

# A Taste of Torah - Nourishment in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

## Parashat Bamidbar: Cultivating Wilderness Awareness Which Lessons Can We Glean from the Israelites' Wilderness Wandering?

### Why is the Desert Conducive to Perceiving the Presence of Hashem?

Hailing from Denmark, where it always seems to rain, and the earth remains continuously moist and fertile, I appreciate the challenge of growing fruits and vegetables in the Judean hills. Here in Bat Ayin, in the Mediterranean mountain region at higher elevations, we experience long, hot, dry summers when the soil hardens, cracks, and becomes difficult to work. The challenge of cultivating healthy, lush produce teaches us to turn toward G-d and rely upon His blessing. Although we have encountered many obstacles trying to grow crops in our garden, I am grateful for how each difficulty brings me closer to Hashem. This is easy for me to say since we do not depend upon our garden for our livelihood. In contrast, the Israelites left the fertile soil of Egypt, watered predictably by the Nile, and entered the dry wilderness where nothing naturally grows. Since they could not carry many provisions on the journey, and there were certainly no health food stores or supermarkets in sight, what extraordinary emunah they must have had, trusting that Hashem would sustain them.

I once participated in an all-night moonlit desert hike. We walked silently through the darkness, hearing only the soft rustling of the sand beneath our feet. At one point, we were instructed to disperse and spend time completely alone with Hashem. In the wilderness, there were no distractions, no noise, no signal, and not even any temptation to reach for our phones. The feeling of being surrounded by vast emptiness intensified the awareness of Hashem's presence. I felt as though my external and transient attachments were gradually melting away, leaving only the eternal reality of Hashem filling my consciousness.

Perhaps through this experience, I caught a tiny glimpse of what the Israelites encountered during their forty years of wilderness wandering. It is no wonder that the wilderness generation became known as the **דור הַדַּעָה/Dor De'ah** - 'the Conscious Generation.' Removed from the illusions of self-sufficiency and surrounded entirely by Divine sustenance, they lived with a constant awareness that every breath, every drop of water, and every morsel of nourishment flowed directly from Hashem. In a "land not sown," they discovered the deepest nourishment of all - our relationship with the living presence of G-d Himself.

### Why Was the Wilderness Experience Necessary Before Entering the Land?

**ספר ירמיהו פרק ב פסוק ב**

**כֹּה אָמַר ה'שֵׁם זְכוֹרָתִי לְךָ חֶסֶד נְעוּרַיִךְ אֲהַבֵּת כָּל־לַילְתֶּיךָ לְכַתֵּךְ אַחֲרַי בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה**

"Thus says Hashem, I remember for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your bridal days, how you followed Me into the wilderness, into a land not sown" (*Yirmeyahu 2:2*).

As someone who has lived for many years in the hills of Judea, this verse speaks to me deeply. Although the prophet describes the Jewish people following Hashem through the barren wilderness, life in the Land of Israel continues to cultivate this same awareness that our nourishment and security ultimately do not derive from human effort alone.

Surrounded by the beauty and simplicity of the Judean hills, I am constantly reminded that all sustenance flows from Hashem. Living in close connection with nature strips away the illusion of self-sufficiency and confronts us with a deeper question: What truly sustains us?

*Parashat Bamidbar* opens specifically in the wilderness because before entering the fertile Land of Israel, the Jewish people first had to journey through a barren land where no natural nourishment could be found. In the barren wilderness, in a "land not sown," they learned through direct experience that

nourishment doesn't originate from the earth alone, but directly from Hashem Himself. It was specifically in a "land not sown" that the deepest foundations of emunah could take root. In settled lands, it is easy to imagine that our sustenance is a result of our labor, our wealth, or the natural fertility of the earth. Yet the wilderness revealed a deeper truth concealed beneath the surface of physical reality – that even natural nourishment ultimately emanates from the Divine word sustaining all existence at every moment.

Rabbeinu Bachaya explains that the greatness of Israel was that they followed Hashem into the vast wilderness without preparing provisions for the journey. They trusted completely that the One Who called them forth would also sustain them (Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Shemot* 12:39). The prophet, therefore, describes this journey as "the love of your bridal days," likening Israel to a bride following her Beloved into the unknown. Their readiness to walk into a barren land without visible sustenance became one of the greatest expressions of love and trust in Jewish history.

### How Does the Wilderness Open Us to Higher Consciousness?

The wilderness did not merely teach the Jewish people to trust that they would receive food. It transformed their entire consciousness. Removed from the constant distractions, ambitions, and illusions of settled civilization, the Israelites became free to perceive reality more deeply. Living continuously enveloped by Divine providence transformed the wilderness generation into the דָּוָר דְּעָה/Dor De'ah – 'the Conscious Generation.' The *Zohar* describes the wilderness experience as entering the צִלָּה דְּמֵהֵימָנוּתָא/tzila d'meheimanuta – "the shade of emunah." Just as the sukkah surrounds us with an atmosphere of faith in the Divine protection, so too the wilderness enveloped the Jewish people within the Clouds of Glory and the constant awareness of Hashem's presence (*Zohar*, Part 3, 103b). In a barren land stripped of ordinary security, the Israelites could no longer place their trust in agriculture, wealth, or human control. They lived entirely sheltered beneath the wings of the Shechinah.

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter explains that the Jewish people merited receiving the Torah specifically through their willingness to follow Hashem into the wilderness. Torah belongs to a higher reality beyond the ordinary material world, and therefore it can only be truly received when a person loosens her attachment to physical security and places her trust more fully in Hashem (Sefat Emet, *Behar* 5647). The wilderness cultivated this inner state of openness and surrender.

Perhaps this is why the Torah had to be given specifically in the desert rather than in a thriving city or fertile farmland. The noise of ordinary life can easily drown out the subtle awareness of the Divine. Yet in the vast stillness of the wilderness, where there was nowhere else to turn, the many layers concealing Hashem's presence gradually dissolved.

### Can We Follow Hashem Without Guarantees?

Rabbi Moshe Sofer raises a fascinating question regarding the greatness of the wilderness generation. At first glance, it may not seem so extraordinary that the Israelites trusted Hashem to sustain them in the desert after witnessing the miracles of the Exodus. Yet he explains that the Jewish people also knew something else. They knew that even Avraham, after faithfully following Hashem into the Promised Land, encountered severe famine and was forced to descend to Egypt in search of food. The Israelites, therefore, understood that following Hashem does not necessarily guarantee immediate material comfort or security. If even Avraham could experience hunger in the very land Hashem promised him, how could they assume that hundreds of thousands of people would suddenly be sustained in a barren wilderness? Yet despite this uncertainty, they still followed Hashem into the "land not sown." This was the true greatness of their emunah (Chatam Sofer, *Devarim* 8:3).

Perhaps this is one of the deepest dimensions of spiritual nourishment. We often imagine that trust in Hashem means confidence that everything will unfold comfortably and predictably. Yet the wilderness

teaches a more mature form of emunah – the willingness to remain connected to Hashem even without guarantees. True nourishment grows not from certainty about the future, but from the relationship itself.

It was only after the Israelites demonstrated this willingness to follow Hashem without tangible assurance that they merited receiving the manna from Heaven. In this way, the wilderness revealed a vital principle of all deep relationships – cultivating the courage to walk together into the unknown. True blessing only begins to unfold once we are willing to step forward without the security of knowing exactly how everything will develop to provide our sustenance.

This mirrors how the sea only split after Nachshon ben Aminadav ventured into its waves. This remains a powerful and eternal lesson. One of my alumnae students broke up with her fiancé because, as a full-time Yeshiva student, he had no clear plan for making a living. While the need for certain material security is understandable, I personally experienced how the families in Diaspora Yeshiva in the eighties lived totally off emunah. While the husbands would learn Torah full-time, the wives would learn part-time and raise large families. Without a fixed income, Hashem somehow took care of us. We may not have eaten steak at fancy restaurants or bought designer clothes, yet we didn't starve. The women continually experienced Hashem's providence through finding exactly the dress in our style and size among the boxes of free clothing sent from the USA.

When we stop demanding complete security before taking the next step, we begin to notice Hashem's providence woven into the details of our lives. Sometimes nourishment arrives through manna from Heaven, and sometimes through unexpectedly finding a simple dress in precisely the right size at exactly the right moment. The outer form may differ, yet both reveal the same truth – that Hashem continually sustains those who choose to follow Him into the unknown.

*Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin: Holistic Torah for Women on the Land is for women who seek to delve deeply into their souls through intensive textual study and creative expression. We engage women of all ages and nationalities in intense Torah study and sustainable living. Drawing on creativity and life experience, students participate in art & drama workshops, authentic movement, and organic gardening, and take turns cooking wholesome meals for each other. Our Holistic Torah involves connecting to Torah of the land, to our Creator, and to personal growth. Dormitory facilities are available in the peaceful, rural setting of Bat Ayin, nestled in the Judean Hills and located just 20 minutes south of Jerusalem.*