



Oases in the Wilderness:
Torah Reflections on *Parashat Bemidbar*
Numbers 1:1 – 4:20
2 Sivan, 5767 May 19, 2007

This week's Torah portion takes us into the fourth book of the Torah, Numbers. The English title refers to a census of the Israelites found in the first chapter of the book. The Hebrew title is *Bemidbar*, literally, In the Wilderness.

A wilderness or a desert can have great beauty in terms of land formations. Through its very starkness it offers a pristine purity. More often, however, we think of the wilderness as a place of barrenness and sterility. In a recent Haftarah reading, the prophet Jeremiah contrasted a bush found in the "scorched places of the wilderness" with a "tree planted by waters" which sends its roots to a stream (Jeremiah 17:6, 8).

The whole book of Numbers is set *bemidbar*, in the wilderness. Throughout these chapters there is little relief from the desert challenges. On several occasions, the Israelites voice their complaints to Moses.

For many people in our more mature years, or for those of us who are experiencing physical, emotional, or spiritual difficulties, like in the book of Numbers, life often seems barren and fruitless. Life is grainy and gritty. We thirst for some kind of relief. We view our present as unpleasant, and may see our future as hopeless. We lack the inner resources to dream.

While in the book of Numbers, the Israelites will reside in the desert for forty years, these are not times bereft of relief. Embedded in this book of the desert there are, to continue the metaphor, occasions which are oases of hope and fruitful blessing.

Chapter six features the familiar words of the Priestly Blessing: "Thus shall you bless the people of Israel, say to them, 'The ETERNAL bless you and keep you; The ETERNAL deal kindly and graciously with you; The ETERNAL bestow favor upon you and grant you peace.'"

Chapter twelve contains the now familiar words often incorporated into Healing Services, when Moses implores God to bring wellness to his older sister Miriam, "*Ei Na, R'fa Na La* – please God, please heal her."¹

Chapters twenty-two to twenty-four relate the wonderful narrative of Balaam the foreign Prophet/Seer, and his blessing Israel with the words, "*Ma tovu oha-leḥa Ya-akov, mish-keno-teḥa Yisrael* – How lovely are your tents, Jacob, your sanctuaries, Israel." These words have been incorporated into the daily, Shabbat, and holy day liturgies, as the opening words of many a religious service.

¹ See Bonita E Taylor, "The Muse of Chanting" chapter in Jack H Bloom, Editor, *Jewish Relational Care A-Z*, Binghamton, NY: Haworth, 2006, pp. 111-115

Without minimizing or discounting the years of hardship, the desert experience was not a period without times of goodness. May we, even in our difficult days discover oases of hope.

Sacred source of blessings, give us strength when we trudge through the wilderness of despair and despondency. Inspire us, as we search deep within our hearts, to find memories when we have been a blessing for others, and when others have been a blessing for us, when we have experienced oases of hope. Make your presence felt in our lives for you are the Fountain of Living Waters. Amen.

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