

B' midbar 5770 - The Wildeness of Torah
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

So, where were you when you found out about the water situation a couple of weeks ago?

We were walking home from a lovely Shabbat hike behind the Bowman school about a mile from here. As we came under Route 2, I saw Jane Aronson waving at me.

She came running up to us: “Don’t drink the water! Don’t drink the water!”

We were carrying some water bottles, but I could not understand why she did not want us to drink from them any longer.

She explained that the main water line that supplies Boston and dozens of surrounding towns including ours were now on “backup water” that might not be clean enough to drink. We could drink only bottled water.

This was ironic because I had been to Costco earlier that week and bought lots of bottled water. I also came home with far too many of dozens of products from 50 bags of microwave popcorn to enough ketchup for several summers of BBQ’s – sometimes I just can’t seem to help myself over there!

My wife Sharon had correctly told me that we didn’t need all this water and we should use regular water, which is much better for the environment. She was right, but I tried to defend my purchase: “Well, it’s always good to have some water; you never know when we might need it!”

In any case, we had some water and it was a good thing. I heard that there was such a run on water in Lexington that it was gone within a couple of hours – a purchase we could not make as it was still Shabbat...

While we all know that this temporary inconvenience turned out OK, for a time many of us were sent into a bit of a panic. Should we boil water? How do we clean out the ice machine? What should our kids drink in shul

and school? How much water does an 8-year old need for a day of school? Should we flush the toilets? Were the dishes clean if they were washed with this unchecked water?

It was a bit unsettling and made us all remember how blessed we are to have clean, plentiful running water in a seemingly endless supply (at least most of the time). How different is our world from the world of just a few generations ago. This was a taste of being in the wilderness, without all of our human-made innovations.

I have not had many experiences of being in the wilderness and away from clean water. I remember another water situation when I was a child: the great blackout of 1977 in New York City. When the power went out, we could not take the elevator up to our apartment, and the water stopped. My sister had just been brought home from the hospital to the apartment, and I will never forget schlepping buckets of water up those flights so we could give her a bath or flush the toilets.

Of course, the other times I have not had water have been on hikes or camping trips. The last time I was really camping outdoors was before we had kids. Sharon and I joined a group of friends in Wisconsin for a Shabbat in nature. While this is not my forte, we pitched our tent and had a nice time on Friday; I liked the pre-Shabbat rock climbing.

During the night, however, it rained hard, and the tent starting leaking with a couple of inches of water running through it. Between that and a fever I developed, I decided I had enough of the wilderness and spent the rest of the Shabbat in my car – warm and dry, waiting for Shabbat to end so we could drive home.

Being in the wilderness can be difficult.

Our parashah this Shabbat begins in the wilderness. The fourth book of the Torah, Numbers (or in Hebrew, Bimidbar) translates to “in the desert” or “in the wilderness.” As Emily pointed out in her insightful dvar Torah, the Israelites must have felt lost in the wilderness in a new place and in their new reality.

But while the wilderness is a place of confusion, it is also a place of great significance for our people. It is where we received the Ten

Commandments – God’s revelation at Mount Sinai – and it is where the Children of Israel, a disparate group of ex-slaves, became more united as a people.

Today, we stand at a fascinating moment on the Jewish calendar. We are starting this new book of the Torah, and it is almost Shavuot – the festival where we reenact Sinai, remember and rejoice in God’s revelation.

This is the usual pattern; rarely does Shavuot not come immediately after this week’s Torah reading. Our tradition picks up on this confluence and emphasizes that the Torah was given in the wilderness.

In fact, our sages taught that God’s revelation, the core of our Torah, had to be revealed in the wilderness. But why? It does not make sense. Where would we expect the Torah to be revealed to us?

Yes, Jerusalem.

As we sang when we removed the sefer Torah – “*Ki mitziyon teitzei Torah* – because out of Zion, out of Jerusalem the Torah comes forth. It should have been Jerusalem, the holiest place for our people.

But, that’s exactly it – the vision of the Torah was to be broader and more universal. The Torah was given to the Jewish people to share with humanity. That’s why it was revealed in the *midbar*, in the wilderness, not in an inhabited place. Like the wilderness itself, it is for everyone to enjoy.

It also serves as an important corrective. While Jerusalem is our spiritual home, receiving the Torah in the desert reminds us that there are other places of holiness in the world where God’s presence can also be found.

The *midbar* is also a place of simplicity. It is unadorned, there are no buildings or ruins there, no things to clutter your mind or take you away from Eternal Truth.

Scholars tell us that we are not sure where Sinai is, and perhaps that is purposeful, lest we come to worship that place too much. Some believe it is *Jabl Mussa*, which translates from the Arabic as Moses’ mountain. It is a mountain in the Sinai Desert – as the rabbis tell us, not the tallest mountain.

I visited there 15 years ago with a roommate. He and I hiked up to the top at night with a Muslim guide named Mohammed. Using our flashlights we made it to the top, and in the night sky in early autumn it seemed as if we were standing right in the heavens. The sky opened before us and shooting stars blazed overhead. I took out a small Tanakh and read Exodus 19 and 20 – the narrative of Sinai from the Torah. Since there were no buildings, there was little to see in the desert at night; there was very little there. That was one of the moments in my life when I felt God’s presence most powerfully.

While my roommate, Mohammed and I shared this experience, I decided to go a bit away from them and recite the Ma’ariv service at the top of the mountain. There was something magical about that solitude, like the 40 days that Moses enjoyed with the divine presence at the top of the mountain 3500 years ago. I was freed from all worldly goods, possessions and any distractions. There was pure silence.

While the Torah text talks about thunder at Sinai, the rabbis teach that after that, the world was still. As the midrash states: “When the Holy One gave the Torah, no bird sang...no creature spoke, the world was still and quiet.”

The Torah was revealed in that setting and that silence.

We all know the power of this truth, but we forget it. To really learn something, we need to step outside our routine, we need to go out, even into the wilderness. We need to leave our stuff – literal and metaphoric – behind and enter into a different space.

The desert, the wilderness, does just that. We can step outside ourselves and encounter the deepest truths. That is where we can become one with ourselves, with who we really are and what we are feeling and encounter the *Kadosh Barukh Hu* – the Sacred One who stands behind and within the Universe.

That is the power of a journey into the unknown. This year, I had the pleasure of participating in our Temple Emunah Retreat for 4th through 7th graders at Camp Ramah. While we did all the same things we would have done here at Temple Emunah for Shabbat – we davened/prayed, studied, played sports, ate, sang and had fun – there was something very different

about doing it in the middle of the woods. *Havdalah* under the stars at the end of Shabbat simply felt different.

The same thing occurs on our Temple Emunah Israel trips – experiencing Shabbat in the Negev is a new experience and can be quite powerful. Being outside, in nature, in the wilderness is transformative for us.

So on this Shabbat before Shavuot, I encourage us all to find our own Sinai – a place where you fully bring God and Torah into your life. Perhaps it is place in your home to daven – a place in your backyard without distraction where you can enjoy nature and commune with the Creator. Perhaps you'll join me next June in Israel.

You may want to try this coming Tuesday night during all or part of our all-night learning or between 4:45 and 6:30 AM on Wednesday morning when we hold our annual sunrise Shaharit service and reenact Sinai right behind the synagogue.

Take a Jewish book or text with you into the woods and encounter the depth of our tradition. Find a place of Torah in your life.

While the *midbar*, the wilderness, does not have running water, nor is it totally sheltered, it is the place where God's Revelation was received, and it remains the place where we can leave behind elements of our lives to truly feel God's presence.

Shabbat Shalom.