

# Echoes of Eden

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## Parashat B'midbar 5774

### An (Un)Necessary Book

As we begin reading the fourth book of the Torah, we cannot help feeling somewhat unsettled. Each of the chapters of B'midbar (Numbers) follows in logical sequence; no particular word or sentence causes us unease. Rather, the entire book, as a whole, gives us pause: At face value, this book should never have been written. The events it records should never have happened. The book of B'midbar begins as the Israelites leave Mount Sinai, in possession of the precious Torah. Their next stop should have been the Promised Land, their stated destination. Their original itinerary did not include forty years in the desert.

There are two ways of looking at this delay, which is distilled in the name of the book – B'midbar, “in the desert” - reflecting the setting in which the events unfold: Perhaps the people were simply not ready to enter, fight for, capture and rule their own country. They needed to “kill time” and to come of age, to mature as a nation and to

muster the skills and strength they would need before facing the tasks ahead. The desert would be a holding pattern, an incubator. Alternatively, we may find that the desert experience had intrinsic value as an educational experience. To rephrase the question, were the years in the desert a coincidence of geography, or was there a deeper significance to the place in which the Jewish nation came of age? Surely, the Israelites needed a place to collect themselves and to prepare for the conquest of the Land of Israel, and there were few other locales available in which to do so. Nonetheless, there seems to be a greater design behind God's decision to delay their entry into the Land and to extend their sojourn in

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the desert. Is there something special about the desert that is particularly germane to the process they would undergo?

In the desert, man is exposed, without shelter. Hot days, cold nights, open spaces and no reliable sources of food or water create a situation of unparalleled vulnerability. In this atmosphere, the Israelites' reliance on God was complete, and the certainty that all sustenance comes from God was ingrained upon their collective psyche for all time. This is the quintessential lesson to be learned from the desert, a lesson that could not have been learned as effectively anywhere else.

In this sense, the desert experience is reminiscent of the Eden experience, in which man did no work, yet all his needs were provided for. While we might not think of the desert as a utopian existence, on a functional level there was something very Eden-like in the Israelites' forty-year sojourn in the desert.

There is another aspect of the desert experience: isolation. Normally, societies are influenced by the ideas, mores and behaviors of other societies - either consciously or subconsciously. Even societies that erect walls - figurative or literal - to resist this inevitable crosspollination are usually only partially successful. The newly-freed slaves, at the dawn of their national history and in the early stages of cementing their national identity, may not have been mature enough to withstand negative influences from the pagan societies they would encounter in the Land of Canaan. In this light, it becomes clear why God chose the isolation of the desert for the period of incubation.

This isolation may also be seen as proactive, more positive than a mere avoidance tactic. When Avraham set off to fulfill God's command and offer up his son Yitzchak, two young men, members of Avraham's household, accompanied them. They reached the appointed place together, but then Avraham divided the group in two: He and Yitzchak would ascend the mountain and serve God, and then rejoin the others. Rabbi Soloveitchik explained this verse as a paradigm of spiritual growth:

There comes a time in the life of every seeker of spirituality when he must be alone. However, the verse does not end there: Avraham sees the separation as

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one stage, and the rejoining of society that follows as no less important a stage in the process. The Jewish people have a great destiny to fulfill. In order to become a "light unto the nations," we must first be "ignited." This was the essence of the Revelation at Sinai. To cultivate that light and allow it to grow, we needed time; this was the time spent in the

desert. Perhaps in a perfect world the former slaves could have entered the Holy Land immediately and had a positive impact on the nations around them; God knew that in reality, they simply were not ready. Just as Avraham needed time alone with Yitzchak, so, too, the Jewish People needed time alone to achieve a full understanding of their relationship with God and His commandments. And just as Avraham descended from that isolated experience of enlightenment and revelation and influenced the entire world, so, too, will his descendants.

For a more in depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/05/audio-and-essays-parashat-bmidbar.html>