

A Shabbat Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

The Most Precious Gifts Are Free

This week we begin reading from the fourth book of Torah, *B'midbar*, "In the wilderness." In accordance to the traditions of our ancient Hebrew calendar, this portion is read just before the Festival of *Shavuot*, the celebration of the gift of Torah (*z'man matan Torateinu*).

So what is the connection between "in the wilderness" and the gift of Torah? We find a compelling answer in Midrash Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, one of the oldest collections of midrashim:

They encamped in the wilderness: The Torah was given in public, openly in a free place. For had the Torah been given in the land of Israel, perhaps the Israelites would have said to the world: "You have no share in it. But now that it was given in the wilderness, publicly and openly in a place that is free for all, everyone wishing to accept it could come and accept it (*Tractate Bachodesh*).

Similarly, in *Midrash Rabbah B'midbar* it is written:

Why was it given in the wilderness? Because, if it had been given to them in the Promised Land, the tribe in whose territory it was given would have said, "I have a prior claim to it!" Consequently, it was given in the wilderness, so that all should have an equal claim to it (Chapter 29:26).

The gift of Torah is free and its inspired wisdom elevates all who engage in it. So what is the rub? How can something free and promising such intellectual and spiritual rewards come without a catch? Well, in truth there is a catch: It is a gift that requires some effort and dedication to fully enjoy

and reap the benefits. In this way, Torah is like a loving relationship. True love is given without cost and without unreasonable conditions. But there are expectations; namely, that the lovers are responsive and loyal and sensitive to one another. Unrequited love withers. In the Talmud it was wisely noted that “When love is strong, the lovers can make their bed on a sword’s blade. When love grows weak, a bed of sixty cubits is not large enough” (*Sanhedrin 7a*).

As spring is in full bloom it is time to renew those most precious gifts that lift our spirit and affirm life’s meaning and purpose. Our ancestors found Torah in the sparse and rough environment of the wilderness. And even then, they had difficult trials, tests and even moments of estrangement. But they had the tenacity to keep trying. They had the grit to muster through the failures and disappointments. And they had the belief that if they kept trying there would be a better life---if not for them, then at least for their children and children’s children.

And so it has been for over 3,500 years. No matter what, we keep coming back to embrace the love of life. That is the gift of Torah. It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it, and all its supporters are happy. Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.

Come and claim your gift of Torah every Shabbat! Come to the celebration of Torah at the Shavuot services this Saturday night and Sunday morning.

Our Shavuot *Tikkun Leil* begins Saturday night (7pm) with a dairy dessert oneg and then a musical study session and Festival service with Cantor Nesis, Rabbi Susan and me (7:30-8:30pm).

On Sunday morning, the Shavuot service begins at 10:00am and will include Yizkor memorial prayers, our fabulous Sinai Choir and, of course, Torah! All for FREE!

Shabbat Shalom v'Chag Shavuot Sameiach,

Rick

Rabbi Rick Rheins