

TORAH TABLE TALK – *PIRKE AVOT*

The Wilderness: The Best and Worst of Times

Parshat Bemidbar, Leviticus 1:1 – 4:20

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

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There is much that is troubling about the Book of Numbers. The fourth book of the Torah covers the years that the people of Israel spent in the wilderness. It begins a year after the Exodus from Egypt and concludes just before the people enter the Promised Land. These were not happy times for the people of Israel. Time and again the nation tests God’s patience, questions Moses’ authority, and doubts whether they truly want to become an independent nation living in the land that was promised to their ancestors. To the very end of their desert sojourn the people of Israel remain petulant, rebellious and stiff necked. But they are not alone. During these years in the wilderness, Moses doubts his ability to lead the nation, and his siblings, Miriam and Aaron, are less than kind in dealing with their younger brother.

And yet the sages offer a different perception of the years of the desert sojourn. These are years of closeness and intimacy between God and Israel. Israel feels secure under the protective cover of God’s cloud of glory. The wilderness, then, is a place of faith, where the people have an immediate sense of God’s presence and protection. We celebrate Israel’s desert sojourn on Sukkot when we leave our homes and dwell in booths, symbolic of their tents or of God’s protective presence in the wilderness. The contrast here is striking: how could a people who received so much from God and their leaders be so ungrateful, so rebellious, and so angry?

Pirke Avot 5:7 With ten trials our ancestors tried the Holy One, blessed be He, in the wilderness as it is written "Who ... tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice." (Numbers 14:22)

Sources

Avot d’Rebbe Natan Chapter 34

With ten trials our ancestors tried the Holy One, blessed be He, in the wilderness as it is written: “In the wilderness, at Aravah, over against Suph, in the vicinity of Paran and Tophel, and Laban, and Hazerot, and Di-Zahab.” (Deuteronomy 1:1) “In the wilderness” where they made the golden calf, as it written, “They made a calf in Horeb.” (Psalm 106:19) “At Aravah” where they clamored for water as it is written, “And the people thirsted for water.” (Exodus 17:3) Some say this refers to the idol of Micah. “Over against Suph” is a reference to the rebellion at the Red Sea. Rabbi Judah says, they were rebellious at the sea and they were rebellious in the sea, as it is written: “But they were rebellious at the sea, even in the Red Sea.” (Psalm 106:7) “In the vicinity of Paran” refers to the incident of the spies, as it is written, “And Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran.” (Numbers 13:3) “And Tophel” refers to the slanderous words which they uttered over the manna. “And Laban” refers to the controversy of Korach. “And Hazerot” refers to the incident of the quail. These are seven. And elsewhere it is written, “And Taberah, and at Massah and at Kibrot Hata’avah you made God angry.” (Deuteronomy 9:22)

Devarim Rabbah 7:9

"And I have led you forty years in the wilderness" (Deut. 29:4). The Holy One asked Israel, "Have I not been as a wilderness unto Israel?" (Jer. 2:31), have I led you as though you were in a wilderness? In the way of the world, when a king of flesh and blood goes forth into a wilderness, does he do so in order to find quiet or fine food and drink such as he finds in his own palace? No. Yet you were slaves in Egypt, and I brought you forth from there, caused you to be sheltered under clouds of glory, appointed three redeemers for you--Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, ever ready to serve you. The clouds of glory were seven in number: one above you, one below you, four at the four points of the compass; and the seventh in front of you smote serpents and scorpions, leveled hills and valleys, burned thorns and thistles, and caused smoke to go up. Seeing the smoke, all kings of the east and of the west said, "Who is this that cometh up out of the wilderness, like columns of smoke?" (Song 3:6). I caused manna to come down for you, the well to spring up for you, even brought you quails. Have I then

been a wilderness unto Israel? Have I guided you as in a wilderness? Or would you say that "it has been for you a land of thick darkness" (Jer. 2:31)? Have I not Myself given light for you in the dark that beset you? In the way of the world, when a man receives a guest, he will slaughter a calf for him the first day and hens the second day; he will cook pulse the third day; but on the fourth day he will give the guest something less delicious, and even less so on succeeding days. Thus, the first day is not at all like the last day. Do you suppose the Holy One also acted in this way? Hence Scripture says, "These forty years the Lord thy God hath been with thee" (Deut. 2:7)--the last day as much as the first.

Commentary

In fifth chapter of *Pirke Avot*, the sages paint a symmetrical picture of history: we are presented with the history of humankind and the Jewish people in series of tens: ten utterances at creation, and ten generations from Adam to Noah and then from Noah to Abraham. We learn that there were not only ten plagues and ten miracles in Egypt but ten plagues at the sea as well. Finally, we learn that Israel tested God ten times in the wilderness. We find a different version of this statement in *Avot d'Rebbe Natan* (a later expansion of *Pirke Avot*). In *Pirke Avot* we find a quote in which the Torah explicitly says that there were ten trials in the wilderness but does not explicate what the trials were. In *Avot d'Rebbe Natan*, the text quotes the opening verse of Deuteronomy in which Moses begins his admonition of Israel by reminding them of the various places they have been and at which they tested God's sufferance.

Numbers presents a dark picture of human nature and the people of Israel. Despite all that God has done, the people continue to doubt God's promises and Moses' commitment to them. From the story of the spies, to Korach's rebellion, to the people's constant insubordination and whining over their lack of water and food, we are left to wonder why God continues to support the people of Israel. But God is also belligerent and punitive; time and again he punishes the people until the entire generation that left Egypt has died out some naturally and some under unnatural circumstances. So what is the nature of these trials of which we speak in *Pirke Avot*? Children often test their parents not because they doubt them but because they wish to know the extent and boundaries of their parents' love for them. The desert is both a place of love and testing. With all that Israel received, they still needed to learn the boundaries in which they had to live and they needed to know that God would be with them even in times of rebellion. The worst of times might very well be the best of times.

So maybe it is part of human nature to test those we love. We shouldn't have to test the ones we love but too often we do. The Etz Hayim commentary quotes Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch who says that the book of Numbers contrasts 'the people of Israel as it actually is' to "the ideal to which it was summoned." We are constantly journey between these two landmarks.

Questions to Ponder

1. Have you ever felt that you were being tested by others: your children, students, coworkers? How did this make you feel? How did you respond?
2. How are the two images of the wilderness in *Pirke d'Rebbe Natan* and *Devarim Rabbah* different from one another? Is it possible for both of them to be true at the same time?
3. Why do you think the Torah appears to present such a negative image of the people of Israel? Do you think it is fair assessment of the nation? Retell the story of the desert sojourn from the perspective of the average Israel looking back at his family history.
4. Do you think that the God of the wilderness years is punitive and belligerent or patient and long suffering? What do you think this book is trying to teach us about our relationship with God?
5. Can you think of a time in your life when you felt you were being 'tried?' How about a time when despite difficult circumstances you felt that the experience was a positive and important one for you personally? What made it both the worst and the best of times?

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