

# A Desert Gift

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## A Desert Gift By Rav Moshe Taragin

The Midrash (*Bamidbar* 1:1) announces that the Torah was delivered through three media: fire, water and desert. Evidently, each medium captures a vital element of Torah and the experience of its reception.

The blazing provision of Torah certainly highlights both its transcendence as well as the terror seized the audience at *Har Sinai*. *Chazal* comment that the Torah was delivered as black fire inscribed upon white fire – a mystery which substantiates the supernatural nature of Torah. The ambience of *Matan Torah* – at least as portrayed by *Parashat Yitro* – is dominated by billowing mountains; the mountain was transformed into a terrifying furnace. In fact, Hakadosh Barukh Hu Himself recounts their reaction to the great fire and wishes, "Would it be that the nation should continue to fear me as they did that day" (*Devarim* 5:26).

Certainly, water captures multiple features of Torah - the most immediate being its indispensability in supporting life. Beyond the obvious feature of Torah as a provider of life, the Midrash in *Shir Ha-shirim* lists fourteen other characteristics of Torah which water symbolizes. *Shoftim* 5 confirms the presence of strong precipitation on 6 Sivan. Whether the copious imagery of *Shoftim* refers to actual rainfall or to a more cataclysmic eruption of water is in many ways less crucial than the actual presence of water during the delivery of the Torah.

However, the symbolism of desert and the manner in which this climate contributed to *Matan Torah* is far less obvious. Yet the Midrash equates the three, suggesting that the wilderness and dunes reflected an essential facet of *Har Sinai*. In fact, the pivotal role of a desert environment is already established by the verse in *Bamidbar* 21:18, in which the new generation about to enter Israel thank Hashem for "the gift of the desert" (*mi-midbar matana*), confirming the role of the desert in illustrating the lessons of *Har Sinai*. What special aspects of Torah does a desert setting demonstrate?

I. Torah and Humility

Perhaps the principal feature of Torah evoked by the desert is the humility which must accompany its study. The Gemara in *Eiruvin* (54a) declares that a person must behave as a desert to properly acquire Torah. Just as a desert allows passage, similarly a Torah student must allow himself "to be trampled upon," so to speak, to suitably acquire Torah. The obvious dangers of celebrating victimization notwithstanding, this Gemara intuitively associates humility as a precondition to Torah study and associates this dependence with the desert framework of *Matan Torah*. In fact, the conclusion of the Song of the Well claims, "From Matana to Nachli'el and from Nachli'el to Bamot (mountain peaks) and from Bamot to Guy." Noticing the vertical sense of this *pasuk*, the Gemara comments, "If the acquisition of Torah induces vanity or conceit (*bamot* = cliffs = high self-regard), he is then degraded by God (plunged into the *guy* = valley)."

Presumably, the preconditioning of Torah success upon lack of pretension is experienced in two different manners. Firstly, Torah is Divinely awarded in response to personal virtue - humble deportment being an essential component of moral integrity. An interesting Midrash in *Ki Tissa* describes Moshe's frustration after forty days of tenaciously attempting to receive the Torah. Despairing at his own perceived ignorance, he bemoans, "I have spent forty days and nights pursuing Torah and I know nothing." At this point, God awards him with comprehensive Torah knowledge – presumably in response to both his dogged efforts as well as his impressive humility. Had he gloated over his accomplishments, he would not have received this grant; acknowledging his "inadequacy," he merits a complimentary divine endowment. Certainly, the metaphor of Torah as a gift, or *matana*, implies its nature as a gift in response to moral caliber.

In addition, humility enables Torah growth in a more rational and logical fashion. Torah acquisition is not merely an intellectual exercise. We uncover and retain Torah knowledge in direct proportion to the degree that we value it as Divine. Another Midrash in *Ki Tissa* claims that had the nation received the entire Torah directly from God, no Torah would ever be forgotten. If we truly recognized the eternity of each word of Torah and its Divine author, we would never allow ourselves to forget it nor apply anything less than maximal effort in its study. Failure in Torah study – whether in comprehension or retention - is not merely an intellectual limitation; each lapse represents a partial neglect of Torah's Divine source.

A stunning Gemara in *Temura* (16a) narrates Yeshoshua's final moments with his *rebbe* - Moshe. The latter inquires as to whether his student is troubled by any final Torah uncertainties which can be aired while Moshe still lives to respond. Yeshoshua exclaims that he is confident in his Torah knowledge and poses no questions to Moshe. At that moment, Yeshoshua wavered and forgot 300 *halakhot* and was plagued by 700 additional questions.

Beyond viewing this regression as punishment for momentary hubris, we may impute this Torah debility to partial displacement of Divine awareness. Yehoshua, famed for his humble subservience to Moshe, momentarily introduced a touch of self-importance and thereby displaced the presence of God. Reduced focus upon the Divine image devalued his Torah and severed it from his identity.

A similar phenomenon can be detected in *Parashat Matot*, in this instance regarding Moshe Rabbeinu. After the army returns from the defeat of Midyan, Moshe is angered by certain deviations from his original orders. After the Torah records his censure, Elazar the *Kohen Gadol* relays *halakhot* relevant to the purification of Midyanite vessels. The Gemara comments that Moshe, in his fury, temporarily forgot the laws of foreign vessels. Once again, we may view this lapse as a cognitive reality rather than a punitive measure. Anger is fed by self-regard and ultimately induces displacement of Divine presence. As the Gemara claims, "Whoever angers is considered an idol worshipper." If anger constitutes momentary insanity, it is only enabled by "looking aside" from God. During his anger, Moshe shed "traces" of his unparalleled focus upon Hashem, and in that moment a fraction of his Torah knowledge departed.

Humility is not merely a moral prerequisite for passionate and devout Torah study. It serves as an academic facilitator, emptying the mind and heart of self-interest and allowing the Divine focus necessary for Torah excellence.

## II. Tenacity and Self-Sacrifice

A parallel Gemara in *Nedarim* (55a) invokes the desert context and articulates a message which is structurally similar to *Eiruvim* (54) - with one subtle distinction. Whereas *Eiruvim* endorses pliant and yielding behavior (literally allowing trespass as a desert), *Nedarim* advocates self-transformation into *hefker* (lack of ownership). Perhaps the message of *Nedarim* is similar to *Eiruvim*, with minor differences in metaphor. Understandably, ownerless tracts easily allow trespass. Perhaps the imagery of *Eiruvim* may have invited exploitation and was replaced by a more legal description.

Alternatively, by invoking a different term, *Nedarim* may be voicing a different quality of Torah. *Hefker* may refer to the barrenness of the desert and the absence of comfort or amenity. This Gemara may be encouraging unrelenting effort, coupled by the willingness to endure sacrifice and deprivation, to enable superior Torah experience. This is certainly the intention of the continuation of the Midrash in *Bamidbar* (1:1):

Whoever does not transform himself into *hefker* as a desert cannot acquire the inner wisdom of Torah.

This Midrash casts a desert as a region liberated from human comfort – both material and psychological. By extension the message becomes, "If a person conditions himself as a desert - empty of any luxuries - he will succeed at Torah growth." From this vantage point, the desert climate exemplifies the notion that Torah cannot be acquired through the pleasures normally associated with urban life and the comforts which civilization offers. Its pursuit must be relentless, inflexible, fierce, even harsh. Commitment to Torah cannot be leisurely or relaxed. As such, this Midrash aligns with the Gemara in *Berakhot* (63b) which demands self-annihilation in the pursuit of Torah (Torah can only be acquired by "killing oneself"), and the famous Mishna in *Avot* (4:6) which describes ideal study accompanied by meals of unadorned bread, simple water and meager living conditions. The Midrash does not sound the stridency of *Berakhot* (killing oneself) or the economic hardship of the Mishna in *Avot*, but it does place Torah accomplishment in the wild and jagged sands of the inhospitable desert.

A different Midrash, on *Bamidbar* 19:26, resonates with the same message but offers slight differences:

Why was the Torah delivered in a desert? Just as a desert is not tilled or harvested, similarly, a Torah student is liberated from worldly burdens. Or say as follows: Torah can only be required by a person who dissociates himself.

In other words, Torah can only be acquired by a person who dissociates himself from worldly striving.

In general, this Midrash reiterates the notion of a desert as detached from human experience - both benefit as well as burden. Assuredly, there are subtle but significant differences between the two versions posited by the Midrash in *Bamidbar*. The initial comment of the Midrash views human liberation as a CONSEQUENCE of Torah study rather than as a precondition. Commitment to an eternal ideal emancipates a *talmid chakham* from worldly nuisance. In a sense, this release is provided as reward for religious sacrifice, but it is also a result of proper orientation of the human imagination. Life's hindrances and annoyances are weighty or insignificant to the degree that we assign them emphasis. Torah study attunes the human heart to eternity and hopefully supplies the perspective to designate proper proportion to daily challenges. Establishing proportion is the first step toward liberation from the heavy toll of daily life.

The second layer of the Midrash envisions "desert disassociation" as a prerequisite for Torah merit in the more classic aforementioned manner. By isolating oneself from mundane experience, one can pursue Torah with greater verve and unconditioned intensity. Perhaps this Midrash evokes the epiphany of Moshe at the burning bush, the flight of Eliyahu from Achav, and the yearning of Yirmiyahu, all of whom saw in the desert a great release from the corruption of urban experience.

### III. Democracy of Torah

Prior to highlighting the dissociative features of the desert, the Midrash in *Bamidbar* struck a different theme. Had the Torah been delivered in Israel proper, perhaps the tribe which hosted the event would exercise proprietary rights to Torah. To insure a democratic distribution of Torah, it was delivered in the desert – literally in no man's land - so that it would be viewed as public provenance.

This particular Midrash worries about exclusionary tendencies in the national sense, and the function of the desert as tribal equalizer. However, in a broader sense, the danger of exclusiveness may be more perilous at an ideological level. How often do we encounter misplaced assertions about the only suitable *derekh ha-limmud* or the only viable *hashkafa*? Delivering Torah in an ownerless desert was intended to rebuff these claims. Without question, the feature of *hefker* mentioned by the Gemara in *Nedarim* also campaigns for a pluralistic sense of multiple styles of Torah study and co-existent ideological systems.

The lack of ownership of the desert is unique in that it stems from the untamed and uncontrollable nature of this region. Unlike cultivated regions whose ownership is legally established, a desert is too vast for domination. The unrestricted access to a desert is not legal as much as it is spatial. A desert is too vast to be managed, and this zone inherently defies human title. As Torah is the encapsulation of the Divine Will, it too – by very definition - is too vast and infinite to be fully captured by human reach. No one individual is fully capable of encompassing the totality of this infinite territory. Exclusive claims to proper Torah study or sole acceptable ideologies are not just morally questionable; they are intellectually dishonest and bespeak an inability to imagine the infinite sweep of the landscape of Torah.

In fact, the Midrash in *Shir Ha-shirim*, which enumerates the fourteen correspondences between Torah and water, mentions the vastness of the seas as the very first likeness. In this respect, the imagery of the scorching and arid desert and the tempestuous and ferocious oceans combine to portray the enormity of Torah. Interestingly, ocean imagery has more readily been adapted to capture the sweep of Torah, whereas the desert theme has not been institutionalized. We often speak of the *yam ha-Talmud* (the seas of the Talmud) as

a manner of expressing its dimensions and its level of difficulty. Similar phraseology never developed surrounding the desert – perhaps because, unlike the ocean's enchanting sway, the desert fills man with a forbidding sense of danger and futility.

#### IV. Free Dispensation of Torah

The final theme developed by *Chazal* addresses the manner by which humans disseminate Torah. The original Midrash in *Bamidbar* 1:1 equates fire, water and desert as three elements which are freely available; just as these elements do not carry financial charge, similarly, Torah should not be delivered for financial considerations. Based upon this Midrash, two *gemarot* – one in *Nedarim* (37a) and one in *Bekhorot* (29a) - each direct us to teach Torah freely based on the precedent of Moshe who delivered Torah in this fashion. Moshe claims (*Devarim* 4:5), "I have taught you laws and tenets as I was commanded by God." Moshe informs the people that just as he received Torah from God without fee, so he conveyed it to the nation. He implores them to behave similarly in presenting Torah.

Based upon this *derasha*, the Rambam (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:7) distinguishes between *Torah Shebikhtav* and *Torah Shebe'al Peh*; only the latter must be freely distributed, since it was this Torah that Moshe presented in a more personal manner. By contrast, the Midrash in *Bamidbar* draws no distinction between the two, affirming that all Torah should be freely provided. Either way, the desert environment reinforces an ideal of free Torah education. In fact, the Midrash, having cited water and fire as two additional elements which carry no fee, cites a well-known *pasuk* in *Yishayahu* 55:1 which instructs the thirsty and indigent to seek water and bread - a transparent reference to Torah and spiritual sustenance. As the verse addresses the penurious and promises spiritual provision, it is undeniable that Torah should be offered without recompense.

Aside from his comments about salaried Torah teachers, the Rambam also spoke highly critically about gaining any financial advantage from Torah study. In his famous statements in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* chapter 3, he rails against commitment to Torah study which imposes financial needs upon public charity. The Rambam is concerned with a range of perils – practical, moral as well as ideological. It is almost certain that the Rambam would disagree with the contemporary experience of kollel learning. Unfortunately, modernity does not easily accommodate the Rambam's ideal, and this "concession" became necessary to advance the committed study of Torah. Similarly, our condition does not facilitate the ideal of teaching Torah without salary. Despite our necessary concessions, the spirit of "free disbursement of Torah" should inform our attitudes and the posture we adopt as Torah providers. Torah should not be taken as some individual possession which can be withheld

or extended with personal discretion. It must be shared freely without financial expectation or, in a more general sense, without any human convention limiting its availability.

The most significant moment in legal and moral history, in prophetic experience and in national development, occurred in a barren windswept region. *Har Sinai*, as a mountain, possesses no long-lasting import. It retains no halakhic *kedusha* and possesses no spiritual identity. Archaeologists and historians may endeavor to discover its identity, but in the spiritual world of religious observance its moment has long since passed. However, at that moment, the mountain and the desert hosted this seminal event and the messages of 6 Sivan were delivered through landscape as well as legislation.

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