

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...)

plagues, a census here and there, instructions for marching, a list of campsites and dedication offerings, an indecipherable poem and a copper snake are interspersed with miscellaneous laws relating to the kohanim and levi'im, land, the menorah, pots, pans and a very strange purification process involving a cow. This is to say nothing of a comedy saga with an almost Shakespearean flavour in which the narrative jumps away from B'nei Yisrael uniquely in the whole Torah and follows a wizard called Bilam for one enormous paragraph.

As I try to wrap my head around this jumble every year, I find myself coming back to the name of the book, which means something like "in the wilderness". Thirty-eight years of uninterrupted quiet certainly remind me of moments of complete peace camping in the Negev desert, feeling my smallness against the expanse around me. The chaos of the narrative also feels wilderness-like; the book is bound to feel jolting when the months and years of quiet waiting, the ropes that bind each event smoothly to the next, cannot be captured by words. Even the appearance of Bilam might make sense if we imagine our narrator, sitting as ever in the midst of Am Yisrael, gazing at the horizon and seeing on a distant mountain top two strange human figures and a donkey.

Bamidbar Rabba, the great aggadic midrash on our new book, comments on the opening words, "And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai".

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי - אֲלֵא כָּל מִי שְׂאִינוֹ עוֹשֶׂה עֲצֻמוֹ כְּמִדְבַר, הַפְּקֵר, אִינוֹ יְכוּל לְקַנּוֹת אֶת הַחֲכָמָה וְהַתּוֹרָה, לְכַךְ נֶאֱמַר: בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי.

Anyone who doesn't make themselves ownerless like the wilderness is unable to acquire the wisdom and the Torah. Therefore it is said "In the wilderness of Sinai".

After four hundred years of slavery, Bnei Yisrael needed time and space to become a nation of Torah, of halakhah and of social responsibility. And every year as we progress through the eerie quiet, the echoing paragraphs and the dream sequences of Sefer Bamidbar we are given an opportunity to think about who we want to be when we emerge from our cocoons. How much more so this year.

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## Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center Conservative Yeshiva

# TORAH SPARKS

## Parshat Bamidbar

May 23, 2020 | 29 Iyar 5780

Annual | (Numbers 1:1-4:20): Etz Hayim p. 769

Triennial I | (Numbers 1:1-1:54): Etz Hayim p. 769

Haftarah **Shabbat Machar Chodesh I Samuel 20:18 - 20:42**: Etz Hayim p. 1216

### *What is Bamidbar Gabriel Gendler*

*Conservative Yeshiva, 2018-20*

What happens in the fourth book of the Torah? Even when I was young I could tell you that Bereishit tells the story of the patriarchs and their families, starting from the creation of the world and ending in Egypt. At the same time I thought that Shmot was about the Exodus and the revelation at Mount Sinai, and it wasn't long before I worked out that there was a second half describing the creation of the mishkan. As a teenager I picked up two more pieces of folk knowledge: Devarim is a long speech by Moshe in which a great deal of the Torah gets repeated, and Vayikra is a book of law focused on the priesthood and sanctity.

I still don't know what Bamidbar is about. Its narrative unfolds over thirty-nine years, but all but the first and last of them come and go unremembered. What we do hear about fits no pattern: we don't experience a rhythm like in Vayikra, or a rhetorical structure like in Devarim, or narrative arcs like in Bereishit and Shemot. The incidents of the spies, Korach and the rock, various wars and

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## D'var Haftarah: God's Redemptive Healing

*Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, From the Archives*

Jonathan's friendship with David was legendary. He was willing to remain by the side of his friend through triumph and tragedy. He stood up for David when King Saul, his father, set himself up against him. He was even willing to relinquish his future as king because he thought his friend, David, would make a more effective king.

The sages characterized the relationship between Jonathan and David in the following Mishnah: "Whenever love depends on some selfish end, when the end passes away, the love passes away; but if it does not depend on some selfish end, it will never pass away. Which love depended on a selfish end? This was the love of Amnon and Tamar. And which did not depend on a selfish end? This was the love of David and Jonathan. (Avot 5:16)

Amnon's love for Tamar was founded on his own selfish obsession for his sister. (see 2 Samuel 13) When his perversion was satisfied, he hated her. Jonathan, however, knew that David stood between him and the throne. Still, he genuinely loved David. Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemach Duran (Spain, North Africa 14th-15th century) delineated the significance of this mishnah: "Anyone who establishes a friendship for access to power, money, or sexual relations; when these ends are not attainable, the friendship ceases...love that is not dependent on selfish ends is true love of the other person since there is no intended end." (Magen Avot – abridged and adapted translation) This Mishnah makes it clear that Amnon's love for Tamar was wrong because it manifested itself by treating a person as if she was an object rather than a person while Jonathan's love for David, was based on treating the other as a person rather than as a thing.

Of course, the two relationships found in this Mishnah represent ideal typologies, one bad and the other good. Real relationships fall somewhere in between these two diametrically opposite models. (see Rabbi Chaim Hirshensohn, *Eleh Divrei Habrit*, part 3, p. 93) People both love and "use" the people in their lives, but it is important to be aware of the possibility of how depraved or exalted the relationships between two people can be in order to raise up the relationships in life to the highest degree that is humanly possible.

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## "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child"

*Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

Text: Bamidbar 3:1-4

*And these are the offspring of Aaron and Moshe on the day the LORD spoke with Moshe on Mount Sinai. (2) And these are the name of the sons of Aaron: The firstborn Nadav, and Avihu, Elazar and Itamar (3)... whom he installed to serve as priests. (4) And Nadav and Avihu died before the LORD...*

Commentary: Rashi Bamidbar 3:1

*And these are the offspring of Aaron and Moshe – But it mentions only the sons of Aaron! But they also are called the children of Moses since he taught them Torah. This tells us that whoever teaches the Torah to the child of his/her fellow human, Scripture regards it as though he had begotten him (Sanhedrin 19b).*

*On the day the LORD spoke with Moshe on Mount Sinai did these children (of Aaron) become his (Moshe's) children, because then for the first time he taught them what he heard from the Almighty.*

- What question does Rashi attempt to answer in this commentary?
- How does the end of the verse ('the day the LORD spoke with Moshe at Mount Sinai) connect, according to Rashi, to the opening about the offspring of Aaron and Moshe?
- Why do you think that a person who teaches a child Torah is considered as a parent? What does that tell teachers about their relationship with their students? Is an age difference important for this relationship? Is the relationship between the teacher and the student's parent of any significance?
- Who have been the people in your "village" that were your spiritual parents?

Commentary: Shadal (Luzzato) Bamidbar 3:1

*...And it says "these are the offspring of Aaron and Moshe" but did not mention the offspring of Moshe, to announce that Moshe did have offspring, but the LORD did not want to sanctify them to be Kohanim and did not give them any great position, and to say that Moshe was not asking for any greatness for himself (and his offspring)*

- Shadal shares Rashi's question, but not the direction of his answer. How does he explain the omission?
- This comment touches on the difference between the positions of Moshe and Aaron. Try to define the difference in their nature that leads to one being hereditary the other not. In your opinion, which type of position has a more lasting impact? Why?