

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Despite the fact that God's revelation on Mount Sinai takes place amidst spectacular displays of fire and water, whereas the desert revelation proceeds privately in a tent, the Midrash suggests that there are commonalities between the Fire/Water God of the Mountain and the Desert God of the Tent of Meeting. The Midrash asks why the Torah was given through fire, water and desert; and answers that, like these three things, Torah is absolutely elemental and so cannot be claimed by any one person or group. It is as foolish to claim that you own the word of God as it is to claim that you own fire!

The Midrash continues as follows: 'A different thing: "And YHVH spoke to Moshe Bemidbar Sinai": this teaches that anyone who does not make themselves like a desert (Kemidbar) – *hefker* (ownerless) - is not capable of acquiring Wisdom and Torah. Hence it teaches "Bemidbar Sinai".' This section of the Midrash is playing with the close visual similarity between the phrase in the Torah "Bemidbar" (in the desert) and the word "Kemidbar" (like a desert). Now it is the recipients of the Torah who must themselves become "like a desert". To receive the Torah we must also be like the wilderness: "*hefker*" or ownerless. The Torah is accessible to all, owned by none and it can only be acquired by one who makes themselves ownerless in turn.

The great challenge for those of us who wish to "acquire" the Torah is to figure out what does it mean to make oneself "*hefker*" or ownerless? In what way are we not "*hefker*"? By what, or by whom, are we owned? How does this ownership prevent us from acquiring wisdom?

At the Conservative Yeshiva we see four types of students who most easily make the leap into immersive Torah study: 1) recent college graduates, 2) people making a career change, and 3) those given a sabbatical, and 4) retirees. What all have in common is a schedule that gives them more than 2 or 3 weeks of vacation. With only short vacations here and there, most of us either fulfill family obligations or flee from all obligation. But when one is truly "ownerless" and stops relating to one's "free" time as "vacation" it is natural to seek out new experiences that require commitment, but enrich one's life intellectually, socially, and spiritually. (Over 100 students coming to the CY this summer already know this.)

The challenge for our graduates, and for all Jews who don't have the time to go to yeshiva, is how to set aside "ownerless" time each week, to engage in deep Torah study, and be reminded to whom we are most truly obligated.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Bemidbar / Shavuot

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Annual (Numbers 1:1-4:20): Etz Hayim p. 769; Hertz p. 568
Triennial (Numbers 3:14-4:20): Etz Hayim p. 779; Hertz p. 576
Haftarah (Hosea 2:1-22): Etz Hayim p. 786; Hertz p. 581

D'var Torah: Becoming Ownerless

Rabbi Joel Levy, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty & Rosh Yeshiva

The fourth book of the Torah, Bemidbar, begins: "And YHVH spoke to Moshe Bemidbar Sinai (In the wilderness of Sinai), in the Ohel Moed (Tent of Meeting)... saying..." This is the first time that God is described as speaking to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai in the Ohel Moed. From here on the communication between God and Moshe takes place solely Bemidbar Sinai, in the human plane, at ground level, in the Tent of Meeting.

It might be supposed that talking to God and receiving Torah in a tent in the middle of a vast encampment would be a very different experience from encountering the creator of the universe high on a mountain amidst thunder and fire. Midrash Rabbah, however, tries to link these two places for receiving Torah as follows:

Why does the Torah say "Bemidbar Sinai"? From here the rabbis taught that the Torah was given in/through/by three things: in fire, in water, and in the desert. How do we know in fire? (From Exodus Chapter 19) "And Har Sinai smoked in every part because YHVH descended upon it in fire." How do we know in water? (From Judges 5:4-5) "The earth trembled and the heavens dropped, the clouds also dropped water...that Sinai before YHVH the God of Israel." And how do we know in the desert? (From Bemidbar 1:1) "And YHVH spoke to Moshe Bemidbar Sinai." And why was it given through these three things? Just as these things are free for all inhabitants of the earth, so words of Torah are free, as is written: (Isaiah 55:1) "Let everyone who is thirsty come to the water..."

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D'var Haftarah: Scattered, Not Planted

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The book of Hosea opens with a harsh prophecy (Chapters 1-2) charging the children of Israel with disloyalty to God. The message is framed metaphorically through the life of the prophet who is commanded to marry a woman who is portrayed as being disloyal to the marriage. As a consequence, the couple's children are given names which reflect this disloyalty and that of the people toward God as well.

One of the children, Jezreel (Yizre-el) is apparently named for a specific episode which greatly disturbed the prophet: "And the Lord said to him: 'Call his name Jezreel, for soon I will make a reckoning for the blood of Jezreel against the house of Jehu and put an end to the house of Israel. And it shall be on that day that I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel'" (1:4-5) The name, Jezreel, seems to be a condemnation of Jehu, who usurped the kingship of the northern kingdom of Israel by slaughtering the members of the house of the previous king, Ahab in Jezreel. While the Tanakh does not spare words for its disdain for Ahab and his house, Hosea abhorred the acts which led to his overthrow.

The prophet's messages were not exclusively direct. They were also master word craftsmen and poets. Hosea was a master of his art. The name "Jezreel", in consequence, was used playfully to add layers to his message. The name stems from the Hebrew root "zayin resh ayin" which means "to plant" but is a homonym for a word whose root is "zayin resh hey" meaning to scatter. In the context of the verse cited above, Targum Yonatan, the Aramaic translation of the Prophets, asserts that the prophet infers the latter word, making the name mean "God will scatter", implying that punishment for the nation's sins will be exile.

In this week's haftarah, Hosea uses this same name symbolically to overturn this harsh punishment: "And the people of Judah and the people of Israel shall gather together and set over them a single chief, and they shall go up from the lands, for great is the day of Jezreel" (2:2) Here, Hosea wants us to understand the name to mean "God will plant".

The overarching message of this poetic play on words is to remind us that, on the one hand, there must be consequences for our actions. The prophet demands that injustice must be paid for. This message, however, by itself leaves us with a bleak picture. The message in this week's haftarah comes to reassure us that there is still hope and that our world will ultimately be restored and our situation righted.

Parashat Bemidbar Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

We are starting the fourth book of the Torah, Bamidbar. In this parashah the focus is on a census taken a year after leaving Egypt, in preparation for entering the Land of Israel. On Sunday and Monday, we will celebrate Shavuot during which the book of Ruth is read; therefore, some of the questions relate to it.

Parashat Bemidbar

1) The people were counted by Moshe, Aharon, and representatives of each tribe. The representatives are listed by their names (1:5-16). Why do you think that the Torah decided to include all their names?

2) In the explanation of the special status of the tribe of Levi (3:11-13) we are informed that initially the firstborn were intended to serve God since He smote all firstborn in the land of Egypt. What might have been the advantage of having the firstborn, rather than the tribe of Levi, serve? What are the advantages of having a single tribe serve?

Shavuot / Book of Ruth

3) Ruth, the Moabite daughter in law of Naomi, returns with Naomi to Bethlehem in Yehudah. Upon arriving in the town, all the women gather around asking 'is this Naomi?!' (1:19-22). The text does not tell us about any questions relating to Ruth who is standing at Naomi's side. Why might that be?

4) While God's name is mentioned in the book, we are not told at any point about God's intervention. Nonetheless, as we read the story, it is hard not to feel God's hand in the events. Where do you see it in the story? (I will suggest 2:3 as an example.)

5) In 4:11-12 the town's people give Boaz a wedding blessing. They hope that God will make the woman he is marrying as Rachel and Leah, and his home as that of Peretz born to Yehudah from Tamar (story in Gen 38). Why might they have mentioned Tamar, Yehudah, and Peretz?

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