

Parashat Bamidbar - Shavuot 5776, 2016:

*The Desert, the Torah and Shavuot*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

*Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) established the yearly calendar in such a manner as to ensure that the public reading of our *parasha* almost always precedes the Festival of Shavuot. In their divinely inspired wisdom, they perceived an indissoluble conceptual link between Parashat Bamidbar and the giving of the Torah on Shavuot. *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* (1:7) represents one of the best examples of this manner of thought:

**And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert:** Why [did Hashem speak to Moshe] in the Sinai Desert? [Based upon the inclusion of the phrase, “the Sinai Desert,”] our Sages taught that the Torah was given through three different modalities (literally, “three things”]: fire, water and [the medium of] the desert.

How do you know that the Torah was given through fire? [The text states,] “And the entire Mount Sinai smoked because the L-rd had descended upon it in fire, and its smoke ascended like the smoke of the kiln, and the entire mountain quaked violently.” (*Sefer Shemot* 19:18)

How do you know that the Torah was given through water? [The text states,] “L-rd, when You went forth out of Seir, when You marched out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, the heavens also dripped; also the clouds dripped water.” (*Sefer Shoftim* 5:4)

And how do you know that the Torah was given through [the medium of] the desert? [The text states,] “The L-rd spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert, in the Tent of Meeting on the first day of the second month, in the second year after the exodus from the land of Egypt, saying.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 1:1)

And why was the Torah given through these three things? [This comes to teach us] that just like these [three things, i.e. fire, water and desert] are free to all the people of the world, so, too, are the words of the Torah [free to one and all]. As the text states, “Ho! All who thirst, go to water, and whoever has no money, go, buy and eat, and go, buy without money and without a price, wine and milk.” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 55:4, these and all Bible

translations, *The Judaica Press complete Tanach*, Midrash translation and brackets my own)

After substantiating its assertion that the Torah was given through fire, water and the desert, the Midrash suggests an alternative explanation of the phrase, “And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert.” In doing so, it imparts the lesson that a person must make himself/herself “like a desert” if he/she wishes to secure Torah knowledge: “Anyone who does not make oneself like an ownerless desert will be unable to acquire wisdom and Torah. Therefore, the Torah states, ‘in the Sinai Desert.’”

The value of Torah is inestimable. One of the many sources wherein *Chazal* gave voice to this idea is the *Ahavat Olam* blessing of the Evening prayer service: “For they [the words of the Torah] are our life and the length of our days, and about them we will meditate day and night...” (Translation, *The Artscroll Siddur* with my brackets and emendations) As such, we certainly must do everything in our power to acquire Torah knowledge on the highest possible level. Yet, what does the Midrash mean when it states that in order to gain wisdom and Torah it is necessary to “make oneself like an ownerless desert?” Let us explore the responses to our question given by one of the greatest Chasidic Masters, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk *zatzal* (known as “The Kotzker Rebbe,” 1787-1859).

The Kotzker Rebbe begins his elucidation of our phrase, “make oneself like an ownerless desert,” by citing a complementary Midrashic passage from *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Parashat Bamidbar II*:

When the Holy One blessed be He came to the sea [to give the Torah,] it ran away. As the verse states: “The sea saw and fled...” (*Sefer Tehillim* 114:3) When He [initially] revealed Himself on Mount Sinai, it, too, fled before Him. As the text says: “The

mountains danced like rams [away from Him]...” (*Sefer Tehillim* 114:4) When He came to the desolate desert, [however,] it received Him and praised Him. As the text states: “The desert and its cities shall raise [their voice]; Kedar shall be inhabited with villages; the rock dwellers shall exult, from the mountain peaks they shall shout.” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* (42:11) Then the Holy One blessed be He said: “This desert is better than all the other lands, and it is here that I shall build my lodging place for Myself.” He descended therein and everyone and everything became joyous – that the Holy One blessed be He went down thereto. As the verse says: “Desert and wasteland shall rejoice over them, and the plain shall rejoice and shall blossom like a rose.” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 35:1, Midrash translation and brackets my own)

At this juncture, the Kotzker Rebbe suggests that only a person who rejoices in Hashem like the desert is fitting for the *Schechinah* (the Divine Presence) to dwell upon him and thereby merit the light of the Torah.

Following this initial analysis, the Kotzker Rebbe offers two additional interpretations of the expression, “make oneself like an ownerless desert.” The first focuses upon the manner in which a person should view his or her Torah accomplishments, and the second centers upon the *middah* (characteristic) of self-reliance and its application to Torah study:

**Like a desert:** Even if one has learned a great deal, and has achieved much in their Torah studies, he must know in his soul that he has not yet attained that of which he is capable. This is just like the desert that has never encountered the hand of man. As such, it remains unworked and unplanted. **Like a desert:** For it is the case that a person who dwells in the desert is forced to rely upon his own strengths and abilities [in order to survive], since there is no one else to help to help him. [This is equally true for the Torah scholar, i.e., he must expend all of his efforts and exercise all of his abilities if he is to achieve true greatness in his studies. As we learn in *Pirkei Avot*,] “If I am not for myself, who is for me?” (Source: *Itturei Torah*, translation and brackets my own)

In sum, the Kotzker Rebbe offers three expositions of the phrase, “like an ownerless desert,” that link our *parasha* to Shavuot and our acceptance of the Torah:

1. We must be perpetually prepared to encounter and praise the Almighty in unmitigated exaltation – so that we may acquire His holy Torah.
2. The attainment of Torah is definitionally a work in progress. Whatever level we

have reached in our intellectual and spiritual quest, it is merely the beginning of a life-long journey to know the Almighty.

3. Self-reliance and prodigious effort are two absolute requirements in our desire to master the Torah's wisdom.

This Shabbat's Torah reading and the festival of Shavuot offer us opportunities to symbolically re-enter the *midbar* (desert) so that we may re-experience the majesty of *Kabbalat HaTorah* (Receiving the Torah). As the Kotzker Rebbe so beautifully taught us, may we make ourselves "like an ownerless desert," so that these days will be ones wherein we joyously meet and praise Hashem and redouble our efforts to learn and master His holy Torah. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Sameach*

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*," may be found at:

<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.