

In the Wilderness

Introduction

This week's Torah portion, *Bamidbar*, “In the wilderness”, begins as follows:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי בְּאֶהֱל מוֹעֵד

The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, [and told him to perform a census]. [Numbers 1:1]

Why tell us that God spoke to Moses “in the wilderness”? What is the significance of the location? Bamidbar is always read on the Shabbat before Shavuot, which commemorates the time when the Torah was revealed. Is there a connection?

-Ibn Ezra provides a simple explanation: We are informed that Moses did not have to go up to Mount Sinai as before, since God was now present in the Tent of Meeting. But then, why not say just “in the Tent of Meeting” and omit “in the wilderness of Sinai”?

-The Ramban says that it informs us that they did not travel away from there until they were counted.

But is there more to it?

The desert made Torah available to all

The Midrash gives a much wider explanation:

The Sages taught that the Torah was given through three things: fire, water, and wilderness...

-“Fire” from “And Mount Sinai was all in smoke as God had come down upon it in fire.” [Exodus 19:18]

-“Water” from “The heavens dripped and the clouds dripped water [at Sinai].” [Judges 5:4]

-And “Wilderness” from “And God spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai.” [Numbers 1:1]

And why was the Torah given through these three things?

Just as [fire, water, and wilderness] are free to all the inhabitants of the world, so too are the words of Torah free to them, as [Isaiah] said:

Oh, come, all who are thirsty for water... even if you have no money. [Isaiah 55:1]

[Numbers R. 1:7]

Another Midrash comments:

The Torah was given in public, in [the desert, that is,] a place free to all; 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 wilderness, in a place free to all, so that anyone wishing to acquire it could come and do so. [Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai on Exodus 19:2]

So, by giving the Torah in an open, ownerless location, God made it available to all.

The Midrash adds that if the Torah had been given in Israel, the other nations would have had an excuse for not accepting it. In fact, before God gave the Torah to the Israelites he offered it to all the other nations and each found a reason to decline:

When the Lord appeared to give Torah to Israel, it is not to Israel alone that He appeared, but to all of the nations. First He went to the children of Esau, and He asked them: Will you accept the Torah? They asked: What is written in it? He answered: "You shall not murder". [Ex. 20:13] They answered: The entire essence of our father is murder ..., as his father [Isaac] assured him:

And by your sword shall you live. [Gen. 27:40]

He then went to the children of Ammon and Moab and asked them: Will you accept the Torah? They asked: What is written in it? He answered "You shall not commit adultery." They answered: Lord of the Universe, illicit relations are our entire essence, as it is written:

And the two daughters of Lot conceived by their father. [Gen. 19:36]

He then went and found the children of Yishmael and asked them: Will you accept the Torah? They asked: What is written in it? He answered: "You shall not steal". [Ex. 20:13] They answered: Lord of the Universe, our father's entire essence is stealing, as it says:

And [Yishmael] shall be a wild man, his hand against all. [Gen. 16:12]

There was none, among all of the nations, to whom He did not go and speak and knock at their door, asking if they would accept the Torah... And they could not even abide by the seven mitzvot that the sons of Noah took upon themselves...

[But] Israel accepted the Torah with all of its explanations and inferences. [Sifrei Deut. 343, Avodah Zara 2b]

The desert is the best place to connect to God

The Midrash even teaches that a 40-year sojourn in the desert was necessary for the Torah to really be accepted:

God led the people about by the way of the wilderness [Ex. 12:18]. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: If I lead them into the land by the most direct route, they will each take possession of a field and a vineyard and neglect the law. Therefore I will lead them through the wilderness for forty years and cause them to eat the manna and drink the water of the well so that the law may penetrate into their very beings. [Midrash Tanḥuma, Beshallach 1]

The Midrash confirms this elsewhere: The fewer the possessions, the better one can learn Torah:

Anyone who does not make themselves ownerless like the wilderness cannot acquire the wisdom and the Torah. [Numbers R. 1:7]

The Talmud says you must turn yourself into a “wilderness” for the Torah:

[Rava] said: Once a person renders himself like a wilderness, deserted before all, the Torah is given to him as a gift...

And once it is given to him as a gift, God bequeaths it to him...

And once God bequeaths it to him, he rises to greatness...

But if he elevates himself [in arrogance about his Torah], the Holy One, Blessed be He, degrades him... and lowers him into the ground. [Nedarim 55a, commenting on Numbers 21:18-19]

Possessions require time. Scholars are frequently supported by their communities so they don't have to worry about material matters.

The desert is a place of true freedom. Those who live there are nomads -- they don't own it; they just roam through it.

In fact, Rav Naḥman of Breslov preached that, to be close to God, you have to speak to God in your mother tongue, at least one hour a day; preferably in a natural setting, such as a field or a forest, among the natural works of God's creation, to avoid man-made distractions. He called it *hitbodedut*, meaning “self-seclusion”. It is central to his thinking. He described it as follows:

It is very good to pour out your thoughts before God like a child pleading before his father. God calls us His children, as it is written [in the Torah]:

You are children to God. [Deuteronomy 14:1]

Therefore, it is good to express your thoughts and troubles to God like a child complaining and pestering his father.

His followers, the Breslover Hassidim, go to remote natural settings to meditate.

As one commentator described it:

During a session of hitbodedut, the practitioner pours out his heart to God in his own language, describing all his thoughts, feelings, problems and frustrations. Nothing was viewed by Rebbe Nahman as being too mundane for discussion, including business dealings, conflicting desires and everyday interactions. Even the inability to properly articulate what one wishes to say is viewed as a legitimate subject to discuss with God. One should also use the opportunity to examine his behavior and motivations, correcting the flaws and errors of the past while seeking the proper path for the future.

There is even a program called Bamidbar Therapy, which you can check out online (<https://www.bamidbartherapy.org/>). Here is how it describes its approach:

Our approach incorporates the modern understanding of the human brain through the study of psychology and neurology, with the collective Jewish experience around the deeper questions that every person grapples with. We do this in the wilderness -- a pristine environment where there are no distractions and no false fulfillments. It is the clearest lens through which to look at ourselves and create space for these questions in our lives. That is what makes BaMidbar a Jewish wilderness therapy program.

Are desert and speech related?

“Bamidbar” is often translated as “In the wilderness”. But its root *dalet-bet-resh* also refers to speaking. Are the two related, and if so, how? The Zohar suggests that Moses was unable to speak clearly (and needed Aaron) until he led the people into the desert:

[The Torah says:]

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בֶּן אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִקֶּצֶר רוּחַם וּמִעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה
And Moses told the children of Israel [that God will free them], but they would not listen, for their spirits were anguished [“their breath was short”] by cruel bondage. [Exodus 6:9]

What is the meaning of “their breath was short”?

Rabbi Shimon saw a mystical significance in the expression... At that time, Moses was still in the grade of “Voice” (קוֹל), and for him the grade of “Speech” (דְּבַר) was in exile... This lasted until Israel approached Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. Then the Voice was united with the Speech, and the word was spoken... Only at the giving of the Law Moses was, as it were, healed of his impediment [“slow of tongue”], when the Voice and the Speech were united in him as their organ. Before that event the power which is Speech guided Israel in the desert, but without expressing itself until they came to Sinai. [Zohar, Shemot 2:25b]

The two words are together in Hosea:

וְהִלַּכְתִּיהָ הַמִּדְבָּר וְדִבַּרְתִּי עִל לִבָּהּ:

I [God] will lead [Israel] through the wilderness (*midbar*) and speak to her (*dibarti*) tenderly. [Hosea 2:16]

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes:

There is an intrinsic connection between [the two] ...

“In the wilderness” -- “Bamidbar” -- Israel heard the “Medabber” -- the-One-who-reveals-Himself-in-words...

In the desert, they heard the Word and became the people of the Word.

Value of silence

God cannot be seen, but can be heard if we listen carefully. Sages: One advantage of the desert is the experience of silence: keeping quiet to meditate and also listening carefully. The Sages valued silence:

רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אָמַר, סִיג לַחֲכָמָה, שְׁתִּיקָה

Rabbi Akiva says: Silence is a fence to wisdom. [Avot 3:13]

A fool who is silenced is also considered a wise man. [Prov. 17:28]

If a word is worth one coin, silence is worth two. [Megillah 18a]

Shimon... used to say: all my days I grew up among the sages, and I have found nothing better for a person than silence... Whoever indulges in too many words brings about sin. [Avot 1:17]

The Amidah is also known as the silent prayer. Some worshippers say it is their favorite part of the service.

The prophet Elijah hid in a cave and looked for God:

There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks... but the Lord was not in the wind.

After the wind—an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

After the earthquake, fire; but the Lord was not in the fire.

And after the fire; a still, small voice...

[And there was God,] telling him: “Why are you here, Elijah?” [1 Kings 19:11-13]

Hollywood notwithstanding, God does not necessarily come in big, fiery events. We must be quiet and listen carefully to find Him. As the psalmist said:

The heavens declare the glory of God... There is no utterance, there are no words... Yet their voice carries throughout the earth, their words to the end of the world. [Ps. 19:2-5]

Don't talk too much

Commenting on the virtues of not talking too much, Maimonides writes:

[Rambam on Pirkei Avot 1:17]

[King Solomon] the wise said:

בְּרֵב דְּבָרִים לֹא יִהְיֶה לִפְשֵׁעַ וְחֹשֶׁךְ שְׁפָתָיו מִשְׁכִּיל

Where there is much talking, there is no lack of transgression, [but the one who curbs his tongue shows sense.] [Proverbs 10:19]

The reason is that most words are unnecessary and sinful... If a man speaks abundantly, he will surely sin, because there will be among his words something that is not proper to say. Therefore, one of the signs of the wise is that they use few words and one of the signs of the foolish is that they use a lot of words... The Sages declared that using few words indicates great stature and good lineage...

According to our Torah, speech divides into five groups...:

-The first group is what we are commanded to say: Reading the Torah, learning and analyzing it. This is a positive commandment: [The Torah says:]

And you shall *speak* [about words of Torah when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up]. [Deuteronomy 6:7]

It is as weighty as all the other commandments [put together]...

-The second group is forbidden speech, such as... bearing false witness, tale-bearing and cursing... foul language and evil speech.

-The third group is disgusting speech. It has no benefit... but it is not a sin and is not rebellious. [It is] average speech, relating news, happenings, or what some king did in his palace, or why someone died, or why someone became rich. The wise call this “idle chatter”, and pious men refrain from it... Included in this category is also disparaging a virtue or extolling a vice...

-The fourth group is beloved speech. It speaks the praise of virtues... and disparages vices... It points the soul to these virtues through stories and songs, and likewise prevents vices. Likewise, it praises great people, extols their qualities, so others may appreciate their actions and follow their ways. And it condemns lowly and evil people, so others may despise their deeds and their memory, distance themselves from them, and not follow their ways. This is called *derech erez* -- “civility”.

-The fifth group is permitted speech. It is speech one needs for business and livelihood, for eating and drinking, for clothing, and for all other needs.

It is permitted. It is not beloved and not despised. If he wants, he may speak it, and if he prefers, he may be silent. In this group, it is praiseworthy to be sparing, and men of ethics warn against excessive speech.

Concerning [words that are] forbidden or despised... it is obviously worthy to completely refrain from them. Concerning [words that are] commanded or beloved, if a person could speak them all his life, it would be good. Nevertheless, there are two conditions: First, his actions must match his words... and second, he must be brief... As the Sages taught [in the Talmud]:

A man should teach his students concisely. [Pesachim 3a]

He seems to imply that if you don't practice what you preach or you are long-winded, you should be quiet. (This would be an interesting subject of discussion.)

Conclusion

According to our Sages, the Torah was revealed in the desert because the remoteness and emptiness of the desert foster introspection; because the desert belongs to all and so does the Torah; and because its silence forces us to listen carefully and thereby find God.

Shabbat shalom.