

Along the close to two thousand miles that separate Buenos Aires from Ushuaia, one can drive for miles and miles through areas where the only sign of civilization that you will find is the black layer of asphalt that you are traveling on; nothing, absolutely nothing else. You drive for hours without encountering any sign of human life.

Growing up in Argentina, both my parents worked full time jobs. Still, they managed to schedule their vacation time to coincide with our school vacations. Every year, they planned road trips to so many different parts of the country; North, West and South. This is how I got to visit so many different areas in the country; mountains and valleys, rainforests and beaches, lakes and cataracts, mountaintops covered with snow and warm deserts. We even took road trips to neighboring countries, like Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, Bolivia and Paraguay.

I vividly remember the summer when we took a trip to Ushuaia, the capital of Tierra del Fuego, and the southernmost city in South America (and in the world). What an amazing experience that was!

One of the many elements that fascinated me during that trip was travelling for long hours through massive extensions of land where we could not find even one sign of human life! Every so many miles, we would drive through a tiny settlement with, maybe, a grocery store, an emergency care unit, and a gas station, nothing else; that was it!

Having been there and having gained appreciation for that kind of landscape, helps me understand the Mount Sinai experience. We know that deserts, extended areas of land with no visible marks of civilization, are often a good backdrop for intense spiritual experiences.

Silent kayaking trips to Alaska, trips to India and to the Middle East for 'silent' retreats are common offerings for individuals who are in search of ways to enhance their spiritual experiences.

During my training with the Institute of Jewish Spirituality, we had, on different occasions, several days when speaking was not allowed. We spent full days without any conversation whatsoever. This approach was intended to enhance our ability to explore and experience the richness of our inner lives, which we often, intentionally or not, end up muffling with noise and with distractions.

A 'Desert Theology' has been developed throughout the years and universities and schools of theology include courses that offer the students an opportunity to examine questions arising out of ancient traditions of spiritual practice based on desert experiences, giving particular attention to the question of what it might mean to retrieve the image of the desert as a central part of contemporary spiritual life.

This week's *Parsha*, *BaMidbar* (in the desert) and the holiday of Shavuot that immediately follows, *Zman mattan Torah*, the time when we celebrate God's revelation through the gift of Torah, are strong suggestions that we should, in our own lives, look

for moments where we can 'silence' the world around us and create desert type experiences.

When we can successfully disconnect from the surrounding noises that constantly invade our lives, we will be helping ourselves as we will be enhancing our ability to perceive and hear our inner spirituality. Through these expansions we might be in a better place to find and to encounter God in our lives.

My suggestion and my prayer for this Shavuot is that, in the same way as the Children of Israel encountered God in the desert of Sinai, we will succeed in encountering God within the spaces that we will have created.

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Sameakh! May we all receive and enjoy Torah on this holiday!

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