



Fire, Water, Wilderness:

Living With the Torah

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Parashat Bemidbar 5786

“God spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after their departure from the land of Egypt, saying” (Numbers 1:1). This verse opens the Book of Bemidbar and initiates God’s speech to the Israelites during these years of routine wandering. The *midrash* focuses on this verse, refusing to read it as a simple description of time and place:

במדבר רבה א:ז

בשלושה דברים נתנה התורה, באש, ובמים, ובמדבר.
באש מנין (שמות יט, יח): וְהָרַסְתִּי עֵשֶׂן כָּלֹאֵ וְגו'.
ובמים מנין, שנאמר (שופטים ה, ד): גַּם שְׁמַיִם נִטְפוּ גַם עֲבִים נִטְפוּ מֵיָם.
ובמדבר מנין וידבר ה' אל משה במדבר סיני,
ולמה נתנה בשלושה דברים הללו, אלא מה אלו חנם לכל באי העולם כך דברי תורה חנם הם, שנאמר
(ישעיה נה, א): הוֹי כָּל צִמָּא לְכוּ לַמַּיִם

Bemidbar Rabbah 1:7

The Torah was given through three things: fire, water, and wilderness.



How do we know it was given through fire? From the verse: “Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke” (Exodus 19:18).

How do we know it was given through water? As it is said: “The heavens dripped, the clouds dripped water” (Judges 5:4).

And how do we know it was given through the wilderness? From the verse: “God spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai.”

And why was it given through these three things? Just as these are free to all inhabitants of the world, so too the words of Torah are free, as it is said: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters” (Isaiah 55:1).

In a plain reading of the text, the description of the location that opens the Book of Numbers does not seem to raise any questions. However, the *midrash* chooses to read the words “in the wilderness of Sinai” as a description of one of the mediums—the pathways—through which the Torah is given: fire, water, and wilderness. In doing so, the *midrash* reflects several of the fundamental values that the Torah teaches, upholds, and outlines—values reflected in the manner in which the Torah was given, which are themselves part of the values of a life of Torah.

According to this *midrash*, the Torah was given through three different mediums. The first medium is fire. The verse cited to prove this points us directly to the heart of the experience at Mount Sinai: “Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for God had come down upon it in fire” (Exodus 19:18). It takes us back to the moment of revelation and of God drawing near to humanity at the giving of the Torah.

The fire that accompanies the moment of Sinai symbolizes the power of a potent, singular revelation and its capacity to effect change within the human soul. Fire illuminates and warms, but it also consumes. Thus, the divine approach is described not as a quiet closeness,



but as a staggering intensity that evokes awe, generates heat, and sets processes in motion. This moment was also volatile, dangerous, and absolutely transformative.

The second medium is water. Leaving the original Sinai moment, the *midrash* quotes from the opening lines of the Song of Deborah, which offers thanks and praise following a victory in battle. As traditionally understood, the song begins by describing the state of the world at the moment of the Sinai revelation: “Then Deborah sang... God, when You came forth from Seir, when You strode from the field of Edom, the earth quaked, the heavens dripped, the clouds dripped water. The mountains quaked before God, even Sinai, before God, the Lord of Israel” (Judges 5:1,4-5).

The Song of Deborah presents the giving of the Torah not merely as a historical event, but as a living memory acting within history, one that can be recalled by a prophet in celebration of victory. Water, in this context, expresses continuity, flow, and blessing. If fire represents the powerful moment of revelation, water represents the way that revelation continues to permeate reality over time and make it fruitful. The Torah continues to shape life beyond the routine of the wilderness, this time within the routine of life in the Land.

The third medium is the wilderness. What does it mean that the Torah was given through the wilderness? The wilderness symbolizes the dryness of existence, the grayness of the everyday. The wilderness is also a symbol of journey—an in-between space—between Egypt and Canaan, between slavery and sovereignty. The Torah is given not only through dramatic means like fire, nor only through flowing and quenching means like water, but also through the mundane, the ordinary, the path itself.

We might reflect on the *midrash*’s suggestion that the Torah was given through such varied—even, in the case of water and fire: contradictory—means. The proposal that the



Torah is given in three different and opposing ways makes a profound statement: it reflects that the Torah is diverse and multi-layered, possessing many facets and voices. This is not the amplification of a single voice, but an embrace of the Torah's multivocality, even voices that are in tension with each other or threaten to counteract each other, like how water extinguishes fire. It seems it is given in such diverse forms because it addresses diverse people. Beyond this multivocality, a love for all creatures is reflected in these varied paths to receiving the Torah. The multivalent symbolism of the Torah represents that each individual is granted their own unique mode of reception, tailored to them, so that they might be able to truly receive the Torah.

The *midrash* does not stop at just describing these three mediums; it also clarifies their deeper significance: "And why was it given through these three things? Just as these are free to all inhabitants of the world, so too the words of Torah are free." It is important to the *midrash* to emphasize that the elements through which the Torah is given are found freely and without limit in the world—they are free of charge. The *midrash* suggests that the Torah was given through fire, water, and wilderness because it, too, is free, laid out for anyone who seeks, requests, or desires it. It is not reserved for priests or rabbis, nor is it held solely in the hands of Moshe; it belongs to every person as they are. The verse cited as proof describes a thirsty person, as if to say that the Torah quenches, calms, and enlivens: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters" (Isaiah 55:1).

The prophet suggests that the most precious thing—the Torah—is precisely that which cannot be bought. It requires not wealth, ancestry, or knowledge—only thirst. This reinforces the *midrash's* perspective: access to Torah is not achieved through status or property or merit, but through an internal readiness: the willingness to quench one's thirst with Torah.



Parashat Bemidbar opens the second year of the Israelites' stay in the wilderness, beginning the story of their routine life once they are no longer a nation of slaves. This opening, through the lens of the *midrash*, teaches us that routine must be anchored in the formative events of the Exodus and the Sinai revelation, which provide the foundation and the vision for life—both in the wilderness and beyond. The Torah is a continuous foundation rather than a one-time event, and it must be internalized into our daily consciousness. Furthermore, it seems the *midrash* teaches that the Torah is given with power (fire), continues with gentleness (water), and exists within—and perhaps specifically through—the everyday (wilderness). It is given for free, not because it is easy, but because it seeks to be accessible to every person in every situation.

The challenge that remains before us is: how do we become “thirsty”? How do we maintain a closeness to the Divine who gives us the Torah in fire, water, and wilderness—so that the Torah is not merely a memory of revelation, but a living presence shaping our lives here and now?

