



## **Rabbi Katz's Drashah for Parshat BaMidbar**

May 15, 2021 - 4 Sivan 5781

The Midrash tells us that a prerequisite of Kabbalat HaTorah is being like a “Midbar”, a desert, based on the first pasuk of the parshah. Chazal also tell us that the calendar must be structured so that we read Bamidbar on the Shabbos preceding Shavuot. The Sfas Emes adds to this that we not only have the parsha to prepare for Kabbalat Hatorah, but we use the Shabbos itself. Shabbos, he explains, is a time where we sacrifice our own activities, our own indulgences, for the sake of reflection and comradery with others. Instead of focusing on what we ourselves have to accomplish, we take stock of life and the world around us. This conscientiousness is the precursor of Matan Torah, as it was only through unity, “as one body with one heart” (Rashi, Shemot 19:1) that we merited to receive the Torah. Similarly, we were instructed about Shabbos even before we arrived at Sinai (See Parshat Beshalach).

Alternatively, on a simpler level, we can explain the necessity of Shabbos and the desert as a precursor before Matan Torah as a means of serenity. A life-altering decision with profound ramifications requires that we give it some time beforehand to process and prepare. This, after all, is one of the objectives of the 3 days before Shavuot, the “shloshet yemei hagbalah”. The Chidushei HaRim says, similarly, that the entire Sefirah is a preparatory time to contemplate and inculcate the value of receiving the Torah.

This serenity, however, is ultimately broken at the time of Matan Torah. As narrated in Parshat Yitro, “On the third day there was thunder and lightning... and the sound of the trumpet was very loud; and all the people who were in the camp trembled”. The serenity allowed the people to experience and tolerate the awe-inspiring moment of Ma’amad Har Sinai. Those three days of respite, in the desert, with Shabbos, were the preparations that the Jewish people needed, and which we experience this Shabbos as well.

But not everyone has this opportunity this Shabbos. Our brothers and sisters in Eretz Yisrael are living in constant fear and anxiety, worried for their lives and the lives of their children and friends. Their serenity and respite is yet to be enjoyed. We are blessed to have such technology as the Iron Dome, and it is truly remarkable. But as we’ve unfortunately seen, it’s not perfect. The anxiety of a missed rocket, the possibility of slipping through the cracks, is just enough to keep a parent awake all night; to keep a family holed up in a shelter.

The Ksav Vehakabbalah points out that there was another “fear” in the pesukim of pre-Matan Torah. Only two pesukim after the first (19:18), the Torah says that there was a lot of smoke, and “the entire mountain trembled”. On a literal level, this may refer to an earthquake-like phenomenon. But the Ksav Vehakabbalah explains that this was a fear of reverence. It was a trembling of every living thing,

in silence. There are some fears which are borne out of literal physical entities, like thunder and lightning, and then there are fears which are caused by the awareness of what's going on around you, even without literal triggers. At Har Sinai, the world trembled in recognition of the awe-inspiring event, despite the physical stillness of the moment. In Israel, our nation is gripped by fear, even with the miraculous luxury of an Iron Dome.

The gemara (Yoma 28) discusses how the anticipation of an event can be even more profound than the event itself. Looking forward to a specific indulgence can create the same pleasure neurologically than it does in actuality. Dan Gilbert describes a similar phenomenon in his book "Stumbling on Happiness". Fear and anxiety are often the same way. The anticipation of the unknown, the worry for what will be, and the lack of recourse to prevent a possible tragedy can be crippling for a person and society.

As we sit in America and anticipate the joy and celebration of Matan Torah, in the serenity of our homes this Shabbos, our friends and families in Eretz Yisrael are anticipating the possibility of a very different future. We keep them in mind as we daven for their peace, not only in the conflict generally, but in their lives and minds personally. May we, as the entire Jewish people, merit to experience the trembling of awe and reverence this coming Shavuot, and not one of fear and anxiety.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Katz