

The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Bamidbar How Does the Wilderness Prepare Us to Inherit the Land of Israel?

What made Me Embrace the Torah in The Old City of Jerusalem on Shavuot?

This Shavuot, I celebrate 45 years of Torah! I can hardly believe how the years have flowed by, like foamy waves softening and refining our hearts, as hardships etched their traces into the furrows of our faces. I look back with nostalgia to that first Shavuot – the beginning of my teshuva – when everything was new. I found myself among a circle of women, sitting on cool stones under the starry sky in the Old City of Jerusalem. It was the first time I learned about Ruth – who left behind the comfort of her regal home, her country, and all that was familiar, to follow her aged mother-in-law Naomi toward an unknown destiny.

I, too, had recently left my own country, my childhood home, and the prospect of a prestigious university degree to follow my heart and fulfill an undefined calling. Was Ruth also a truth seeker, who found the pomp of prosperity superficial while looking for a deeper meaning and mission in life? I pondered.

Since my teenage years, I had been searching for truth. I had rejected the Marxism I was taught in high school, which focused solely on dismantling economic classes without addressing the values that would define the envisioned society of financial equality. Dancing in the inner city with born-again Xians whose theology conflicted with everything I would later come to value felt exciting at the time, but their answers rang hollow and rehearsed. Though I was a flower-power girl immersed in the hippy counterculture, I was never drawn enough to the East to join my friends traveling to India and Nepal in search of spirituality and inner vision. Yoga helped me strengthen my body, but it in no way touched my soul.

I had never considered seeking truth within my own Jewish heritage. The Jewish experiences of my youth had led me to believe Judaism was nothing more than a culinary creed wrapped in outdated rules, lacking any spiritual essence.

Yet here I was, in the holy city of Jerusalem, at the Women's Division of the Diaspora Yeshiva – where I had surprisingly found my spiritual home. I still remember hearing Rabbi Goldstein proclaim: "Now that you've received the Torah, can you give it back? No, you can't. You have to keep it!" At that moment, I knew I was hooked for life.

Why is the Torah Given in the Desert?

Parashat Bamidbar opens with the Israelites still in the wilderness, poised to begin their journey toward the Land of Israel.

סֵפֶר בַּמִּדְבָּר פָּרָק א פְּסוּק א וַיְדַבֵּר הָשֵׁם אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי...

"Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai..." (*Bamidbar* 1:1).

Chazal ask: why was the Torah given in the **מִדְבָּר**/*midbar* – 'desert' a place of emptiness and desolation? To enter the covenant of Torah and inherit Eretz Yisrael, we must let go of personal pride and entitlement. The desert has no owner. It is vast, barren, and silent. In that space of inner surrender, we become worthy of receiving Hashem's word.

Just as the desert prepared us to receive Torah, it also prepared us to receive the Land. Before entering the land flowing with milk and honey, we had to be emptied of Egypt – of its mentality, attachments, and enslaved self-image. The desert strips away ego so we can enter the land as humble vessels for Hashem's presence. This reflects my experience of accepting the Torah, on my first Shavuot. I made myself like the wilderness, emptying myself of my past to start over on a clean new page in the story of my life.

The Midrash teaches: the Torah was given with fire, water, and in the wilderness – all elements that are

free and accessible to all. So too, Torah is free for anyone who thirsts for it (*Yeshaya'hu* 55:1). Another teaching: Only one who makes himself like a wilderness can truly acquire Torah. “Whoever does not make himself ownerless and accessible to all, cannot acquire the wisdom of the Torah” (*Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:7).

What Does it Take to Make our Torah Transformative and Enduring?

The Imrei Emet explains that the Torah was given to rectify the three core flaws of humanity – jealousy, lust, and pride – reflected in the sins of early generations: Kayin, the generation of the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. The mitzvot at Matan Torah correspond to these: the boundary around Mount Sinai addressed jealousy – giving each person their designated space; the command to abstain from marital intimacy represented restraint – countering lust; and standing humbly at the foot of the mountain symbolized submission – opposing pride. This is why the Torah was given with fire, water, and wilderness – representing passion, humility, and self-nullification. Every day, we are challenged by jealousy, lust, and pride – and only through the power of Torah can we overcome them. Moreover, to truly acquire Torah, we must make ourselves like a wilderness – open, humble, and ownerless (*Imrei Emet, Bamidbar*, 5667). This concept hits home when I reminisce about those early days of embracing Torah, most of the students in Diaspora Yeshiva from affluent American families, made great sacrifices to leave flourishing careers and promising prosperous futures behind, to dedicate ourselves to Torah learning in the Land of Israel. As the Imrei Emet teaches, as long as we make ourselves like a desert completely given over and devoted to Torah and Mitzvot (*mesirut nefesh*), through this inner work of surrendering our selves, our Torah becomes transformative and enduring. Now, 45 years later this concept has proven true through the descendants of the students of the ‘hippy yeshiva’ raising families deeply rooted in Torah and mitzvot.

How Does the Counting of Israel Connect to the Land?

It is significant that the journey through the wilderness begins with counting:

ספר במדבר פרק א פסוק ב

שָׂאוּ אֶת רֹאשׁ כָּל עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם בְּמִסְפָּר שְׁמוֹת כָּל זָכָר לְגִלְגָּלָתָם:

“Take the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by families following their fathers' houses; a head count of every male according to the number of their names” (*Bamidbar* 1:2).

What is the purpose of counting the Israelites specifically at the outset of the nation's journey through the wilderness? The Netziv explains that the census in Parashat Bamidbar isn't just about numbers – it's about identity and a spiritual confirmation of each individual's destined inheritance in the Land of Israel (*HaEmek Davar, Bamidbar* 1:2). Each person was counted “by name” and “by their father's house,” emphasizing identity, lineage, and their destined portion in the Land of Israel. The configuration of the Israelite camp mirrored this destiny. Each family and tribe camped in a Divinely designated place, forming a sacred map that anticipated their eventual settlement in Eretz Yisrael – not only geographically, but spiritually.

According to the teachings of the Arizal, this encampment was patterned after the supernal structure of the sefirot. The twelve tribes corresponded to distinct spiritual channels, grouped into four **דגלים/degolim** – ‘banners’ – each containing three tribes. This mystical arrangement reflected a deeper cosmic order, where each tribe's location in the wilderness corresponded to its spiritual root above (*Etz Chaim*, Sha'ar 31, Chapter 3). The Midrash supports this idea, stating that the formation of the tribes mirrored the arrangement of the heavenly hosts (*Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 2:8).

Thus, the desert became a place of alignment – each soul drawn to its specific inheritance, in sync with its Divine source. This is hinted in the verse: **וְאִישׁ עַל־דָּגְלוֹ בְּאֶתֶר לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם יֵחָנוּ** “Each man by his banner,

according to the signs of their father's house shall they camp" (*Bamidbar* 2:2). The **אֹתוֹת**/*otot* – "signs" – may be understood as spiritual markers, revealing each tribe's unique role within the collective mission of *Am Yisrael* in *Eretz Yisrael*.

How is the Wilderness Experience Still Relevant for Life in the Land Today?

The journey from the wilderness to *Eretz Yisrael* is not only historical – it is psychological and spiritual. Many of us today live in the Land yet still carry traces of 'Egypt' in our hearts. The *midbar* remains a necessary stage to enter the Land inwardly.

The holiness of *Eretz Yisrael* cannot be fully appreciated until we empty ourselves of the spiritual clutter of exile. Only then can the light of the Land penetrate our souls. I'm continually inspired by how many of my students go through this process – shedding layers of exile, undergoing both physical and spiritual reboot, and gradually rooting and resettling themselves in the Holy Land.

Although Bat Ayin isn't a desert, compared to the grand cities many of our students left behind, this rural village in the Judean Hills serves as a kind of *midbar* – a humble, quiet space where we can learn to hear the whisper of the Divine voice. The word **מִדְבָּר**/*midbar* – 'desert' – is etymologically related to **דִּבּוּר**/*dibur* – 'speech.' Like the desert, Bat Ayin is free of distractions – a place where we can learn to listen to the still, small voice and truly dwell in the sanctity of *Eretz Yisrael*.

May we each walk our personal *midbar* with courage and faith – shedding old identities, listening to the voice of Hashem, and preparing our hearts to receive our portion in the Holy Land. And may we soon see the full inheritance of *Am Yisrael* revealed – each tribe, each soul, restored to its rightful place in the Land.