

Make Yourself Like a Wilderness
Torah Study for *Parashat Bemidbar*
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Source Sheet by Nicole Auerbach

Numbers 1:1

(1) On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, saying:

Nedarim 55a

Rav Yosef said to Rava: **Do not sit on your feet until you tell me the explanation of this matter: What is the meaning of that which is written: “And from the wilderness Mattana and from Mattana Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel Bamot”** (Numbers 21:18–19)? Rava said to him that it means: **Once a person renders himself like a wilderness, deserted before all, the Torah is given to him as a gift [mattana], as it is stated: “And from the wilderness Mattana.” And once it is given to him as a gift, God bequeaths [nahalo] it to him, as it is stated: “And from Mattana Nahaliel.” And once God bequeaths it to him, he rises to greatness, as it is stated: And from Nahaliel, Bamot, which are elevated places. And if he elevates himself and is arrogant about his Torah, the Holy One, Blessed be He, degrades him, as it is stated: “And from Bamot the valley”** (Numbers 21:20). **And not only** is he degraded, **but one lowers him into the ground, as it is stated: “And looking over [nishkafa] the face of the wasteland”**

במדבר א'א'

(א) וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי בְּאֶהָל מוֹעֵד בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁנִי בַשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִית לְצֵאתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר:

נדרים נ"ה א

אָמַר לִיָּה לֹא תִיַתִּיב אַכְרַעָךְ עַד דְּאָמַרְתָּ לִי פִירוּשָׁא דְהַדִּין מִיִּלְתָּא מַאי דְכַתִּיב וּמִמִּדְבַר מַתָּנָה וּמִמַּתָּנָה נַחְלִיאֵל וּמִנַּחְלִיאֵל בְּמֹת אָמַר לִיָּה כִּיּוֹן שְׁעוּשָׁה אָדָם אֶת עֲצָמוֹ כְּמִדְבַר שְׁהוּא מוֹפְקָר לְכָל תּוֹרָה נִיתָנָה לוֹ בְּמַתָּנָה שְׁנֵאָמַר וּמִמִּדְבַר מַתָּנָה וְכִיּוֹן שְׁנִיתָנָה לוֹ בְּמַתָּנָה נַחְלוֹ אֵל שְׁנֵאָמַר וּמִמַּתָּנָה נַחְלִיאֵל וְכִיּוֹן שְׁנַחְלוֹ אֵל עוֹלָה לְגְדוּלָה שְׁנֵאָמַר וּמִנַּחְלִיאֵל בְּמֹת וְאִם הִגְבִּיָּה עֲצָמוֹ הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְשַׁפִּילוֹ שְׁנֵאָמַר וּמִבְּמֹת הִגְיָא וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָּא שְׁשׁוֹקְעִין אוֹתוֹ בְּקַרְקַע שְׁנֵאָמַר וְנִשְׁקָפָה עַל פְּנֵי הַיְשִׁימוֹן וְאִם חוּזַר בּוֹ הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מִגְבִּיָּהוּ

(Numbers 21:20), like a threshold [*iskopa*] that is sunken into the ground. **And if he reverses his** arrogance and becomes humble, **the Holy One, Blessed be He, elevates him,**

Rashi on Nedarim 55a

כמדבר שהוא מופקר לכל - מלמד תורה
בחנם לכל:

"Like a wilderness, deserted before all" --
This teaches that Torah is freely available to all.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

Only when you are "like a wilderness" are you ready to have God's presence rest upon you and merit the light of Torah. "Like a wilderness" means that you have not yet been touched by human hands, that you have never been cultivated or planted, that you must rely on your own strength, as in the teaching, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" (*Mishnah Avot* 1:14)

(quoted in *Itturei Torah* [Hebrew], vol. 5, by Aharon Yaakov Greenberg [Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1996], p. 9). Source: Jeffrey W. Goldwasser, "Becoming a Wilderness"

Rabbi D. Shoham, in *Itturei Torah*

Another reason that the Torah portion of Bamidbar is always read right before Shavuot, the time of the giving of Torah: to teach you that if you want to merit receiving Torah, you must make yourself like the wilderness, to have a great measure of humility and to feel no reason for pride, to know that you are bare and lacking all, like the wilderness.

Source: <https://www.jewishrecon.org/sites/default/files/resources/document/bamidbar-wilderness.pdf>

Numbers Rabbah 1:7

Adonai spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai...(Numbers 1:1): Why [was Torah given] in the wilderness of Sinai? From this the Sages taught: Torah was given to the accompaniment of three things: fire, water, and wilderness...Why was the giving of the

Torah marked by these three features? To indicate that as these are free to all in the world, so also are the words of the Torah free...Anyone who does not make herself as open [hefker/ownerless] as the wilderness, is not able to acquire wisdom and Torah.

Eruvin 54a

Rav Yosef said to [Rava]: **Do not sit on your knees until you have explained these verses to me: What is the meaning of that which is written: “And from the wilderness to Mattanah; and from Mattanah to Nahaliel; and from Nahaliel to Bamoth; and from Bamoth to the valley in the field of Moab, to the top of Pisgah, which looks out toward the desert” (Numbers 21:19–20)? Rava said to him: If a person makes himself humble like this wilderness, which is open to all and upon which everyone treads, the Torah will be given to him as a gift [*mattana*]. And once it is given to him as a gift, he inherits it [*nehalo*] and God [*El*] makes it His inheritance, as it is stated: “And from Mattanah to Nahaliel.” And once God has made it His inheritance, he rises to greatness, as it is stated: “And from Nahaliel to Bamoth,” which means heights. And if he becomes haughty, the Holy One, Blessed be He, lowers him, as it is stated: “And from Bamoth to the valley.” And if he repents, the Holy One, Blessed be He, raises him back up, as it is stated: “Every valley shall be exalted” (Isaiah 40:4). . . .**

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba said that Rabbi Yoḥanan said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “He who guards the fig tree shall eat its fruit” (Proverbs 27:18)? Why were matters of Torah compared to a fig tree? Just as this fig tree,

Eruvin 54b

whenever a person searches it for figs to eat, he finds figs in it, as the figs on a tree do not ripen all at once, so that one can

עירובין נ"ד א

הני קראי מאי דכתיב ומדבר מתנה וממתנה נחליאל ומנחליאל במות ומבמות הגיא א"ל אם אדם משים עצמו כמדבר זה שהכל דשין בו תורה ניתנה לו במתנה וכיון שניתנה לו במתנה נחלו אל שנאמר וממתנה נחליאל וכיון שנחלו אל עולה לגדולה שנאמר ומנחליאל במות ואם מגיס לבו הקדוש ברוך הוא משפילו שנאמר ומבמות הגיא ואם חוזר בו הקב"ה מגביהו שנאמר (ישעיהו מ, ד) . . .

א"ר חייא בר אבא א"ר יוחנן מאי דכתיב (משלי כז, יח) נוצר תאנה יאכל פריה למה נמשלו דברי תורה כתאנה מה תאנה זו

עירובין נ"ד ב

כל זמן שאדם ממשמש בה מוצא בה תאנים אף דברי תורה כל זמן שאדם

always find a recently ripened fig, **so** too,
with **matters of Torah. Whenever a person
meditates upon them, he finds in them
new meaning.**

Eitan Fishbane, "Becoming Like the Wilderness"

R. Bahya asks, restating an earlier midrashic teaching (Tanhuma, 6; Bemidbar Rabbah, 1:7): why does the Torah emphasize God's speech to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai (בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי)? It was to teach that "a person does not attain the Torah until they have made themselves empty and abandoned like the wilderness" (אין אדם קונה התורה עד שיעשה עצמו הפקר) (כמדבר) [commentary to Num. 1:1]. To receive the revelation of Torah—or perhaps a bit less grandly, to let Torah take root in one's heart—a person must first make themselves into a midbar, an inner empty wilderness that is cleared of all the weeds and brush that obstruct true perception and feeling. A wilderness that returns to the first purity of nature.

Just as divine revelation and the Torah arise from the physical space of wilderness, of midbar—at the burning bush and then at Mount Sinai—a heart infused with divine Torah arises through a person's mindful cultivation of their own interior wilderness. One should seek to attain the level of hefker—of feeling unbound by the pride and egoism of ownership, of being unattached to materialism. In hefker consciousness, we train our spiritual sight to see the Divine Presence that dwells beneath the surface, beneath the many golden calves of our obsessions, possessions, and wayward priorities. This is a radical reinvention of the concept of hefker, a neutral halakhic category of abandonment and ownerlessness (e.g. BT Eruvin, 45b).

In this transformed reading, 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 kemidbar 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 the early Hasidic rebbe R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk (Pri Ha'aretz, Letter 27) taught, true wisdom and humanity rises from the cultivation of deep humility:

The Torah only stands firm in one who makes himself like a midbar

hefker before those who are poor of mind and rich of mind, and he doesn't think of himself as better than his friend. On the contrary, he should be completely nullified before his friend, and it is through this that they become united and bound up one with the other.

True spiritual refinement, the deepest attainment of hefker kemidbar, must not remain at the level of individualistic mystical growth and the personal quest for divine revelation. To realize the ideals of piety, to ensconce the living Torah in the wholeness of oneself, a person must aspire toward a genuine humility, to avoid the harmful path of judgmentalism and arrogance. It is in the bond of loving friendship and fellowship, in kindness and humility toward the other, that the Torah—and God—are most radiantly revealed.

