

Treasures Found In the Wilderness

This week we begin reading from the fourth Book of the Torah, *B'midbar*, literally, "In the wilderness." The English title of this book is "Numbers" as a derivative of the early Greek and Roman names for the book ("*Arithmoi*" and "*Numeri*," respectively). Those names reflect the censuses that are recorded in the Book (chapter 1:2-54 and chapter 26:1-51). In addition, there are lists and descriptions of how the tribes and their troops were arranged around the tabernacle. Perhaps it was only natural for the Greeks and Romans to focus on demographic accounting and troop strengths. Both cultures made bold plans to dominate the world; population studies and military analysis were crucial to their goals.

On the other hand, the original Hebrew name for the fourth book reflects our ancestral philosophy that sacred teaching and inspiration are available to all and can be found even in the most unlikely places: even *B'midbar*, "in the Wilderness."

Note that the formative period for our Israelite ancestors was during the forty years we spent in the wilderness.

It was in a howling wasteland that we were transformed from a caravan of refugees, miraculously freed from Egyptian slavery into a proud nation that possessed the Torah and a mission to be a light unto the world. It was in that harsh Sinai desert that we discovered meaning and purpose and values. It was in the wilderness that we learned we could endure, survive and even thrive against all odds. It was in the wilderness that a new generation of the Children of Israel arose who were strong, courageous and determined to make a better future.

Our early rabbinic sages taught that the reason the Torah given in the wilderness is to indicate that these sacred values are readily available to all humankind (*Midrash Rabbah B'midbar* 1.7).

The Book of *B'midbar* (Numbers) is always read on the Shabbat just before the Festival of *Shavuot*, the holy day that celebrates the gift of Torah (*z'man matan Torateinu*). Again, it is a reminder of the transformative experiences we had from *Pesach* to *Shavuot*, from our freedom from slavery to our celebration of Torah. It is an eternal reminder that profound lessons are learned during times of struggle, hardship and uncertainty. Even while trudging through the wilderness, we can discover and lay claim to the spiritual, emotional and social qualities that affirm life's goodness.

From deprivation, we begin to reprioritize our values and to reclaim our ownership of that which transcends time and material. People and community that we once took for granted are now so precious that even seeing images of them on a screen fills us with joy.

One day, hopefully very soon, we'll be through this COVID-19 induced wilderness and find our way again to that Promised Land where family and friends can gather freely. Oh, how sweet it will be to gather again with you for worship, study, simchas and smoozing in-person! And when that time finally comes, we'll look back on the days in the wilderness and realize that just like our ancestors, we have found that which is truly sacred.

B'vrakhah,

Rick

Rabbi Rick Rheins