wedding, when it was widely considered to be safe to cross the Israeli-Egyptian border just south of Eilat, and travel into the barren frontier of the Sinai Peninsula. Sinai is a few hours into the wilderness, much of the trip on dirt roads. There are no rest stops, no drive through Starbucks, no gas stations, no development whatsoever. Eventually you come to the compound at the base of the mountain which contains a monastery that was commissioned by the Roman Emperor Justinian I in the 6th Century. The monks who reside there claim that Moses's well is on the premises as well as the burning bush! The summit of the mountain is surprisingly small. There was hardly room for all the pilgrims from around the world to clamor together at the top to watch the sunrise. A small crag in the rock is said to be where Moses resided while on the mountain receiving the 10 Commandments...and where he hid when God's presence passed by ...

There was one overwhelming sensation I recall from the summit of Mt. Sinai. Looking out over the expanse of mountain ranges all around Sinai, my first thought was, how do 'they' know that this mountain out of so many others is the actual Mt. Sinai?! Desert hermits since the 3rd Century claimed it to be the authentic place, but the 3rd Century was still over a millennia after the events at Sinai. I also remember the feeling of absolute desolation...I felt so far from civilization.

Sharm al-Sheikh, the largest city in the southern peninsula is 3 hours from Sinai. In a way I had never before experienced, I felt that I understood the meaning of the *midbar*.

In Hebrew, the Book of Numbers, which we began reading the morning is Bemidbar. “In the wilderness.” It is the chapter of our people’s history in the bleak and barren landscape that Sari and I encountered at Mt. Sinai. It’s no wonder this book is filled with dissent and rebellion. Even though I knew there was an air conditioned bus waiting for me at the base of the mountain, I felt jittery just being so far from everywhere. There is a sense of utter loss of direction...everything looks the same, north, south, east, west. The heat radiates from the sunburned ground. I could imagine my ancestors surveying this place and wondering how they would procure food; where they would find potable water. The wilderness can be a frightening place.

A famous Midrash wonders about why God would have chosen the wilderness of all places to reveal the Torah to the Jewish people. You would think that our most precious possession would be given in a more suitable environment...like the city of Jerusalem. We just sang *ki mitzion teitzei Torah*...Torah goes forth from Jerusalem. But it was not *given* in Jerusalem. You might think that the Torah would be given in a place of permanent sanctity...that we would not only know without a doubt the address, the coordinates...that we could type it into Google Earth and be able to zoom with our smart phones right over the very spot! You know you can do that for many of the world’s holy sites...you can Google Earth yourself right onto the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, or right into the middle of Vatican City or right into the heart of Mecca...which is good since Jews cannot actually go to Mecca in person—that’s against the law. The Saudi government hasn’t figured out a way to block us from Google Earth tough! But you can’t find where the Torah was given because it was purposely given in no man’s land...in an undisclosed location. So, why was Torah given in the wilderness asks the Midrash? Because the Torah itself is compared to the wilderness in that it is open and accessible to all humankind, as it is said in Isaiah 55, “Let everyone who is thirsty come for water...” How I love this midrash! So often Torah is viewed as the parochial, insular concern of a highly-educated elite. But here the Midrash reminds us that Torah is meant to be democratized...open, attainable, user-friendly if you will, for everyone!

I want to offer yet another powerful metaphor for Torah being given in the *midbar*, in the wilderness. I have already described to you the feeling of desolation and loneliness that one

experiences in the *midbar*; the fear of simply being able to stay alive in such harsh, barren conditions; the sense of dread at the possibility of being totally lost and abandoned. And in that very space, the Jewish people found God, and felt God's unmistakable presence. This is the timeless message of the Book of Numbers; that even in a place of distress and panic and apprehension, the people somehow sense that God cares for them, that God loves them, and that they will make it to the Promised Land. Can you imagine how many generations of our people have felt uplifted by that message...as they wandered from one country to another; landless, stateless, as they relocated to unknown places, fleeing from persecution? But this book, this story reminded them that if their ancestors could have faith in the wilderness of Sinai then they could have faith in the wilderness where they found themselves. Now I want to teach you an ancient rule of biblical interpretation. [It's actually found on page 70 in your siddur, where there's a whole list of hermeneutic principles attributed to Rabbi Yishmael.] He says *bishlosh esrei midot ha'Torah nidreshet*...the Torah may be interpreted according to 13 different rules. Rule number four states *miklal u'frat*...that specific truths can be derived from larger, more general circumstances. So friends, if it is true that the Jewish people were able to discern God's presence during their wilderness wanderings as described in the Book of Numbers, then it should be true that we as individuals should be able to sense God accompanying us in the various wildernesses where we sometimes find ourselves in life. If it was true for the people at large, it ought to be true for each one of us.

I have written and spoken to you about one of my personal heroes, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Szapira, who known as the Piaseczno Rebbe before his community was rounded up and interred in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1939. While in the Ghetto, Szapira operated a clandestine synagogue, where he delivered numerous inspirational speeches and teachings to his embattled community. On January 27, 1940 he began recording his d'var Torah with the words: "This Sabbath I was in hiding." God only knows the terror of the ghetto on that particular Shabbat. He said to his community that morning: "Israel's acceptance of the Torah took place in the desert...had Israel accepted the Torah in their land, in the land of Israel, they would have thought that it is only possible to fulfill it in their own place, in their own home, but not when they are disturbed in exile. Therefore God gave them the Torah in the desert, on the road, in transit, so that they would know that they must fulfill it everywhere." I am riveted at how this holy rebbe

encouraged his followers, living the nightmare of the Warsaw Ghetto, to still do mitzvot, to still feel God's presence, even in that dreadful wilderness of their lives.

The truth is, it seems like much of the Bible is a record of people searching for hope and meaning in the midst of great struggle: Abraham and Sarah leaving behind everything they knew and moving to a place they never heard of; Hagar and Ishmael's near death experience in the desert; Jacob running away from home to save his life; the barrenness of Sarah-of Rachel-of Michal-of Hannah; Joseph abandoned by his brothers at the bottom of a pit; Moses fleeing into the desert trying to figure out what in the world he's supposed to do with his life; David constantly in hiding from the menace of Saul; Elijah hopeless and dejected in the wilderness; Jeremiah weeping at the destruction of Jerusalem; Jonah on the run from himself and from God; Job trying to make sense of his losses... This is the human condition! This is a timeless experience that has been shared throughout the ages. And we too have moments of disillusionment, of confusion, of hopelessness. None of us is immune from the vicissitudes of life. And when we are in those narrow places, those dark places, think of Sefer Bemidbar... think of the book of wilderness wanderings... the Book of Numbers and the experiences of our ancestors... the way so many people who encountered struggles of cataclysmic proportions as well as deeply personal ones nevertheless found hope and strength and faith. If these stories are meant to teach us anything it is that there is no place and no circumstance and no situation no matter how egregious where we cannot find God, or where hope is impossible. The Jewish people are living testimony to that truth, and this is one of the many things that make me so proud to be a Jew.

As some of you know I got to go back to my old stomping grounds in Dallas for a recent Rabbinic convention. Dallas is known for, among other things, the unabashed display of religious faith. Here in Maryland there are lawn signs for political candidates and ballot issues, there the lawn signs proclaim people's religious beliefs. So as I drove from my in-laws' house to the convention hotel I noticed all these lawn signs proclaiming "Be strong and take courage," which is a quote from Joshua 1:9. There was no other information on the lawn signs... no church name or event. Just "be strong and take courage." And I felt pride that our holy tradition was being used as a source of encouragement for others. So let's take our own message to heart... Be strong and take courage... no matter what wilderness of life you're in. We have been there

before and history tells us, there's always a way out...and may we each find the Promised Land we're searching for.