



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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בס"ד

במדבר תש"ף
Bamidbar 5780

**Egalitarian
Society,
Jewish-
Style**

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

Education should be free and available to all people.



PARSHAT BAMIDBAR IN A NUTSHELL

The central theme of the Book of Bamidbar is the second stage of the Israelites' journey. They have travelled far from Egypt, but are still far from their future homeland. They must also evolve from slaves into a free people. This week's parsha and next week's parsha are about the preparations for that journey. The first step is to take a census (to count the people). To inherit their land, the Israelites will have to fight battles. So the men who will form the Israelite army need to be counted up. The Levites are counted separately because it is their job to serve in the Mishkan, and not to fight.

The layout of the camp is also described. It is to be in a square shape with the Mishkan in the centre. Three tribes are to set up their tents and banners on each side, while the

Levites form an inner square. The order in which the tribes camp will also be the order in which they travel.

The duties of the priestly family of Kehat (Moses, Aaron, and Miriam's family) – are now explained. They will carry the holiest objects, the Ark, the Menorah, Altars, curtains, and holy vessels used in the sacrificial service, when the Israelites are on the move. They must to be particularly careful with these special objects.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think the Torah gives us so many details about life in the *midbar* (the desert)?



THE CORE IDEA

The parsha of Bamidbar is generally read on the Shabbat before Shavuot, when we celebrate the giving of the Torah. The Rabbis, believing that this is no coincidence, looked for a significant connection in the parsha to Shavuot.

Finding the link is not easy. There is nothing in the parsha about the giving of the Torah. Instead it is about a census of the Israelites. Nor is its setting helpful. We are told at the beginning that the events about to be described took place in "the wilderness of Sinai," whereas when the Torah speaks about the giving of the Torah, it talks about "Mount Sinai." The "wilderness of Sinai" is a general desert area. Mount Sinai is a specific mountain within that region.

The Sages did, nonetheless, make a connection, and it is a surprising one:

"And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai wilderness." (Bamidbar 1:1) The Sages realised through this that the Torah was given through three things: fire, water, and wilderness. How do we know it was given through fire? From the verse in Shemot 19:18: "Mount Sinai was all in smoke as God had come down upon it in fire." How do we know it was given through water? As it says in Judges 5:4, "The heavens and the clouds dripped water [at Sinai]." How do we know it was given through wilderness? [As it says above,] "And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Wilderness." And why was the Torah given through these three things? Just as [fire, water, and wilderness] are free to all the inhabitants of the world, so too are the words of Torah free to them, as it says in Isaiah 55:1, "Oh, all who are thirsty, come for water... even if you have no money." (Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7)

The Midrash takes three words associated with Sinai – fire (that was blazing on the mountain just before the revelation), water (based on a phrase in the Song of Devorah) and wilderness (as at the beginning of our parsha, and also in Shemot), and it explains that “they are free to all the inhabitants of the world.”

This is not the connection most of us would make. Fire is associated with heat, warmth, energy. Water is associated with quenching thirst and making things grow. Wilderness is a space between starting point and destination, the place where you need signposts and a sense of direction. All three would therefore make good metaphors for the

Torah. It warms. It energises. It satisfies spiritual thirst. It gives direction. Yet that is not the approach taken by the Sages. What mattered to them is that all three elements are free. Because the Torah is for everyone!

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is surprising about the link the Rabbis found between fire, water, the desert and the Torah?
2. In what way is the Torah free for everyone?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Pappos ben Yehuda once saw Rabbi Akiva gathering students and teaching Torah in public. Pappos said to him: Akiva, are you not afraid of the Romans who have forbidden Torah study?

Rabbi Akiva answered him: Let me explain with a story... Imagine a fox walking along a riverbank when he sees fish hurriedly darting about from place to place.

The fox says to them: From what are you fleeing?

They answer: We are trying to avoid the nets that people cast to try and catch us.

The fox asks the fish: Why don't you come up onto dry land, and we can live together just as our ancestors did?

The fish say to him: Are you really the one who they say is the cleverest of all animals? You are not clever at all, you are a fool!

We may see some danger in the water, but this is our natural environment. On dry land, people will still try to catch us, but we won't even have the water we need to live. How much more would we fear if we left the source which gives us life!?

It is the same with us Jews. Now we sit and study Torah, about which it is written: “For that is your life, and the length of your days” (Devarim 30:20). If we fear the Romans now, imagine how much more so if we stop studying Torah, which is the source of our life!

Talmud Bavli, Brachot 61b

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. To what is the Torah compared to in this story? Why?
2. Why do you think learning Torah is important?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The Torah and the desert have several similarities. The desert is a place of silence where you can hear the voice of God. The desert is a place away from the distractions of towns and cities, fields and farms, where you can focus on the presence of God. The desert is a place where you realise how vulnerable you are: you feel like sheep in need of a shepherd. The desert is a place where it is easy to get lost, and you need some kind of Google-Maps-of-the-soul. The desert is a place where you feel your isolation and reach out to a force beyond you. Even the Hebrew name for desert, *midbar*, comes from the same root as “word” (*davar*) and “to speak” (*d-b-r*). Yet these were not the connections the Sages of the Midrash made. Why not?

The Sages understood that something profound was born at Mount Sinai, something which has distinguished Jewish life ever since. It was *the democratisation of knowledge*. Literacy and knowledge of the law was no longer to be confined to a priestly elite. For the first time in history everyone was to have access to

knowledge, education and literacy. “The law that Moses gave us is the possession of the assembly of Jacob” (Devarim 33:4) – the whole assembly, not a privileged group within it.

The symbol of this was the revelation at Mount Sinai, the only time in history when God revealed Himself not just to a Prophet but to an entire people. In the penultimate command that Moses gave to the people, known as *Hakhel*, where at the end of every seven years, during the Festival of Succot, the Torah is read before all the people – men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in the towns.

There is an echo of this in the famous verse from Isaiah 54:13, “And *all* your children shall be learned of the Lord and great shall be the peace of your children.” This was and remains the unique feature of the Torah as the written constitution of the Jewish people as a nation under the sovereignty of God. Everyone is expected not merely to keep the law but to know it. Jews became a nation of constitutional lawyers.

There were two further key moments in the history of this development. The first was when Ezra and Nehemiah gathered the people, after the Babylonian exile, to the Water Gate in Jerusalem, on Rosh Hashanah, and read the Torah to them, placing Levites throughout the crowd to explain to people what was being said and what it meant, a defining moment in Jewish history that took the form not of a battle but of a massive adult education programme (Nehemiah 8). Ezra and Nehemiah realised that the most significant battles in ensuring the Jewish future were cultural, not military. This was one of the most transformative insights in history.

The second was the extraordinary creation, in the first century, of the world's first system of universal compulsory education. Here is how the Talmud describes the process, culminating in the work of Joshua ben Gamla, a High Priest in the last days of the Second Temple:

"Truly the name of that man is to be blessed, namely Joshua ben Gamla, for but for him the Torah would have been forgotten from Israel. For at first if a child had a father, his father taught him, and if he had no father he did not learn at all ... They therefore ordained that teachers should be appointed in each district, and that boys should enter school at the age of sixteen or seventeen. [They did so] but if the teacher punished them they used to rebel and leave the school. Eventually, Joshua ben Gamla came and ordained that teachers of young children should be appointed in each district and each town, and that children should enter school at the age of six or seven." (Baba Batra, 21a)

Universal compulsory education did not exist in England – at that time the world's leading imperial power – until 1870, a

difference of 18 centuries. At roughly the same time as Joshua ben Gamla, in the first century C.E., Josephus could write:

"Should any one of our nation be asked about our laws, they will repeat them as readily as their own name. The result of our thorough education in our laws from the very dawn of intelligence is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls."

We now understand the connection the Sages made between the wilderness and the giving of the Torah: it was open to everyone, and it was free. Neither lack of money nor of aristocratic birth could stop you from learning Torah and acquiring distinction in a community in which scholarship was considered the highest achievement.

As Rambam says, "The crown of Torah is for all Israel. Whoever desires it, let them come and take it."

I believe that this is one of Judaism's most profound ideas: start with education. If you want to create a just and compassionate society, start with education. If you want to create a society of equal dignity, ensure that education is free and equally available to all. That is the message the Sages took from the fact that we read parshat Bamidbar before Shavuot. This is the festival where we celebrate that when God gave our ancestors the Torah, He gave it to all of them equally.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why is free education a critical component in a free and equal society?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

The words of the Torah span a thousand years, from Moses to Malachi, the first and last of the prophets. For another thousand years, until the completion of the Babylonian Talmud, Jews added commentaries to the Book, and for yet another thousand years they wrote commentaries to the commentaries. Never has there been a deeper relationship between a people and a book. The ancient Greeks, puzzled by the phenomenon of an entire people dedicated to learning, called Jews "a nation of philosophers." Certainly we are called on to be a nation of students and teachers. In Judaism we not only learn to live; we live to learn. In study, we make Torah real in the mind so that we can make it actual in the world.

'Ten Paths to God' curriculum, Unit 3 - Study: Listening to God



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why was the Torah given to the people in the wilderness?
2. Why is it important to note that the revelation on Mount Sinai was experienced by the entire people?
3. Why do you think Jewish society instituted universal education so many generations before the rest of the world?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question based on the ideas from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. While one might think that life in the desert is not relevant to us in the 21st century, there are many lessons to be learned from both the structure of life, and the stories that happened to the people during this time. These lessons are timeless and relevant to every generation. They are expressions of Torah values that our lives today should also be based on. The Torah as an educational text connects to the theme of this week's *Covenant & Conversation*, which is the importance of education as a value.

THE CORE IDEA

1. These are the basic elements of life. The Torah is equally elemental to our existence, and without it we would not be able to exist. However, the Rabbis focused instead on the free and totally accessible nature of these elements. Fire, water and the wilderness are accessible to all humans, or they should be. And this is how the Torah should be too – equally accessible to everyone. Not just the rich, or the intelligent, or to those with power and status. But rather everyone should be able to learn and benefit from Torah study.
2. The Torah is free for everyone because it is not reserved just for those that are in power, or those that can afford to go to expensive academies or hire personal teachers, and it is not just for the intelligentsia. Judaism believes that all Jews should have equal access to Torah study, and it was the first civilisation by far to institute universal education.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The Torah is compared here to water, which is the life-giving environment that fish are dependent on for their survival. We often find water compared to the Torah. In Rabbi Akiva's story, the fish need to be in the water in order to live. They will die if they are removed from this environment. The message is that a Jewish people without Torah cannot survive and thrive. It is fundamental.
2. This can be approached on a metaphysical level: learning Torah has a spiritual impact on Jews and on the world, and without Torah study the world could not exist. Or it could be approached on a more rational level: if we are not committed to Torah study, our Jewish identities will weaken and the transmission of our heritage will also be threatened. Jewish survival can only be guaranteed if we educate ourselves and future generations.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. If education is inaccessible to some parts of society, for example where only the wealthy can afford to send their children to school, or when women are excluded from education, then there is inequality. When there are sectors of society who are less educated, they will have less opportunities, less potential for economic development, etc. This is why most societies have universal education, which means the state provides free education for all. Jewish civilisation instituted universal education for all children in the first century, eighteen centuries before England (the first to do so in the West), who did this in 1870.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. There have been many answers given to this question, including to convey the message that a world without Torah is a *midbar*, a barren wasteland; the desert is a place that is empty and to accept the Torah we must deny our own needs and agenda and embrace humility; the Israelites were in the right state of mind to accept God's word because they were dependent on His protection and guidance there. But the Talmud quoted here focuses instead on the free and freely accessible nature of the wilderness. So too must the Torah be freely accessible to all Jews.
2. Other religions have been revealed through individual prophets. Adherents of these religions must have faith in these prophets to follow the word of God as articulated through this individual. However, Judaism believes that God revealed His word to the entire people. This democratises knowledge and power. Ultimately it paves the way for the creation of a society based on the equality of all people.
3. Equality of all people was a central core-value of Judaism from the beginning. All people are created equally, in the image of God. This principle is clear from Judaism's focus on universal education. Other societies took generations to evolve to the point where universal education was seen as a basic human right and priority of the state. Judaism was founded on this value.