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Parshat Bamidbar: Unbuilding and Upbuilding in the Wilderness

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The book of Vayikra, which we just completed, concerned itself largely with order in the *mishkan* (Tabernacle). The book of Bemidbar opens this week with a concern for order *around* the *mishkan*. *Bnei Yisrael* are arranged precisely on its perimeter and counted and tasked with specific jobs. To be part of the camp is to be a part of its regimented array.

It is therefore striking that a *parsha* that spells out this degree of containment, *parshat Bemidbar*, generates *midrashim* that accentuate lack of containment. The *parsha* begins innocuously enough:

The Lord spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert, in the Tent of Meeting on the first day of the second month, in the second year after the exodus from the land of Egypt, saying. (Numbers 1:1)

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי בְּאֵהָל
מוֹעֵד בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִיָּת
לְצֵאתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר: (במדבר
א:א)

Perplexed by the seemingly unnecessary geographic reference to the desert in this address, the *midrash* offers this suggestion:

Why does the verse say "in the desert"? For anyone who does not make him/herself *hefker* like the desert cannot acquire Torah. That is why it says "in the desert of Sinai." (Midrash Tanchuma, Numbers, chapter 7)

...למה במדבר? אלא כל מי שאינו עושה עצמו הפקר כמדבר, אינו יכול לקנות את התורה, לכך נאמר במדבר סיני. (מדרש תנחומא, במדבר (בובר) פרק ו)

The desert needed to be mentioned at the start of this book because the desert was essential to the word of God that followed. It was not merely a spatial designation. It was a contentful communication. "*Hamidbar midaber*," "the desert speaks," claim the Hebrew poets. And so claims the *midrash*. The Torah needed to unfold in the context of a *midbar* because Torah rests on the experience of *hefkerut* that only a desert can deliver so palpably.

What is *hefkerut*? The very opposite of tidy order. It is ownerlessness, wilderness, unruliness. It is radical openness, uncontrolled and untamed. It is total vulnerability, exposed and raw. Being in the desert--with its vast expanses, blazing sun, magnificent quiet, and timeless landscapes--generates all of these experiences. In the midst of unending sands, one can feel one's smallness bump up against the grandeur of eternity. In that space, one can become uncannily receptive. One might begin to hear the voice of God. So render yourself *hefker*, says the *midrash*, in order to receive Torah. Open yourself widely. Detach yourself from those things that tether you and tame you. Give yourself over to the wilderness, for you just might then find yourself back at Sinai. The path to order is paved through disorder.

For the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Gur, *hefkerut* also contains yet another valence.

...The Torah represents the wholeness [*shleimut*] of created beings and to the degree that they are lacking in their own eyes, they will yearn for that wholeness. They will merit Torah. It is very hard for agentic beings to see themselves as deficient, as we must...But one who makes him/herself like a desert [gains this insight], as it says in the *midrash*, one cannot merit Torah without first becoming *hefker* like the desert. This was the preparation of *bnei yisrael* before they received the Torah: that they arrived at this attribute of "desert-ness"; that it became clear to them that they needed to yearn for wholeness and to clarify this need for others. (Sefat Emet, Bemidbar 1874)

כי התורה היא שלימות הנבראים וכפי מה שהנבראים חסרים בעיני עצמם ומקוין אל השלמה. זוכין לתורה. ומאוד קשה לבעל בחירה להיות חסר בעיני עצמו כראוי...אבל מי שהוא כמדבר כמ"ש במדר' שאינו זוכה לתורה עד שנעשה הפקר כמדבר וזה הי' הכנת בני"י קודם קבלת התורה שהגיעו לבח' מדבר להיות ברור בעיניהם וגם לברר זה בכל הנבראים שיהיו מקוין אל השלמה כנ"ל. (שפת אמת, במדבר תרל"ד)

The desert experience is one of thirst, of recognizing that we do not contain within ourselves all that we need to survive and thrive. It highlights our dependence, our need to look outward (and upward) to complete ourselves. Becoming *hefker* is becoming aware of this essential human insufficiency. For the Sefat Emet, this awareness is an elemental part of the spiritual life, which is a striving toward wholeness. It all begins with desire. In order to arrive at *shleimut*, one must recognize that one is not-yet-whole. In order to get filled up, one must behold the ways in which one is ridden with holes. The Torah offers a path toward completeness, but it can be received only by those who can see how very incomplete they are. This is what the *midbar* was all about: becoming conscious of thirst so that it might be quenched by the waters of Torah. The path might be long--40 years long--and circuitous, but this is what it takes "*liknot et ha'Torah*," to actively acquire wisdom.

We stand now on the cusp of Shavuot, during the *shloshet yimei hagbala*, the three days of preparation for revelation. How might we prepare for *Har Sinai*? Enter *midbar Sinai*, our *parsha* enjoins us. Notice how very imperfect we are and how very needful. Tap into our core deficiencies. Recognize that Torah is a process of both unbuilding and upbuilding. And that *shleimut* comes only to those who really yearn for it.



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