



Spiritual Lessons of the Desert

Rabbi Jack Bieler

Dedicated in memory of Erez Levanon, by R' Chanan Morrison

While the first significant word in Numbers (1:1), “*BaMidbar*” (in the desert), bestows upon the Biblical book its Hebrew name, this is not the first time that reference is made to the desert in the Five Books of Moses. Already in Genesis, the desert is depicted as a place of exile, devoid of significant human habitation, attracting those consigned to its bleak landscape to live an outlaw and even criminal existence.¹

However, in Exodus, the same desert environment that was earlier so clearly associated with desolation and violence, takes on an additional, supremely positive spiritual context. While there was understandably great natural reluctance on the part of many of the Jewish slaves to follow G-d out of Egypt into the forbidding landscape of the desert,² and seemingly no end to the people’s subsequent complaining about the lack of food and water,³ it is also specifically in the desert that G-d is revealed to Moses⁴ and ultimately Gives the *Tora* to the Jewish people.⁵

Whereas RaShi⁶ explains Moses’ grazing of Yitro’s flocks⁷ “*Achar HaMidbar*” (at the farthest outskirts of the desert) as an indication of his high moral sensibilities in terms of being determined not to allow the animals to graze on anyone else’s private property, R. Ovadia Sephorno⁸ attributes to Moses a particular spiritual motivation for going to the desert:

¹ See Genesis 16:7; 21:14, 20-1

² Jeremiah 2:2

³ Exodus 15:22-17-7; Numbers 11, 20

⁴ Exodus 3:1 ff.

⁵ Ibid. 19:1 ff

⁶ Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, France, 11th Cent.

⁷ Ibid. 3:1

⁸ Italy, 15th-16th cent. Discussing the same passage quoted above.

“...And he came to the mountain of G-d, to Horeb”—he alone, to experience personal solitude and to pray on the way, with the same linguistic connotation of (Numbers 13:22)
“And he (Calev) came to Hebron....”^{9 10}

The quest to find a place whereby one can separate himself from others in order to commune with the Divine, is already implied, according to Sephorno, by the suggestive behavior attributed by the *Tora* to Isaac:¹¹

“And Isaac went out to ‘converse’ in the field towards evening...”—He turned aside from the road in order to pour out his conversation before G-d in the field so that travelers upon the road would not interrupt him...

Several times in the story of the plagues in Egypt, we are told that Pharaoh asked Moses to pray for a plague to end, promising to free the Children of Israel¹² and then reneging. In one such instance, Moses comments that he must leave the city in order to pray. Rabbinic tradition extrapolates from that single instance a regular pattern of behavior. Moses keeps returning to at least the countryside, if not the desert, in Egypt, each time he needs to convey to G-d Pharaoh’s responses to the progressively intensifying plagues intended to effect the release of the Jews from bondage:

(Exodus 9:29) “And Moses said to him (Pharaoh): When I leave the city, I will extend my palms to G-d (in prayer...)”

(Ibid. 33) “And Moses went out from Pharaoh, leaving the city, and he extended his palms...”

RaShI comments—“But within the city he did not pray, because it was full of idols.”

⁹ In order to explain why one of the spies apparently went off alone to Hebron (Numbers 13:22 begins with a plural verb “*VaYa’alu*”, only to be followed two words later by a singular verb “*VaYavo*”), *Sota* 34b, quoted by *RaShI*, explains that “And he came...” is referring to Calev who went off by himself in order to draw inspiration from the burial place of the forefathers and foremothers so that he will not be corrupted by his sinful colleagues.

¹⁰ Dr. Irving Agus, *Za”L*, a college Jewish history professor of mine, memorably remarked that the role of shepherd, which did not usually involve excessive physical exertion, afforded an individual a great deal of time to sit and reflect while he was overseeing the herds. Shepherding was therefore ideally suited for the development of iconoclastic theological thought. Many of the key founding figures of Judaism—Jacob and his sons, Moses and David—are consistently described as shepherds. In contrast to farmers, who have so much to do on a daily basis that they are in need of an entire year off, i.e., the Sabbatical Year, in order to deepen their spiritual dimensions, shepherds can engage in such speculations for several hours each day. The tension between shepherds and farmers is played out almost from the beginning of the *Tora*’s account of human civilization, with the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4.

¹¹ Genesis 24:63

¹² Exodus 8:4-9, 21-26; 9:27-33; 10:16-18.

It is logical to assume that not only was Moses looking to separate himself from idols, but also from those who worshipped them, i.e., to find a desolate, undisturbed location where he could pray, report to G-d what Pharaoh had said, and receive instructions as to how G-d Wished him to proceed.

And when Moses asks for a sign regarding the ultimate success of his mission to free the Jews, G-d Promises that he and the people will return to the very spot in the desert where Moses had experienced his first Revelation at the site of the burning bush, in order for all those who have left Egypt to be instructed how to become a “Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation” by means of receiving the *Tora*:

“And G-d Said: Because I will Be with you, and this will constitute for you the sign that I have Sent you—when you bring the people out of Egypt, you will worship/serve G-d on this mountain.”¹³

Away from a myriad of distractions that could have prevented the people and their prophet from appreciating the magnitude of the Divine Revelation, the desert helped to create a psychological atmosphere that can allow for people to fully accept the obligations of living according to G-d’s Law. The Rabbis of the *Midrash*¹⁴ assert that aside from the logistical benefit of finding a location devoid of people, and the idolatrous practices so synonymous with Egyptian society¹⁵, the desert also contributed to an insight regarding the ubiquitous availability of *Tora*:

“The Rabbis taught: The *Tora* was Given by means of/within the context of three things—fire, rain and **desert**...

From where do we know that the **desert** played a role? As it says, (Numbers 1:1) “And G-d Spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert”.¹⁶

And why was the *Tora* given by means of/within the context of these three things? Just as these three things **can be obtained for free** by anyone in the world, so too the words of *Tora* are free, as it is said, (Isaiah 55:1) “All who are thirsty should go to obtain water,

¹³ Exodus 3:12

¹⁴ Teachings on the Torah collected from the time of the Mishna, around the 3rd century

¹⁵ see *RaShI* on Exodus 12:1

¹⁶ Numbers Rabba 1:7; Tanchuma Parashat BaMidbar #6. Biblical commentators always take note when the language of the *Tora* digresses from its normal patterns. Throughout the Bible, we encounter countless cases where a message from G-d to Moses is introduced by “And G-d Spoke to Moses saying”. Since the phrase *BaMidbar Sinai* (in the desert of Sinai) is added in Numbers 1:1, it is understood by the Rabbis as providing a paradigm for all of the Revelations to Moses, i.e., that they specifically and deliberately occurred in the desert of Sinai. A similar instance is the commentary that surrounds Leviticus 25:1, when the phrase *BeHar Sinai* (the mountain of Sinai) is atypically inserted.

and anyone who has no money should go and break bread and eat, and break bread and eat without money and without a price for wine and milk.”¹⁷

Another interpretation: Why (was the *Tora* Given) in the desert? Anyone **who does not make himself ownerless**, like the desert, cannot acquire the *Tora*. ”

The first of the *Midrash*’s interpretations appears to be decidedly **economic**, in the sense that just as the desert is accessible to all who wish to enter and dwell therein, so too, no one is permitted to monopolize *Tora* knowledge or charge for its dissemination. The alternate *Midrashic* explanation is intensely **psychological** in nature. Making oneself *Hefker* (ownerless), does not speak as much to the idea of an individual being owned by another, but rather the manner in which one views himself. An individual who is “full of him/herself” will have difficulty accepting and following the directives of virtually any outside authority figure; consequently at least some degree of *Hitbatlut* (self-abnegation) is expected of the truly spiritual individual. Being out in the desert powerfully contributes to an individual’s sensibility that his or her existence is relatively insignificant when compared to the grandiose scale of Creation. This would appear to be precisely what *RaMBaM*¹⁸ was thinking when he offered a practical means by which one can achieve both the love and fear of G-d:

“And what is the way to love Him (G-d) and fear Him? When a person reflects upon His Actions and His Great and Wondrous Creations (*the desert landscape certainly being one of them**) and he sees within them His Wisdom that is beyond comprehension, immediately he loves and praises and extols and is consumed with an overwhelming passion to know the Great G-d...

But when he thinks further about these very things themselves, immediately he trembles, stumbles backwards and is terrified, and he realizes that he is a tiny, lowly, insignificant creature standing with a puny inferior intellect before the Perfect Intellect...¹⁹

The figurative symbolism of receiving the *Tora* in the desert appears to parallel a number of other rabbinic themes stressing humility and self-abnegation as a prerequisite for an individual to

¹⁷“Water”, “bread”, “wine” and “milk” all symbolize different dimensions of and perspectives regarding the words of *Tora*.

* The comment in parentheses is the addition of the author of this essay.

¹⁸ Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon, 12th century scholar, doctor, and philosopher in Spain and Egypt,

¹⁹ Mishne Tora, Hilchot Yesodei HaTora 2:2

properly understand and carry out the Commandments of G-d. Moses, the intermediary between G-d and the people when the *Tora* is first given, is described as²⁰ “*Anav Me’od MiKol HaAdam Asher Al Penai HaAdama*” (the most extremely **humble** individual on the face of the earth). Not only does G-d’s Revelation to Moses take place in the desert, but G-d Chooses to speak to this prophet from the midst of a burning bramble bush, interpreted by R. Eliezer²¹: “...*Ma HaSneh Shafel MiKol Hallanot SheBaOlam, Kach HaYu Yisrael Shefeilim Yerudim LeMitzrayim*...” “(Just as the bush is the most lowly of shrubbery in the world, so too were the Jews lowly and subjugated to Egypt). The symbol of the burning bush thereby equates Moses, the Jews and the bush as sharing the quality of lowliness.²² Even Mt. Sinai upon which G-d Descended and Moses ascended in order to receive the Ten Commandments and the entire corpus of Jewish law, is categorized as the lowest of mountains.²³

Historically, the desert has been a place that has attracted visionaries and groups of individuals who felt that the materialism and corruption of urban societies prevented them from communing with G-d and developing their spiritual capacities.²⁴ The *Tora* suggests that G-d orchestrated the Jews’ going into the desert because the atmosphere created in such desolate and lonely surroundings would be extremely conducive for the entire nation to abandon the example of their previous malevolent flesh-and-blood masters. Instead, the belittling impact of the desert would inspire them to focus upon serving humbly and selflessly the Creator of the Universe.

Following in the footsteps of those redeemed from the bondage of Egypt, we must attempt to reconnect with the open spaces of the wilderness and seek in their natural fashioning a source of awakening to the Mastery of G-d, to access the free inspiration of the Divine therein and to become a little more “ownerless” in order that we can internalize lessons and truths that were previously beyond us.

²⁰ Numbers 12:3

²¹ Exodus *Rabba* 2:5

²² An additional implication of R. Eliezer’s comment in the *Midrash*, is that whereas Moshe’s personality might have inherently been humble, and employing the literary conceit of personification, the physical nature of the bramble bush as compared to other aspects of the flora indigenous to the area suggested lowliness, the Jewish people were not naturally inclined to be humble, and therefore the Egyptian subjugation contributed to readying at least a portion of them—traditionally, the vast majority chose to remain in Egypt rather than follow Moses into the desert—for receiving the *Tora*. The fact that even these individuals, with the exception of the Tribe of Levi, would later be decreed to die in the desert, indicates how difficult it is to change human nature to the point where people willingly accept a system of law and a particular lifestyle and worldview imposed upon them from without.

²³ See Babylonian Talmud *Sota* 5a.

²⁴ See Book III “The Great and Terrible Wilderness” in Bruce Feiler’s *Walking the Bible: A Journey by Land through the Five Books of Moses*, Perennial, New York, 2001, pp. 199-276, for a moving account re the effects of prolonged desert life upon its inhabitants.

In light of R' Bieler's Lesson, the Editors of the Eitz Chaim Hee Series offer the following Practical Lifestyle Tips:

- 1) Reconnect with any desert or other grandiose natural setting that is accessible to you. Keep in mind the lessons mentioned here about one's minute place in the grand creation.
- 2) Take steps to help preserve a natural setting near you. You can contribute your time or money to clean-up projects of nearby mountains, lakes, or forests, or you can remind yourself and others to hike responsibly, by not damaging the valuable habitat you visit.

Rabbi Jack Bieler is a Rector at the Kemp Mill Synagogue in Silver Spring, MD.