



**Beshalach:**  
**The Significance of the *Midbar* Experience**  
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This week's *parasha* begins with the dramatic exodus of *Bnei Yisrael* from Egypt into the *midbar*. The word *midbar*, translated as either desert or wilderness, is used in this week's *parasha* to describe the geographical region of the Egyptian Sinai desert, where the Jewish people wandered for forty years before arriving in the land of Israel. *Bnei Yisrael* receive the Torah in the *midbar*, and the *midbar* is the setting for the duration of the Torah narrative.

The Torah describes the *midbar* as a harsh and hostile environment, not suitable for human life. The Torah tells us that Pharaoh did not believe that the Jewish people could survive in the *midbar*: "And Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel: They are entangled in the land, the *midbar* hath shut them in" (14:3). *Bnei Yisrael*, upon their exodus, believe that an excursion into the *midbar* entails certain death:

And they said unto Moses: 'Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the *midbar*? Wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to bring us forth out of Egypt? Is not this the word that we spoke unto thee in Egypt, saying: Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it were better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the *midbar*' (14:11-12).

In the book of Devarim, the *midbar* is characterized as: "...the great and dreadful *midbar*, wherein were serpents, fiery serpents, and scorpions, and thirsty ground where there was no water..." (18:15). *Bnei Yisrael*'s first, traumatic encounter with the *midbar* is depicted in this week's *parasha*:

And Moses led Israel onward from the Sea of Reeds, and they went out into the *midbar* of Shur; and **they went three days in the midbar, and found no water**. And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' (15:22-24)

What is so necessary about the *midbar* experience that it should define the context for the rest of the Torah? What lessons stand to be gained from the experience? Why did Hashem see fit to give the Torah to *Bnei Yisrael* in the *midbar* and not in the land of Israel?

In this week's *parasha* the Torah mentions the specific path taken by *Bnei Yisrael* as they enter into the *midbar*:

And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that **God led them not by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said: 'Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt.'** But God led the people about, by

the way of the *midbar* by the Sea of Reeds; and the children of Israel went up armed out of the land of Egypt (13:17-18).

HaRambam in the Moreh Nevuchim, explains the significance of these verses:

Here God led the people away from the direct road which He originally intended, because He feared they might be met with hardships too great for their ordinary strength...It was the result of God's wisdom that the Israelites were led about in the *midbar* till they acquired courage. For it is a well-known fact that traveling in the *midbar*, and privation of bodily enjoyments, such as bathing, produce courage, whilst the reverse is the source of faint-heartedness. In addition, another generation rose during the wanderings that had not been accustomed to degradation and slavery.

Here HaRambam gives one explanation for the significance of the *midbar* experience. According to HaRambam, the forty years of wandering in the *midbar* prior to entering into the land of Israel were necessary as a period of national edification and character development. This week's *parasha* describes multiple incidents called *nisyonot* (15:25, 16:4 and 17:7), intended to exorcise the slave mentality from a newly redeemed nation and impart on them specific theological directives.

The verse in Bamidbar: "Surely all those men have seen My glory, and My signs, which I wrought in Egypt and in the *midbar*, yet have put Me to proof these ten times, and have not hearkened to My voice" (14:22), is the basis for the Mishna in tractate *Avot* which concludes: "Ten *nisyonot* were exhibited to God by our forefathers in the *midbar*." The Mishna does not list these ten *nisyonot*, their relevant verses in the Torah, or explain their importance.

In modern Hebrew the word *nisayon* means a test. The root of the word *nisayon* is the word *nes*, which means banner. In the Moreh Nevuchim, HaRambam translates and explains the notion of *nisayon*: "Know that every *nisayon* mentioned in the Torah is to impart on people what they need to do or what they should believe" (3:24). HaRambam understands the word *nisayon* as deriving from the image of a banner that is raised to convey a message to a large group of people.

HaRambam, commenting on the above Mishna in *Avot*, enumerates each one of the ten *nisyonot* referenced in the Mishna. We will examine only the first of the ten *nisyonot* outlined by HaRambam. Hopefully, this example will provide a template for understanding the importance of *nisayon* and the *midbar* experience in general.

In the verses quoted earlier, the Torah tells us that as soon as *Bnei Yisrael* had set out in the *midbar*, they found no water to drink for three days. *Bnei Yisrael* murmur against Moshe and then we are told:

And he[Moshe] cried unto the Lord; and the Lord showed him a tree, and he cast it into the waters, and the waters were made sweet. There He made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there *nisahu* [He proved to them] (15:25).

"*Nisahu*," like the word *nisayon*, comes from the root word *nes*. *Prima facia*, this narrative describes an exhibition of Hashem's kindness to *Bnei Yisrael* and conveys the significance of our dependence on Hashem. This message is echoed in the book of Devarim, as Moshe Rabbenu reflects on the significance of the *midbar* experience:

And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God hath led thee these forty years in the *midbar*, that He might afflict thee, to prove thee, to know what was in thy heart, whether thou

wouldest keep His commandments, or no. And He afflicted thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that He might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every thing that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live (8:2-3).

In addition to this theological message, the Torah tells us that *Bnei Yisrael* were also given statutes and ordinances at Marah. What were these statutes and ordinances that *Bnei Yisrael* received and why were they significant?

HaRambam in the *Moreh Nevuchim* explains what these statutes and ordinances were:

According to the true traditional explanation, Sabbath and civil laws were revealed at Marah: "statute" alludes to Sabbath, and "ordinance" to civil laws, which are the means of removing injustice. The chief object of the Law, as has been shown by us, is the teaching of truths; to which the truth of the creation *ex nihilo* belongs. It is known that the object of the law of Sabbath is to confirm and to establish this principle, as we have shown in this treatise (Part. II. chap. xxxi.). In addition to the teaching of truths, the Law aims at the removal of injustice from mankind. We have thus shown that the first laws do not refer to burnt-offering and sacrifice, which are of secondary importance (3:32).

According to HaRambam, a multifaceted educational experience emerges from the encounter at Marah. In addition to learning about humankind's reliance on Hashem, *Bnei Yisrael* are also taught specific laws intended to "teach truths" and "remove injustice" from the nation. The teaching of laws to *Bnei Yisrael* at Marah is parallel to the giving over of the Torah at Har Sinai, described in next week's *parasha*. In *Hilchot Tefilla*, HaRambam teaches a law that derives from the parallel between the experience at Marah and the receiving of the Torah:

Moshe Rabbenu established for Israel that the Torah be read in public on Shabbat, Monday and Thursday mornings so that no three days should pass without hearing the Torah (12:1).

This law is based on a gemara in tractate *Baba Kama*:

'And they went three days in the *midbar* and found no water' those who expound verses metaphorically said: water means nothing but Torah, as it says: 'Ho, everyone that thirsteth come ye for water' (Isaiah 55:1). It thus means that as they went three days without Torah they immediately became exhausted. The prophets among them thereupon rose and enacted that they should publicly read the law on Sabbath, make a break on Sunday, read again on Monday, make a break again on Tuesday and Wednesday, read again on Thursday and then make a break on Friday so that they should not be kept for three days without Torah.

*Chazal* justify their interpretation of water as Torah from a verse in Isaiah fifty-five. This exegesis is also thematically significant, because it paints the Marah experience as a microcosm for the later receiving of the Torah at Har Sinai.

From the words of HaRambam, we appreciate the significance of the *nisayon* at Marah, and we are afforded insight into the significance of the Torah being given over in the *midbar*. The Torah's commandments, like the *midbar* experience as a whole, are intended to edify and educate us morally and philosophically. In this way, the experience of learning Torah and gaining from its wisdom is analogous to the *midbar* experience afforded to our ancestors. The historical significance of receiving

the Torah is fundamentally linked to the historical significance of the *midbar* experience.

Overall, the *midbar* experience is complex and paradoxical. On the one hand, the *midbar* was a place where *Bnei Yisrael* sinned and were repeatedly punished. The hopelessness of aimlessly wandering for forty years and the tragic death of an entire generation is conveyed in the harsh desolation of the *midbar*. On the other hand, Hashem led *Bnei Yisrael* through the *midbar* with wondrous miracles. In the *midbar* *Bnei Yisrael* received Hashem's Torah and cemented an enduring relationship with their Creator. The *midbar* was the furnace that forged *Bnei Yisrael* as a nation capable of conquering the land of Israel.

The allusions to *midbar* in the books of the prophets highlight the intricacy of these themes. In the book of Hoshea, Hashem reflects on the *midbar* as the place that we were first “found” by Hashem: “I found Israel like grapes in the *midbar*, I saw your fathers as the first-ripe in the fig-tree at her first season” (9:10). In the book of Yirmiyahu, the prophet mourns the irresponsible leaders of *Bnei Yisrael* who turned the fruitful land of Israel into a barren *midbar*: “Many shepherds have destroyed My vineyard, they have trodden My portion under foot, they have made My pleasant portion a desolate *midbar* (12:10).” The prophet Hoshea warns *Bnei Yisrael* that if they do not improve their ways Hashem will destroy their land:

Plead with your mother, plead; for she is not My wife, neither am I her husband; and let her put away her harlotries from her face, and her adulteries from between her breasts; Lest I strip her naked, and set her as in the day that she was born, and make her as a *midbar*, and set her like a dry land, and slay her with thirst.

Also in Hoshea, the in-gathering of exiles and the return to the land of Israel is described as second *midbar* experience:

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the *midbar* and speak tenderly unto her. And I will give her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope; and she shall respond there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt (2:16-17).

May we merit to see the fulfillment of this prophecy and enduring peace in the land of Israel.