

ברוך אתה יהו"ה
אלהינו מלך העולם
אשר קדשנו במצוותיו
וצונו לעסוק
בדברי תורה.

Barukh Atah Adonai
Eloheinu melekh ha-olam
asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu la'asok
b'divrei Torah.

Blessed are You, YHVH,
our God, eternal sovereign, who
sanctifies us in God's connecting
command to busy ourselves
in words of Torah.

Leviticus 25:1-6a

וידבר ה' אל-משה בהר סיני לאמור: דבר
אל-בני ישראל ואמרת אליהם כי תבאו אל
הארץ אשר אני נתן לכם ושבתה הארץ
שבת ליהו"ה: שש שנים תזרע שדך ושש
שנים תזמר פרמך ואספת את-תבואתה:
ובשנה השביעית שבת שבתון יהיה לארץ
שבת ליהו"ה שדך לא תזרע וכרמך לא
תזמר: את ספיח קצירך לא תקצור
ואת-ענבי נזירך לא תבצר שנת שבתון
יהיה לארץ: והיתה שבת הארץ....

YHVH spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai saying:
Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them –
When you come into the land that I give you, the
land will keep a *shabbat* to YHVH. Six years sow
your field, prune your vineyard and gather its
fruit. But the seventh year will be a *shabbat* of rest
for the land, a *shabbat* of YHVH: do not sow your
field or prune your vineyard. Do not reap what
grows on its own of your plantings, or gather
grapes of your vines: it is a year of *shabbat* for the
land.

Sifra Behar, 1:3

את ספיח קצירך לא תקצור מכאן סמכו
חכמים על הספיחים שיהיו אסורים
בשביעית. ... אבל אתה בוצר מן ההפקר.

Do not reap what grows on its own of your
plantings – From this [our ancestors] reasoned
that what grows on its own that was yours could
not be gleaned, but you could [glean] from what
was *hefker*.

Buddhism: non-attachment

כל חמירה וחמיעא דאכא ברשותי דלא
חמיתה ודלא בערתיה ודלא ידענא ליה
לבטל ולהוי הפקר כעפרא דארעא.

Bedikat Hameitz

All *hameitz* here under my control that I have not
seen or removed, or which I am unaware, is
nullified and *hefker* as the dust of the earth.

WHAT OWNS US: ego, self-definition, societal
constructs, narratives, labels, roles, comparisons,
materialism.

communal, connected

ownerlessness —> connection to the divine
not “busied” with other stuff.

B.T. Nedarim 55a

כיון שעושה אדם את עצמו כמדבר
שהוא מופקר לכל תורה ניתנה לו במתנה

When one makes oneself as a *midbar*, so that one
is made *hefker*, all of Torah is given one as a gift.

let go
release
surrender
declutter
humbling
freeing
insignificant*
magnificent
BLESSED
** AWE **
by
suffering
or
something else?

Hiddushei Hatam Sofer, Nedarim 55a

כיון שנתנה לו במתנה נחלו אל. נ"ל דמה
שניתן לו במתנה פ"י שע"י התלמידים
שהוא לומד עמהם ומפקיר עצמו כמדבר
ע"ז זוכה להבין ולהשיג יותר מכח שכלו.
שהקב"ה נותן לו מתנה ומגלילן לו רזי
תורה ונעשה כמעין כמתגבר אך אפשר
שישיג היום וישכח מחר כמתנה ע"מ
להחזיר ע"כ אמר נחלו אל שנותנים לו
בירושה שאין לה הפסק והיינו כנחר
שאינו פוסק:

When [Torah] is given to one, one becomes God's
inheritance. How? By learning with students and
making oneself *hefker* like wilderness: thus does
one merit to discern and become more than by
one's own capacity. The Holy Blessed One then
gives the gift of revealing Torah's secrets, as an
ever-strengthening well – so that if we attain
today and forget tomorrow, like a gift we
remember today and then forget, in reality it's an
endless inheritance, a river that never stops.

PRELUDE TO THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

Numbers 1:1

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי בְּאֶהֱל מוֹעֵד בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִיית לְצֵאתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְאֶמְרָה: YHVH spoke to Moses in the Sinai wilderness in the Tent of Meeting on the second month's first day in the second year after the exodus from Egypt

Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי, לָמָּה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי, מִכָּאן שָׁנוּ חֲכָמִים בְּשִׁלְשָׁה דְבָרִים נִתְּנָה הַתּוֹרָה, בָּאֵשׁ וּבַמַּיִם וּבַמִּדְבָּר. בָּאֵשׁ מֵנִי: וְהָרַס סִינַי עֵשׂוֹן כְּלוּ וּגו'. וּבַמַּיִם מֵנִי, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: גַּם שָׁמַיִם נָטְפוּ גַם עֲבִים נָטְפוּ מַיִם. וּבַמִּדְבָּר מֵנִי וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי, וְלָמָּה נִתְּנָה בְּשִׁלְשָׁה דְבָרִים הַלְלוּ, אֲלֵא מָה אֱלוֹ הַנָּחַם לְכֹל בָּאֵי הָעוֹלָם כִּי: דְבָרֵי תוֹרָה חָנּוּם הֵם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: הוּי כָל צִמָּא לְכוּ לַמַּיִם, דְּבָר אַחֵר, וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי, אֲלֵא כָּל מִי שְׂאִינוּ עוֹשֶׂה עֲצָמוּ כְּמִדְבָּר, הִפְקֵר, אִינוּ יְכוֹל לְקַנּוֹת אֶת הַחֲכָמָה וְהַתּוֹרָה, לְכֹי נֶאֱמַר: בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי.

YHVH spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai – Why the wilderness of Sinai? From here the sages taught that Torah was given by three things: fire, water and wilderness. By fire, as in: "And Mount Sinai was all in smoke as God had descended onto it in fire" (Ex. 19:18). By water, as in (Judg. 5:4): "The heavens dripped and the clouds dripped water [at Sinai]." By wilderness, [as in]: "YHVH spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai." Why the Torah given through these three things? Just as [fire, water, and wilderness] are free to all inhabitants of the world, so too are the words of Torah free to them, as it is said (Isaiah 55:1): "Oh, all who are thirsty, come for water!" Another explanation [for] "YHVH spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai": Anyone who does not make themselves *hefker* like the wilderness cannot acquire wisdom and Torah. Thus it says, "the wilderness of Sinai."

R. David Shoham

[The] reason the Torah portion *Bamidbar* is always read right before Shavuot, the time of giving Torah, is to teach that if you want to merit receiving Torah, you must make yourself like the wilderness, to have a great measure of humility ... to know that you are bare and open, like the wilderness.

Dr. Erica Brown: Into the Wild

There is something about the expansiveness and simplicity of the [Sinai wilderness] that makes people contemplative and aware of their insignificance. The enormity of the terrain highlights our smallness and often, in place of fear, religious awe arises. Wisdom, too, like a spring or sudden flood, rises where least expected. But it is not only this spiritual rawness which is possible in the vastness of the wilderness that leads to knowledge. It is the desire to put order to chaos, which leads to [acquiring] Torah. As humanity feels dominated by the landscape, we try to overcome this impotence by building structures of human intelligence.

R. Shefa Gold: Torah Journeys, Bamidbar

The harsh inner reality of the wilderness purifies whatever traces of enslavement we still carry. This wilderness is the midwife of our new life, after long and hard labor. The wilderness forces us to face the resistance, ambivalence and self-delusion that has kept us from whole-heartedly receiving our birthright: the promised flow of milk and honey that is given to us, and through us, with each moment of life. The wilderness will scare out all our old ghosts and send them forth from the shadows into the full light of awareness. In the wilderness we are stripped of disguises. Defenses fall away. Each part within us is forced to show its true face.

Rabbi Eitan Fishbane: Becoming Like the Wilderness (2017)

The *midbar* may be said to embody a pure state of emptiness—an inner cleansing that allows us to go deeper into the spiritual path. Becoming *hefker* like the *midbar* is a process of letting go of our imprisonment in materiality, in ephemeral and finite desires – to be liberated into the vastness of an inner wilderness.

As R. Nahman of Bratzlav taught (*Likutei Moharan* 1:52), the most profound opening of the heart to God takes place in the physical space of darkness and wilderness, the sometimes frightening ground of loneliness and alienation, [where] we are able to empty our minds and hearts of society's overwhelming drumbeat – where the ultimate *bitul hayeish* (erasure of superficial, mundane consciousness) becomes possible, and we are truly opened in all of our vulnerability before Divinity.

In that place of *midbar*, we are able to break open the heart in ways we didn't know were possible, to cry out to God from a place of the deepest emotional honesty. The *midbar* is an inner place of psyche as much as it is a terrestrial location.

Mekhilta d'Rashbi

The Torah was given to [the Israelites] in the most deserted place in the world. Had it been given in the Land of Israel, the inhabitants of the Land would have said, "It is ours!" Had it been given somewhere else, the inhabitants of that place would have said, "It is ours!" Therefore Torah was given in the most deserted place in the world, so that whoever wanted to receive it could do so.

Lord Jonathan Sacks

Torah is telling us something fundamental to Jewish identity – namely, the unique phenomenon that in Judaism the law preceded the land. For every other nation in history, the reverse was the case. First came the land, then human settlements... then governance and a legal system: first the land, then the law. The fact that in Judaism the Torah was given *b' midbar*, in the wilderness, before they had even entered the land, meant that uniquely Jews and Judaism were able to survive, their identity intact, even in exile. Because the law came before the land, even when Jews lost the land they still had the law. This meant that even in exile, Jews were still a nation.

God remained their sovereign. The covenant was still in place. Even without a geography, they had an ongoing history. Even before they entered the land, Jews had been given the ability to survive outside the land.

Midrash Tanhuma, Beshallah 1

"God led the people about by the way of the wilderness" (Ex. 12:18). The Holy Blessed One said: If I lead them into the land by the most direct route, they will each take possession of a field and a vineyard and neglect wisdom. Therefore I will lead them through the wilderness for forty years and cause them to eat manna and drink well water so that wisdom may penetrate into their very beings.