

Bamidbar 5781

What We Learn In The Wilderness

“Bamidbar,” “the desert,” “the wilderness.” What images do these words evoke? Vast expanses, barren and inhospitable? A forgotten, rock-strewn waste? A colorless and merciless no-man’s land?

This week, we begin to read the Book of BaMidbar, which opens with the words, “The Holy One spoke to Moses [bamidbar] in the wilderness/desert of Sinai, from the Tent of Meeting.”

But it is not necessary to specify that the Holy One spoke to Moses in the desert! The people of Israel just fled across the Red Sea and are wandering in circles. Where do we think they are? Metairie? No, obviously they are bamidbar. If this is so obvious, then why does the Torah make the point, specifically, that this book takes place in the wilderness?

Maybe because wilderness is important.

Moses Maimonides, the Rambam, wrote: “If all countries you know or hear of follow evil ways, as is the case in our time, then one must go out to the caves, the clefts of mountains, and the wilderness.”¹ Wilderness is a kind of sanctuary, a retreat from civilization, its clinging, its striving, and its temptations.

The Midrash teaches us that: “A person cannot take in Torah until they become like the desert.”² If the teacup is full, we can’t pour in more tea (perhaps cafe au lait is more apt for here? But anyway.) It is only when we empty ourselves of our preconceived ideas that we begin to become wise.

And the word *midbar* is related to the word *dibbur* - speech. In the silence of the *midbar* we hear in a different way. Many a spiritual master has sought out years of silent meditation in abandoned caves or oases. The barren expanse of the *midbar* offers solitude and quiet that fosters authentic *dibbur* that cannot be heard over the din of our ordinary lives.

¹ Rambam, *Hilchot Deot* 6:1

² *Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:7

Sanctuary, wisdom, insight. Does any of this sound familiar?

It should. We ourselves have been making a wilderness journey over the course of this pandemic. We took sanctuary in our homes; we opened ourselves every day to new learning, new skills; we hoped every day for greater insight.

With every week over the past month we have moved closer to “normal.” We are coming out of the wilderness that this past year-plus has been. We might feel more oriented, more aware of dates and places. Conversely, we might feel more sensitive, more hesitant, more ready to question what we really want and need. How shall we traverse this final stage of the wilderness?

One of the many things I love about this community is that we are each other’s teachers. Sometimes this manifests in gifts in my inbox, and one such gift was an article from the Financial Times by the writer and speaker Enumo Okoro called ‘What we learn in the wilderness.’ Let me quote her final paragraph here:

What I’ve learnt over the years is that regardless of how we arrive in the wilderness, whether led or driven, it is a place of transformation and reckonings. No one comes out of physical or metaphorical wilderness spaces the same as they were before, and whatever new skills or unveilings of identity we have, it seems to prepare us in unimaginable ways for stepping forward into a new flourishing.³

So as we begin this new book this morning, let’s remain open to this concept of transformation. The Children of Israel spent 38 years going round in circles - but the Torah is silent about that. Instead, the narrative we will read over the next couple of months is one of changing, learning from experience.

The wilderness transformed the Israelites. May it transform us too.

Shabbat shalom.

³ Enuma Okoro, writing for *The Financial Times*, date unknown