

Parashat Bamidbar

How can I Celebrate Shabbat Camping out in the Wilderness?



Dear Rebbetzin,

I'm an ardent nature-lover and there is nothing that makes me feel closer to Hashem than being surrounded by serene landscapes far away from the distractions of the bustling city. I enjoy going camping, praying at the seaside, watching the sun setting into its reflection in the ripples of the ocean and gazing at the starry sky from around the bonfire while the guitars are strumming. A friend and I would like to go camping at the Dead Sea during *Parashat Bamidbar* – the Shabbat prior to Shavuot in order to prepare ourselves spiritually for receiving the Torah. I assume there is no halachic problem with this. After all, the entire Jewish people camped in the wilderness also on Shabbat. Please let me know if there is anything I need to be aware of and any preparation I need to make in order to be able to keep all the laws of Shabbat properly while camping out.

Tzipporah Natura (name changed)

Dear Tzipporah,

Sounds like camping in the wilderness, the Shabbat before receiving the Torah, could be an awesome experience, provided that you make the effort in proper preparation. I actually wish I had the time to join you! The Torah, which was given in the desert was written with black fire upon white fire (*Midrash Tanchuma, Bereishit 1*). In order to engrave the words of the Torah written with black fire in our hearts, we need to become like white fire – like a blank canvas or piece of paper, ready to receive new writing inspiration. I believe that the Torah was given in the desert because this place is the perfect vessel for receiving Torah. The silence of the vast emptiness of the desert cleansed the Israelites from their slave mentality. Likewise, the desert can purge us of our faulty beliefs, attitudes and negative emotions. The pristine wasteland is like a reset button on the computer- cleaning out all our old files to make room for the new. The bareness of the desert can open our hearts to receive. Yet, on a practical level, it is not so simple to keep Shabbat while camping out.

How Can I Carry On Shabbat in the Desert?

One of the 39 forbidden creative works on Shabbat is הוצאה/*hotza'ah* – carrying an object – regardless of its weight, size or purpose from a private to a public domain and vice versa, or carrying it more than four cubits (approximately 2 meters or 6 feet) within a public domain. Private and public do not refer to ownership, but rather, to the nature of the area. An enclosed area is considered a private domain, whereas an open area is considered public for the purposes of these laws. When living in Jerusalem, or in a Torah community, we are used to having an eruv. An eruv is a technical enclosure that surrounds both private and public domains, creating a large private domain in which carrying is permitted on Shabbat. When we spend Shabbat away from a Jewish community, in a place where there is no proper eruv, we cannot carry even a book out to a park. If you would like, for example, to take your siddur to pray outside of the tent, when camping on Shabbat, you need to learn the laws of how to construct an eruv. You must also plan to arrive at your campsite at least three hours prior to Shabbat, in order to have enough time to build it.

Basic Guidelines for Building an Eruv

It is permissible to carry in a closed structure with walls or a fence, etc. If there are no real walls, or if a wall is missing, you can create an enclosure with poles and strings. The easiest way to construct an enclosure is by using fishing line that connects from one pole to the next. The reason to use fishing line rather than rope is that it stays straight. This is important because a sagging eruv line or one that moves around in the wind isn't kosher. The poles have to be at least ten *tefachim* tall (80 cm). They need to be a bit longer in order to drive them into the ground, so they should be at least a meter each (3 feet). If you are camping out for only one Shabbat, four thin pieces of bamboo will suffice in constructing a square around your camp site. Drive a nail into the top of each pole. You could incorporate some of the natural terrain in your eruv such as a cliff wall, very thick bushes, or impassable brush. I recommend that you consult your rabbi about how to build an eruv as building an eruv is a fairly complex halachic endeavor. The Talmudic tractate *Eruvin* is considered to be one of the most difficult tractates. Look for more details on this website <http://travelingrabbi.com/halacha-general/how-to-build-an-eruv-while-camping>.

Shabbat Meals in the Wilderness

I can't imagine spending a Shabbat anywhere without a source of fresh unsalted water. It would be quite hard to schlep all the handwashing water in addition to your drinking water. (A schlep it is going to be in any circumstance.) You will need a good size icebox to bring food for an entire Shabbat. Make sure the food is already prepared and plan meals that can be eaten cold such as wholesome bread, lox, salads and dips... I suggest keeping all your food in the icebox including breads and cakes to avoid invading ants and other crawling creatures. It would be a good idea to bring a battery-powered lamp, lantern or strong flashlight and keep it on for the entire Shabbat so you will have some light Friday night. I also suggest bringing a glass box such as what we use for our Chanukah candles, to insure that your Shabbat candles won't blow in the wind, or even worse blow out. You may be able to keep your Friday night meal hot if you arrange to have your food kept warm on top of covered embers before Shabbat goes in. You can relight your bonfire after Shabbat goes out for a spirited *havdalah* around a campfire.

Safety Suggestions

I suggest that you pack a fully charged cellphone, charger, extra food, at least two extra liters of water, appropriate clothes, emergency supplies and your list of emergency phone numbers. You may include a first aid kit with band aids, bandages and antiseptic wipes, rescue remedy and herbal pain reliever. During the day, protect yourself from the hot desert sun with a large brim hat. Wear loose cotton clothes that cover most of your body including your neck. After Shabbat, make sure to take out your trash and adhere to the principles of '[Leave No Trace](#).'

Finding Your Personal Portion in the Torah

With all these preparations, for the sake of experiencing a holy Shabbat while camping out in the Holy Land, I'm positive that your Shabbat in the Desert is going to be an unforgettable experience. This is your opportunity for meditative reflection to really tune into your own soul and finding yourself and your personal portion in the Torah. Each of the Israelites camped around the Ark of the Covenant containing The Ten Commandments. Each person was associated with his own tribe and camped under the appropriate flag as it states,

פּוּר בַּמִּדְבָּר פָּרָק א (נב) וְחָנוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ עַל מַחֲנֵהוּ וְאִישׁ עַל דָּגְלוֹ לְצַבָּאוֹתָם:

“The Israelites encamped in their own camp, each person according to his troop and by his flag”
(*Bamidbar* 1:52).

Each Israelite camped in their personal space and specific angle in relationship to the Ark of the Torah. Likewise, today, we all need to find our individual portion in the Torah while simultaneously knowing our place within the community. The Shabbat prior to Shavuot is the most suitable time to realign ourselves with our personal portion in the Torah and our true place within the Jewish community. What more appropriate place for such alignment than in the wilderness of the Holy Land?