

Parsha Ponders

Bamidbar | June 2, 2022 | 3 Sivan 5782

*Fire, water, desert*¹

וידבר יקוק אל-משה במדבר סיני באהל מועד וגו'

Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting...²

The Jewish people, ever since our inception at the Exodus from Egypt and the National Revelation at Mount Sinai, have been pursued³ by the enemies of Torah. Throughout the generations there were always new means created to try to extinguish the flame of our tradition. Our national memory recalls that these efforts have grown stronger and mightier, seemingly beyond the boundaries of nature⁴. We all know it was not one Jew who gave up their life to preserve the Torah, but myriads. And yet, our enemies' efforts to slaughter us have proven futile, as the Torah is just as present as ever.

What is our nation's secret to such superhuman strength? How is it that Jews have always been able to refuse to budge⁵, to stand up for what's right, even under pain of death? The key is from how the Torah was given. Our Sages tell us⁶ that the Torah was given to us with fire, with water, and in the desert. It was given to us with fire, as the verse says that Mount Sinai was burning with fire⁷. It was given to us with water, as the verse says that at that time the Heavens and clouds dripped water⁸. Finally, it was given to us in the wilderness, as the verse says that Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai. These three things symbolize the ability of the Jewish people to be *moser nefesh*, to give up our lives for what's right.

Fire reminds us of our forefather Avraham. Our Sages tell us⁹ that he was ordered to bow down to an idol, or that he would be thrown into a fiery furnace. Avraham defiantly rejected any form of idol worship and was consequently thrown into the fiery furnace. This showed tremendous strength of character and will. A miracle occurred and Avraham wasn't harmed. However, one could perhaps argue that Avraham was a unique character in history. Who says that the Jewish people have any remote connection to his superhuman abilities?

As a response to this, we are told that the Torah was given with water. This reminds us of the splitting of the sea. As the Jewish people were escaping Egypt, they hit a dead end, with the sea in front of them, and the Egyptians quickly approaching from behind. Moshe told the Jews to travel nonetheless, and they fearlessly proceeded forwards. Every member of the nation risked their life for the sake of Hashem,

¹ Based on the introduction to Ohr HaMeir, the responsa of Rav Meir Shapiro, the founder of Daf HaYomi and Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin

² Numbers 1:1

³ Vayikra Rabbah 27:5, Koheles Rabbah 3:15, Tanchuma Yashan Emor § 12, Midrash Lekach Tov to Ecclesiastes 3:15, and Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 9:4 (Mandelbaum ed.) say that the Jewish people were specifically chosen by Hashem because we are a pursued nation. This is also true for the animals that are fit for Temple offerings. See also Bava Kamma 93a and Midrash HaGadol to Leviticus 1:1, that it's actually virtuous to be a pursuer rather than a pursuer, as only pursued birds are fit for the Temple altar

⁴ Rav Meir Shapiro signs the date of this *devar Torah* as the 14th of Iyar, 5686/1928 (he also notes that day's *daf*, Kesubos 56), ironically not long before the Holocaust

⁵ See Exodus 34:9, Maharsha to Beitzah 25b, and Yefeh Toar to Shemos Rabbah 42:9, that the Jewish people are praised for their stubbornness

⁶ Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7; Midrash Tanchuma Bamidbar § 6

⁷ Exodus 19:18

⁸ Judges 5:4

⁹ Bereishis Rabbah 38:13, brought by Targum "Yonasan" and in brief by Rashi, both to Genesis 11:28

and the sea miraculously split. However, that was a one-time majestic show of faith. Who says it's something that would or could last, having any relevance to us today?

To this, we are told that the Torah was given in the wilderness. What's the significance of this? The wilderness isn't a safe place. There are snakes and scorpions. There are no natural resources, such as food and water. The Jews left Egypt without the proper provisions. They ended up wandering seemingly aimlessly for forty years. The entire time the Jews remained strong with their love of Hashem. They weren't afraid of the elements. Even though they were technically endangering their life by following His word, they knew that Hashem would take care of them. Their reliance in the face of danger made a tremendous impression for generations to come.

Now we can understand why our Sages say that the Torah was given with fire, water, and in the wilderness. These three things symbolize three pivotal moments in Jewish history, where a grand display of *mesirus nefesh*, the ability to surrender one's life, was performed. They ingrained in our spiritual DNA the ability to withstand all trials¹⁰, allowing the Torah to last for all generations.

Good Shabbos

¹⁰ See Sichos Mussar § 60, who proves this concept from Yerushalmi Kiddushin 4:1