

In the Wilderness : BeMidbar 2020

I love the desert – the Negev and the Arava in Israel, the Southwest in this country. I cherish the silence there, the peace; I love the expanses of land in their subtle brown tones that feel so open, infinite and somehow ...mysterious. There is something undefined about the desert, as though it holds secrets that are not quite visible.

Every year when we come to this 4th book of the Torah – to Sefer BaMidbar – the book of “In the wilderness,” I think about the geographic setting of our Israelite ancestors. As we know, the Israelites will spend 40 years in the desert. Their *physical* locale perfectly expresses where they are spiritually and emotionally: in a wilderness, unsure what awaits them, in transition from slavery to freedom, in between one home and another, in a kind of limbo. They are literally and figuratively in a wilderness. It is a time of potential hope, but also one of deep fear and anxiety. What does the future hold?

We know of course that *one* crucial event will happen to our ancestors in the desert the event we celebrate next week on Shavuot, when our people meet God, so to speak, on Mt Sinai, and God gives us the Torah, which might be understood as “eternal teaching.” And in truth, for most of their 40 years in the midbar, God and Moshe are giving the Torah to the people. It is an ongoing process.

Our rabbinic sages asked the question: why was the Torah given in the desert? The Torah could have been given in a more obviously special place – for example, in the land of Israel, after the people arrived there, maybe as the culmination of their journey, as they prepared to establish a society? Or the Torah might have been given back in Egypt, giving the people guidelines for going forward from there? Why, instead, in the wilderness?

Our sages respond first that the Torah was given in an open, ownerless place, to relay the message that everyone wishing to accept Torah may access it. This idea is explained in a helpful way by contemporary writer Yossi Kahana: “In the place where the Torah was given, there were no towns or neighborhoods. No old money, no new money, no social climbers and no social climbed-overs. Had God given it to us on Wall Street, God would have had to decide whom to appoint to the board and who should retain a controlling interest. Had God given it to us in the Holy Land, God would have had to decide whether to give it in religious Jerusalem, mystical Safed or hi-tech Tel Aviv. Or perhaps on a socialist kibbutz or a religious Zionist settlement? God wanted no stockholders in Torah, no corporate structure, no social or geopolitical context. In fact, no context whatsoever. Just the Torah and anyone who chooses to accept it. ... in the wilderness, the Torah does not come in the context of any particular age or cultural milieu, and thus it belongs, absolutely and unequivocally, to each and every one of us.”

If Torah is given in a place with no context, then we must take it to our places of context – to our cities and towns, to our homes, to our communities. It is our task to receive Torah and make it alive and relevant in all of the places where we live. What helps us – each of us – to do that?

We look to another wilderness teaching from our sages: the Torah was given in the wilderness, they say, to teach us that a person who wants to acquire the wisdom of Torah must make herself a wilderness – *hefker*, ownerless. We are asked to **be** a wilderness. What does that mean? Again, think about the desert – a place that is open, without visible boundaries. It is both majestic and humble, maybe thirsty, waiting to receive something that is absent, or hidden, like rain, or green plants, or living creatures. We are asked to place ourselves in such a stance of waiting, of expectation.

This midrash suggests that when we find ourselves in the wilderness, in a place of mystery and uncertainty, we have two choices. We can close ourselves up in fear, or we can receive wisdom and strength by being open, ownerless, humble, receptive to new possibilities, new ideas, new people and new perspectives.

Every one of us is in a kind of wilderness right now, during this pandemic. We are living with so much anxiety and uncertainty. But if we can allow ourselves to be a wilderness, then we can receive gifts from our situation: new learning, new ways of looking at ourselves and the world, new strengths. Take time in these long wilderness days to make a new friend; learn a new skill; help someone in need; explore Jewish learning or prayer in a new way; or find out something about yourself and your inner life that you never knew. There may be wonderful mysteries to discover in our present wilderness.

Our present situation is challenging and sometimes terrifying; it also opens the way for possibilities and hope, if we can bring ourselves to receive those. It is no easy task – the Israelites spent much of their desert time complaining about what they were missing, even as they also were learning to be transformed into a new people. Our walk across this desert time – like that of our ancestors - can be fraught with danger and struggle, but it is also filled with growth, learning and beauty.

As we prepare for Shavuot next week, we recall that Torah was *given* at Sinai – given, not received. The event is called *Matan* Torah. The ‘receiving’ is an ongoing event, and it is up to every one of us can *choose* to receive the Torah – the teachings - that will help us live with wisdom, justice, healing, peace and God-willing – with joy.

Shabbat Shalom