

## ***B'midbar*, Numbers 1:1 - 4:20**

### **The Spirituality of the Wilderness by Jonathan E. Blake**

"On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, the Eternal One spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting . . ." (Numbers 1:1).

The wilderness experience constitutes more than half of the Torah and gives this week's portion, and this fourth book of the Torah, its Hebrew name. *B'midbar* means "in the wilderness."

Few of us have ever lived in a wilderness. Even those of us who reside in sparsely populated areas enjoy easy access to any comfort or convenience. After all, these words, composed a few miles outside New York City, reached you electronically at the click of a mouse.

It is not insignificant, however, that we came of age in the wilderness, for it is in the wilderness where the Torah tells us we spent forty years wandering that we grew into self-respecting Jewish people, slaves to Pharaoh no more. The Torah locates the bulk of its legislation and cultic observances in the wilderness experience. The authors of the Torah wished to suggest that the basic standards of Jewish life originated and were adopted before the people ever set foot in the Promised Land, in an open, ownerless expanse. Thus did the wilderness represent a source of wisdom for our ancestors.

The wilderness has wisdom to offer us, too.

In February, I traveled to Israel with a congregational delegation. We went as far north as Haifa and as far south as Eilat. We spent a day exploring the Negev, the majestic wilderness that comprises sixty percent of Israel's land mass and ten percent of its population. The Negev is not a desert of sand dunes like the Sahara. It more closely resembles the rocky middle of Arizona.

We explored Timna, an archaeological park of copper mines that date to the late second millennium b.c.e., when mining expeditions arrived from the south to smelt copper ore for the glorious temples of Egypt. We traveled north to the Ramon Crater, a geological phenomenon called a *machtesh*, in which a closed body of water gradually drains through a narrow outlet, the erosion creating a deep impression in the middle of

a mountain. We hiked the canyon of the water spring Ein Avedat and marveled at the panorama from the top. (Our legs reminded us, the next day, of our accomplishment.) We looked out from the grave of David Ben-Gurion into the vast *midbar* that extends to the horizon. Ben-Gurion dreamed of a future Jewish state that would cultivate and settle the Negev. He put his money where his mouth was by retiring to the untamed frontier, most of which remains uninhabited a land crushingly difficult and expensive to irrigate and populate.

In these desert experiences we could imagine ourselves in the sandals of our nomadic forebears walking that rocky wilderness, camping by springs with laden camels, seeking cliff-side shade in the summer heat. From the wilderness we began to experience a spiritual awakening uniquely suited to the geography. From the wilderness we heard two Jewish messages.

**Radical Amazement** The stillness of the *midbar* commanded our attention. Here, for the first time in our travels throughout Israel, we found it hard to get a cell phone signal. Here we escaped the traffic of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, the dense thickets of apartment buildings and stores and restaurants, the gaudy shopping malls of Eilat. We walked, each at our own pace, to a private space in the wilderness and heard nothing but the stones crunching underfoot and the sound of our own breathing.

Each of us reported a transformative experience in those few minutes of wilderness silence. Heschel would have called it wonder or radical amazement. "Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious man's attitude toward history and nature. . . . He knows that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes; he is aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate his sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all. Looking at the world, he would say, 'This is the Lord's doing, it is marvelous in our eyes' (Psalms 118:23)" (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997], p. 45). Nowadays we are seldom granted this realization. Heschel observes that "[a]s civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines" (ibid., p. 46). For Heschel, radical amazement paves the way for all religious awareness; sometimes it takes a wilderness to awaken amazement.

**Humility** The vast emptiness of the *midbar* made us feel small not insignificant, but rather awestruck by the enormity of our surroundings. Recognizing the scarcity of unspoiled wilderness in the world compels our attentiveness to the harm we daily cause the

environment. For a moment we felt humbled by the forbidding landscape, which painted a picture of a world untouched by human hands.

A remarkable recent book by Alan Weisman called *The World Without Us* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2007) envisions, with hard science and deft imagination, a world suddenly depopulated of human beings. Weisman explores "how our massive infrastructure would collapse and finally vanish without human presence; what of our everyday stuff may become immortalized as fossils; how copper pipes and wiring would be crushed into mere seams of reddish rock; why some of our earliest buildings might be the last architecture left; and how plastic, bronze sculpture, radio waves, and some man-made molecules may be our most lasting gifts to the universe" (from the book description on the Web-site [www.worldwithoutus.com/about\\_book.html](http://www.worldwithoutus.com/about_book.html)).

Weisman's vision of a *midbar* relieved of a human presence is humbling, to say the least.

A sojourn in the wilderness recalibrates our perspective. We no longer feel like we're the center of the universe. In the wilderness we come to understand the poet:

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,  
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,  
There is society, where none intrudes,  
By the deep sea, and music in its roar:  
I love not man the less, but Nature more.  
(George Gordon, Lord Byron, from "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage")

When was the last time you enjoyed a few minutes alone, away from civilization? Take some time outside this week, away from buildings, cars, wires, and other people. Turn off your cell phone for fifteen minutes. Sit down by yourself. Who knows what you will discover!

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## **Parashat B'midbar: All These Numbers! by Stephen J. Einstein**

If I were to ask you to name the fourth book of the Torah, I suspect it is more likely that you would respond with "Numbers" than *B'midbar*. While the books of the Torah are titled in Hebrew according to the first major word that appears in the book (not

counting such standard phrases as *Vay'dabeir Adonai el Mosheh . . .*, "The Eternal spoke to Moses . . ."), the English names are derived thematically, from a key event described in the book. English speakers are generally more familiar with these latter book titles.

The Book of Numbers opens with a census of the Israelites, tribe by tribe and family by family. Considering what has become common Jewish practice, it is astounding that such a census was completed and recorded. Throughout much of our history, the counting of people has been fraught with concern. While it was necessary in early biblical times to know how many men were able to bear arms for self-defense, in general we have been disinclined to come up with such specific numbers.

Think of a minyan. In order to conduct a public worship service, we require ten Jewish adults. The gender of those individuals is a matter of disagreement between the various movements within Judaism; in Reform congregations, women and men are counted equally toward the minyan. However, it is customary *not* to count the individuals directly. Rather we use a special Jewish style of numbering: "Not one, not two, not three," etc. An alternate method is to say a different Hebrew word from a verse while looking at each individual. It goes without saying that the verse contains ten words! We often use the Hebrew text of Psalm 28:9: *Hoshiah et amecha uvareich et nachalatecha ureim v'naseim ad haolam*, "Deliver and bless Your very own people; tend them and sustain them forever."

Why the reluctance to count directly? I believe it is related to the notion of *ayin hara*, "the evil eye." Life is shaky at best, and we simply don't want anything to go wrong. (At this point, some readers may feel impelled to spit three times!) There are those who might think of this as superstition; others would simply term it folk belief.

So what type of counting is permitted even encouraged by our tradition? An internal counting, as stated in Psalm 90:12: "Teach us to count our days rightly, that we may obtain a wise heart."

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## The Wilderness: Israel's Test and Ours by Alan Henkin

Since I am the rabbi of a synagogue called Beth Knesset Bamidbar, *Parashat B'midbar* has a special place in my heart. The Hebrew word *midbar* means "desert" or "wilderness," and living at the edge of the Mojave Desert, as I do, I have acquired a great appreciation for the *midbar*. In this week's Torah portion, the first in the Book of Numbers, the Israelites prepare themselves for their march through the *midbar*. "*Adonai* spoke to Moses in the wilderness [*b'midbar*] of Sinai." (Numbers 1:1)

The wilderness is a complex place for the Israelites. It is where they coalesce into a people, transform themselves from slaves to free people, rebel against and obey God, and receive the Torah as well as severe punishment. The wilderness experience is the crucible for Israel's self-consciousness as a people in covenant with God. Hence an intimate, powerful connection exists between the wilderness and Judaism.

What is it about the wilderness that evokes such an intense spiritual response on the part of the Israelites? After all, God can be experienced in a variety of natural settings. For example, the majesty of an old-growth forest and the rhythm of the ocean's waves inspire us with reverence and awe. The wilderness, however, is different: It is a place of danger and desolation, so void of distractions that starkness and focus, rather than mellowness and at-oneness, are the rule. The desert represents the opposite of civilization because it is a place in which social conventions have no role and the place to which some of our greatest prophets, like Moses and Elijah, fled to encounter God outside the confines of society.

The Babylonian Talmud states: "When a person makes himself [or herself] similar to the desert, Torah is given...as a gift." (*Nedarim* 55a) The significance of this expression of Jewish asceticism is that in order to learn and live Torah, we must strip ourselves of physical comfort and personal luxuries. Rabbi Abraham Twerski directs us to *Pirkei Avot* 6:4, in which it is written: "This is the way of Torah study: Eat bread with salt, drink water by measure, sleep on the bare ground, and endure a life of hardship while you toil in the Torah."

Even as we revel in our soaring Dow Jones and NASDAQs, tune in to *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* and get in on the latest IPO, the Torah

reminds us that we can encounter God most effectively when we jettison our material encumbrances. The Torah is countercultural, challenging our easy assumptions and shaking us from our complacency. It provokes us to consider the following: Does our wealth obstruct Jewish spirituality? Do our physical possessions subvert genuine religious fulfillment? Does the covetousness upon which our free market economy depends undermine our quest for God? Perhaps Isaiah says it best when he counsels: "Clear a road in the wilderness for the Eternal One!" (Isaiah 40:3) The arduous path to God often runs through an unfamiliar place that requires self-denial, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice, but clearly, it is worth taking.

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## What's in a Name? by George Gittleman

What's in a name? Rabbi Alan Henkin suggests that this week's portion's name, *B'midbar*, alludes to a deep and important layer of meaning in the Torah: The desert is not just a place but a spiritual state, a place in which an openness to God and God's message can be attained. What makes the desert so different? Its austerity: There are no distractions in the desert. Life and death, beauty and desolation-the ultimate foils for God are ever present.

But what about us? What can we learn from *B'midbar*? How can we gain the acute awareness of God that the desert fosters? Perhaps another name, Numbers, the English title for the book that this Torah portion introduces, offers a clue. Why is this book called Numbers? It is because the focus of the portion is numbers or, more accurately, a census ordered by God in the opening verses, the result of which fills the next four chapters. Why all these numbers? Why does the Torah, which is often so terse, spend so much time on the details of a census? Rashi, the great rabbi and medieval commentator, suggests that the accounting is an act of love: "Because they [the Israelites] are dear to God, *Adonai* counts them every now and again." (Rashi on Numbers 1:2, Silverman translation) Thus, according to Rashi, this census is about appreciation, a sort of divine caress, expressing God's love for us and renewing a sense of who we are in God's eyes. Counting is a metaphor for paying attention. It is not about the numbers but about the awareness that paying close attention generates.

Rashi provides us with a bridge back to the desert, helping us apprehend how we can replicate the austere pallet of the desert so that we may see the vibrant colors of life, always there but too often obscured by the distractions of the every day.

#### Questions for Discussion

- What prevents us from seeing the truths in our lives?
- What kind of accounting must we make in order to be reminded of God in ourselves and our surroundings?

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## NAMING NAMES by Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie

### Parashah Overview |

- God commands Moses to take a census of all the Israelite males over the age of twenty. (1:1-46)
- The duties of the Levites, who are not included in the census, are detailed. (1:47-51)
- Each tribe is assigned specific places in the camp around the Tabernacle. (1:52-2:34)
- The sons of Levi are counted and their responsibilities are set forth. (3:1-3:39)
- A census of the firstborn males is taken and a special redemption tax is levied on them. (3:40-51)

### Focal Point

Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head. You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms. Associated with you shall be a man from each tribe, each one the head of his ancestral house. (Numbers 1:2-4)

So Moses and Aaron took those men, who were designated by name, and on the first day of the second month they convoked the whole community, who were registered by the clans of their ancestral houses-the names of those aged twenty years and over being listed head by head. As *Adonai* had commanded Moses, so he recorded them in the wilderness of Sinai. (Numbers 1:17-19)

### Your Guide

- The Children of Israel had recently escaped from slavery. How might a census have been a way of rehabilitating slaves and restoring to them a

sense of their self-worth and pride?

- This is perhaps the first census in human history. There is little to suggest that this was a common practice at the time. What was the purpose of the census?
- If the purpose of the census had been purely administrative, wouldn't estimates have been enough? Does the text suggest that these numbers were merely estimates?
- Who ordered the census?
- Why did God need a census? Did the God of the Burning Bush, the God who sent the plagues to Egypt, the God who parted the Sea of Reeds need someone to count the Israelites? Could not this God produced an exact number?
- For whose sake was the census conducted?
- Why was it necessary for the census to have been organized according to families or clans rather than individual by individual?

### By the Way...

- Because of [Israel's] love for God, God numbered them. (Rashi on Numbers 1:1)
- Israel has been compared to a heap of wheat. As the measures of wheat are counted when carried into the barn, so, said the Holy One, blessed be He, shall Israel be numbered on all occasions. (Numbers *Rabbah* 1:4)
- "Take a census of the whole Israelite community...*b'mis'par shemot*"-literally, "according to the number of names." What is the meaning of "according to the number of names"? Everyone said his name and wrote it in a book, and afterward they counted the names and knew how many people there were. (Malbim on Numbers 1:2)
- "Take a census [*S'u et rosh*-literally, "Lift up the head"] of the whole Israelite community." The word *s'u* is only used when the intention is to indicate greatness [that is, holding high one's head]. (Ramban on Numbers 1:2)
- "According to the number of names..." For at that time, every one of that generation was designated by his name, which indicated and reflected stature and character. (Sforno on Numbers 1:2)

## Your Guide

- As Rashi indicates, the census was clearly done not for God's sake but for the sake of the Children of Israel. In what way is the carrying out of a census a sign of God's love for Israel?
- The manner of conducting the census as described in the Torah and as further explained by Malbim is enormously cumbersome. Why have everyone write his name in a book rather than simply have all the people line up and do a count?
- According to the Rambam, in what way does the census contribute to the "greatness," that is, the self-esteem, of the people of Israel?

### *D'var Torah*

The first census in human history was ordered by God as a sign of God's love and concern for the people of Israel and as an instrument for enhancing their confidence and feelings of self-worth. Not a single person was to be forgotten. A mass of oppressed slaves, who in Egypt had no individual worth whatever, were now to merit an individual count. And why was the mechanism of counting to record their names in a book used? Because, according to Sforno, everyone from that generation would then be thought of by his name and thus by his own unique, personal qualities. And why was the count organized according to families? Because slaves are denied the security of family life, while for civilized people the family is the instrument for building identity, ethical commitment, and devotion to tradition.

Does this obsession to know the former slaves by their individual names seem excessive? Not at all. What is more important than being known by our right name? Is anything more connected to the depth of our being than our name? If you wish to connect to another person, what is the first important thing you do? You learn his or her name. And what do people expect of their synagogues and their synagogue leaders? That we know their names. Note: The most trusted servant of God was Moses, and what did God say to Moses? "I have singled you out by name" (Exodus 33:17). What we should aspire to in our synagogues is that our members cease to be an undifferentiated mass and that just as God knew Moses, we know them—each and every one—by name.

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## IN THE WILDERNESS by Jonathan Stein

### FOCAL POINT

- *Adonai* spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai... (Numbers 1:1)
- The Israelites shall camp each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house; they shall camp around the Tent of Meeting at a distance. (Numbers 2:2)
- As they camp, so they shall march... (Numbers 2:17)

### *D'VAR TORAH*

This week we begin reading the fourth book of the Torah. Its English title, Numbers, comes from the census that God commands Moses to take in the second verse of the *parashah*. But the Hebrew title of the book, taken from the very first verse of the *sidrah*, is different. The tradition calls this book *B'midbar*, meaning "In the Wilderness" (or "In the Desert"). This Hebrew name is much more descriptive of the contents of the book as a whole than is the designation Numbers.

The thirty-eight-year wilderness experience of our ancestors was crucial to the development of our self-understanding as a people. In later Jewish consciousness, these years of wandering would be remembered as an ideal time when, despite the struggles for material survival, we were especially close to God. The life of the city dweller would come to be viewed as suspiciously corrupt, while that of the shepherd and farmer, who are closer to the desert experience, would be treasured. Still, these thirty-eight years of nomadic roaming must have been terribly difficult: The environment was physically harsh; the demanding impact of the Torah had just begun to sink into the people's consciousness; and the Israelites, who were constantly bickering, yearned for the imagined comforts of Egypt.

Just like our ancestors, how quickly we can enter into a spiritual wilderness when life is challenging. Living "in the wilderness" can be a metaphor, a symbol for the difficult times we all inevitably experience. These periods of our lives can be terrifying, producing feelings of loneliness, disorientation, uncertainty, and loss of faith, as well as a negation of our values. But this week's Torah portion also offers us some guidance.

Immediately following the census, God instructs the tribes and the Levites to take up positions around the Tabernacle, which was to remain at the very center of the camp. (See *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, edited by W. Gunther Plaut, New York: UAHC Press,

1981, p. 1,027.) As the focus of the people's attention, the Ark and the Tabernacle were powerful symbols of God's Presence. "Every individual was located in relation to the Ark and the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was the first thing one saw on leaving home and the first thing one looked for on returning home. Gradually, this physical centrality must have led to the Ark's gaining a central place in the Israelite soul" (*Etz Chayim*, New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001, p. 774). Like our ancestors, each of us sees God from a slightly different perspective, depending upon where we are encamped in life, but God remains the focal point, our anchor and compass in bad times and good.

Two other teachings derived from this week's *parashah* can also help us regain our direction when we're lost "in the wilderness." The midrash teaches that by purposely revealing the Torah in the middle of a desert, God was trying to show us the importance of humility. Humility includes an awareness of one's smallness and is a necessary trait for attaining contentment in life. A humble person is satisfied with what he or she has and feels gratitude, thanksgiving, and awe, all of which are essential for finding a spiritual place in God's world. Difficult times remind us of the need for humility.

And finally, maintaining one's integrity can be a key ingredient to emerging whole from troubled times "in the wilderness." The statement "As they camp, so shall they march..." (Numbers 2:17) has been interpreted homiletically to teach that one should be the same person at home and away; in private and in public; on the inside and on the outside; in our thoughts and our intentions; and in our speech and our behavior. Maintaining integrity when life is difficult can be an enormous challenge: Doing so allows us to emerge from our struggles with our self-respect and dignity intact.

Finding ourselves "in the wilderness" of life, as our ancestors did during this formative period of our history, can be incredibly tough. But we are blessed as Jews to possess the spiritual resources that help us slowly find our way toward the Promised Land.

#### BY THE WAY

- Out of the desert, with all of its dangers, came the Torah, which is our proudest possession and gives to our group-life as Jews its most authentic character and to all humanity the most valid promise of continuing

creative contributions to the total fund of human understanding. That voice spoke in the desert. (Morris Adler, *The Voice Still Speaks*, New York: Bloch, 1969, pp. 265–268)

- Only a person who is willing to make nothing of himself, who thinks of himself as a desert, is truly worthy of having the Divine Presence rest on him and of attaining the true light of the Torah. Furthermore, a person should always think of himself as if being in the desert so that he will lean entirely on his own resources. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" [Hillel, quoted in *Pirkei Avot* 1:14] (Rabbi Menachen Mendl of Kotzk)
- Numbers alone among the books of the Hebrew Bible recounts the story of a single generation of the nation...in a condition unlike that of any other time. In the earthly events and in the cosmic aspect of both continuous and situational miracles, the wilderness generation is like no other, and the book that tells its story is correspondingly unique. (Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, p. 423)

#### YOUR GUIDE

- Have you ever felt as though you were lost in the wilderness? What did you use as your anchor and compass? Did Judaism play a role in helping you find your way?
- Is it a contradiction to think that God is the unifying idea around which all Jews gather and at the same time that each one of us sees God differently? Is it a contradiction to assert in the *Sh'ma* that "God is One" and in the *Aleinu* that "on that day God *will* be One"?
- Is it possible to be too humble? Is it a sin not to stand up for oneself or not to engage in self-defense? How can we be both humble and created in God's image?
- Does having integrity also mean being consistent? Does changing one's mind result in a lack of integrity? How can we change our minds with integrity and not appear inconsistent in the eyes of others?

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## BECOMING A WILDERNESS

by Jeffrey W. Goldwasser

### FOCAL POINT

On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, *Adonai* spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai. (Numbers 1:1)

### D'VAR TORAH

Three-quarters of the Torah is the story of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness. Wilderness is the place where Israel receives Torah and enters into a covenant with God. The name of this week's portion, *B'midbar*, literally means 'In Wilderness.'

The Rabbis of the Talmud and midrash sought the significance of the wilderness as the place where most of Torah happens. They read a verse that says, "from Midbar to Mattanah" (Numbers 21:18), and understood it according to the literal meaning of the place names: "From wilderness, there is a gift."

Torah itself is the gift that comes from wilderness, say the Rabbis. They taught that you must 'make yourself like a wilderness' in order to receive Torah ( *B'midbar Rabbah* 19:26; Babylonian Talmud, *Eirubin* 54a). But, what does that mean? What does wilderness represent in the Torah, and what does it mean in our lives?

To the ancients, the wilderness was a place beyond the borders of any people. The wilderness was an ownerless 'no-man's-land' and was free for all to pass through. The wilderness also was an unknown land of danger.

Perhaps the Rabbis meant that to receive Torah you must release yourself from attachments, shake yourself loose from the illusion that you are 'owned' by anyone or anything. To receive Torah you must make yourself truly free, just as the Israelites could not receive the Torah on Mount Sinai until they were free from Egypt.

Perhaps the Rabbis also meant that you must be open-minded and openhearted to receive Torah. Only when you are willing, like the wilderness, to have all people and all ideas pass through you, will you be able to truly accept Torah. Torah is a gift you receive when you open your heart to all.

Further, the Rabbis suggest that Torah is not just the private learning of the Jews; it is a wisdom for all peoples. Torah, like the wilderness itself, is

universally accessible and has no borders.

Finally, the Rabbis seem to warn that receiving Torah involves danger—the danger of being vulnerable to the unknown. To receive Torah, you must confront your fears and do battle with personal demons. It is a place for deep introspection, and that frightens us.

In all of these understandings of the Rabbis' declaration that you must "make yourself like a wilderness," the critical element for receiving Torah is an *attitude*. To receive Torah you must release yourself from the temporal and material demands of others, from your own preconceptions. You must be open to truth wherever you find it and cultivate an independence of mind.

Above all, this is an attitude of humility. Receiving Torah is laying yourself vulnerable to the possibility that your assumptions are wrong. Becoming a wilderness means that you lay your ego low and allow Torah to enter.

Another classic midrash compares God giving the Torah to a prince who was treated as a hostile power by the lands he visited ( *B'midbar Rabbah* 1:2). . The people of each land fled when they saw the prince approach. Finally, the prince came to a ruined city, one that already had been destroyed by battle. The people there greeted him with praise. The prince said, "This city is the best of all the lands. Here I will build a home, here I will live."

Then the midrash tells us that the same is true of God. It teaches, "When the Holy Blessed One came to the Sea of Reeds, the sea fled (Psalm 114:1–3), but when God came to the arid wilderness, it greeted God with praise, as it is written, 'The wilderness and its towns cry aloud' (Isaiah 42:11). God said, 'This city is the best of all the lands for Me. In this place I will build a congregation and dwell within it.'"

When you are at the point of ruin, when you have been shattered by loss and feel that you have nothing more to lose, that is the moment when it is easiest to receive Torah and let God in. Fortunately, most of us do not spend the majority of our lives in that state. So how do we let God into our lives during a time of comfort and security? At such a time, our psyches rebel against a Torah that asks for humility and recognition of fallibility. How do you let God in when you are convinced of your own importance?

The Torah that is received in the wilderness is the Torah you experience when you put aside conceit and open yourself to God. This is a critical teaching for the many people in our culture who feel the constant urge

to “get ahead” or who fixate on physical appearance and the appearance of confidence and mastery.

Certainly, it is good to have direction in life and to achieve. It is good to possess self-confidence. But true achievement and self-confidence do not come from enslaving your mind to a material goal or image. They come from humble self-awareness of our limited selves and our temporary condition in a world where God is the only constant. That is the Torah we receive in the wilderness.

## BY THE WAY

- Only when you are “like a wilderness” are you ready to have God's presence rest upon you and merit the light of Torah. “Like a wilderness” means that you have not yet been touched by human hands, that you have never been cultivated or planted, that you must rely on your own strength, as in the teaching, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” ( *Mishnah Avot* 1:14) (Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, quoted in *Itturei Torah* [Hebrew], vol. 5, by Aharon Yaakov Greenberg [Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1996], p. 9)
- Such is the study of Torah: to negate yourself before the way that Torah leads you, so that every deed be only to fulfill God's will and desire. You do that by self-negation, by submitting in every act to the inner life-force, which is the life of God, by means of the letters of Torah that lie within the deed. (Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, Sefat Emet, quoted in *The Language of Truth* , by Arthur Green [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998], p. 220)

## YOUR GUIDE

- In midrash, the ruined city—or parched wilderness— opens itself to God's presence. Have you ever experienced feeling like a ruin or a wilderness? Were you then more in touch with God?
- Menachem Mendel of Kotzk teaches an ideal of independence in which you “rely on your own strength.” Can this be reconciled with an attitude of humility?
- The Sefat Emet teaches that you must submit to the “inner life-force, which is the life of God.” How do you submit yourself to something that is within yourself? How do you practice “self-negation” by seeing divinity within?

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## Introducing *B'midbar* by Rifat Sonsino

### The Name

The fourth book attributed to Moses is traditionally called *B'midbar* (not *Ba-midbar*), “in the wilderness,” in Hebrew. The English title, Numbers, comes originally from the Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint (third century b.c.e.), which named it *Arithmoi*. The Latin Vulgate took that name and called it *Numeri*. The old Rabbinic name for the book is *chomesh hap'kudim*, “one-fifth [of the Pentateuch] dealing with numbers,” because of the various lists and censuses recorded in it. Rashi's calls it *Vay'dabeir*, “and he said,” after the very first word of the book (Rashi on Exodus 38:26).

In thirty-six chapters, Numbers covers the forty-year period the Israelites spent in the wilderness of Sinai between the Exodus from Egypt and the entrance to the Holy Land, though most of the material deals with the earliest and the latest years of the journey.

### Forty Years

In the Bible as well as in the ancient Near East, certain numbers, such as three, seven, and ten, play significant roles. Forty is also one of those important numbers. Examples are plentiful: in the Flood, the rain fell for “forty days and forty nights” (Genesis 7:4); both Isaac and Esau were forty when they got married (Genesis 25:20, 26:34); it took forty days to embalm Joseph (Genesis 50:3); Moses spent forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:28); the Israelites were made to wander in the wilderness for forty years (Numbers 32:13); and so on. It appears that in the Bible forty “is used as a round number to designate a fairly long period of time in terms of human experience or endurance” (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, p. 565) and, therefore, should not be taken literally.

Why were the Israelites compelled to wander in the *midbar*, “the wilderness” (not a “desert” like the Sahara, because there was enough vegetation in Sinai to sustain them), for such a long period? There are some hints in the biblical texts and various explanations in Rabbinic literature. According to the Bible, the Israelites complained about the hardship of the wilderness life and wanted to go back to the false security in Egypt, forgetting that they were slaves to Pharaoh (Numbers 14:1–4). They also remembered the good food they had back in Egypt: “We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!” (Numbers 11:5–6). Therefore, the wilderness generation, with a

few exceptions, was doomed by God, who was angry at their lack of gratitude (Numbers 14:35).

For some rabbis, the forty-year wandering was imposed upon the Israelites to force them to study Torah, for otherwise, “each would take possession of a field or a vineyard and regard himself as not obligated to study Torah.” Furthermore, the wandering allowed the Canaanites time to rebuild the country they had destroyed in anticipation of the arrival of the Israelites, for God had promised the Israelites that they would inherit a good land (*Tanchuma, B’shalach 1*).

### **The Message of *B’midbar* Today**

Many contemporary rabbis have pondered the forty-year migration in the wilderness and derived various lessons. One of my favorites is this from Pinchas H. Peli: “The Book *Bamidbar* teaches us that there are no short-cuts to the Promise Land, and no instant transformation from bands of liberated slaves into responsible, self-governing nation; no generation of redemption (*dor geulah*) without a generation dying out in the desert (*dor hamidbar*) preceding it.” (*Torah Today*, [Washington DC: B’nai B’rith Books, 1987], p. 157).

Furthering Peli’s thought, the forty-year wandering, for me, represents a challenge to every individual who undertakes something new. One needs to take a chance in order to embark on a novel adventure. Progress often depends on taking the first step into the unknown. Surely, this risk should be a calculated one, based on knowledge after all the pros and cons are measured, and not a foolish, uninformed step forward. But one thing is clear: If we take no chances in life, very little is accomplished. Almost everything we do necessitates confronting the future with courage and self-confidence. Choosing a profession or a line of work, starting a new business, getting married, moving to a new house or to another location, and other such benchmarks all require taking risks. The alternative is to go back to the security of early family life—if indeed that security exists—and remain like a child. For the Israelites, the wilderness wandering was a training period to learn how to become free and self-reliant. Those who have a slave mentality are not ready to confront the challenges of freedom and novelties of life.

As parents and teachers, our job is to give our children and students the best tools, skills, and moral values available and then launch them into the uncertainties of life. We can only hope for the

best. Ultimately they need to live their own lives according to the circumstances presented to them.

It is in this spirit that the Rabbis required that every parent teach his or her son, among other things, how to swim (Babylonian Talmud, *Kiddushin* 29a). Similarly, in medieval times, Maimonides taught that, of the eight levels of charity, the highest one is to give the individual all the means necessary to become self-sufficient (*Mishneh Torah, Z’raim 7:1*).

There is a beautiful Rabbinic midrash that states that when the Israelites arrived at the shore of the Reed Sea and saw that the Egyptians were closing in, Moses started to pray hard, until God told him, “My children are in great distress, the sea is enclosing them, the enemy is in pursuit, and you stand here praying away! Speak to the Children of Israel that they should go forward” (*Sh’mot Rabbah* 21:8). In another passage, the Rabbis argued, “The sea did not split for them until they stepped into it, indeed until the waters reached up to their very noses” (*Sh’mot Rabbah* 21:10). The lesson is an old one that is not always heeded: God helps those who help themselves!

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### **Risks with Guarantees by Julie S. Schwartz**

How often have we heard the comment, “Even bad luck is better than no luck at all!” Imagine being one of the Israelites—finally freed from slavery, fleeing from the enraged Egyptians, and then literally deserted in the desert with a forty-year journey ahead. The Israelites must have questioned their good luck regularly, since it was usually followed by some new crisis. But even the worst calamities still held out more promise than a life of servitude, a life that offered no opportunities and no hope. So in good Jewish cultural style, our ancestors kvetched and continued on in the wilderness in search of God’s Promised Land and promises to be fulfilled.

How do we know when we should give up a hopeless journey or consider a venture simply too risky? Certainly Rabbi Sonsino is correct in that all growth entails risk and all change feels threatening at some level. Yet the Israelites were given few choices, and their feeble attempts to protest were met with God’s wrath. So their risks were not freely chosen. Today, we moderns often complain that we are “forced” to make a decision when it is clear our own actions have led us

directly down the path we travel. Our society is increasingly risk averse, with a desire for guarantees, safety, and proof. Imagine Moses attempting to lead us now—without an itinerary and no travel insurance!

But when we turn to our text, we can find a resource for meeting the challenges of our day and for dealing with our many choices. The *parashah* begins with the listing of families and the names of each family's leaders. That sense of being named and numbered means that every individual counts—none of us is truly alone. This web of relationships provides us strength and stability even when the journey turns our world upside down. We cannot place a value on the gift of being known by others and being known by the One who gave us this life. Everything is possible when we feel recognized and connected to something greater than ourselves and linked to that which is eternal.

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