

Parashat Hamidbar 5786

Miracles in the Desert

Today's parasha, the first in the book of Numbers, primarily concerns the military organization and census of the people of Israel as they start their journey through the desert in the area east of the Jordan River, known today as the Kingdom of Jordan, where they will settle and wander for the better part of two generations.

Throughout human history and, in particular, in the context of the wanderings of the people of Israel following the going out of Egypt, the desert has been thought of as a place of barrenness, thirst, loneliness and danger, as a timeless, directionless and expansive wasteland. Such wandering has also been seen as a metaphor for confusion and loss of direction.

The desert has also been thought of throughout history as a place of escape and spiritual renewal. The prophet Elijah ran away from King Ahab and Jezebel to the desert after confronting the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. He eventually found himself in a cave where he was confronted by a still small voice that came out of a maelstrom. In this way, escaping to the desert is also seen as a metaphor for spiritual searching, for a deepening of faith and reflection.

In much the same way, the Jewish people's wanderings in the Diaspora has also been likened to wandering in the desert. There, in the Diaspora, we Jews have been powerless, dependent on the ruling powers for security, while seeking direction from God, depending on our wits and on God for protection and sustenance.

In contrast, Jews in Israel have learned to gain and wield power, to be independent, yet we still find ourselves wandering without clear spiritual direction, as if in a desert, confused and uncertain about the future.

When the first pioneers arrived here a century and a half ago, they found mostly desert and swamp, a land not devoid of inhabitants, but one that was backward, sweltering under centuries of neglect. They then began the arduous process of spiritual and physical reclamation.

Even as we continue to grow and develop – each person in his or her own way and each sector of Israeli society in theirs – we stumble along, slowly weaving together a society that incorporates the best – and sometimes the worst – of us, unaware or unconscious of the miracles that surround us.

Yes, we have gained power and independence, but even as we rebuild the waste places, we must be careful to not create new waste places of a spiritual type, chasing after things and answers that are devoid of value, and we must avoid the hubris of thinking that only we, or our like-minded compatriots, have all the answers.

We need to recognize that our security and protection in this war does not come of itself – it comes from our strength as a society – its openness, its tolerance and its willingness to accept input from all its sectors – to speak freely without fear of retribution or censorship. The fact that we can go on with our lives in relative safety with missiles and

rockets fired at us, protected by these marvels of technology, is indeed miraculous, and speaks of a resilience that comes from our sense of shared values.

Miracles in the Torah are generally ascribed to the work of God, such as the 10 plagues or manna, so people generally naturally expect to see only miracles of that kind.

But even in the Torah there are examples of miracles that are wrought in partnership between the human and the divine, such as the aforementioned confrontation by Elijah at Mount Carmel and Joshua's battle with Amorites, when the sun stood still.

In the modern mind, we tend to downplay such events as serendipitous or discount the possibility that they may also reveal the interventions of an unseen and unheard God. But how should we interpret the founding and establishment of Israel against all odds or the development of missile defense systems such as Iron Dome, something that was considered to be an impossibility only a few years ago.

Our success in battle depends not solely on the quality of our weapons and the fighting spirit of our warriors, but also on a foundation of good deeds and the freedom and care that prevails in our society.

By our good deeds – through things like care for the sick, the infirm, the widow and the orphan, by kindness and gentleness of spirit – we bring spiritual strength and societal resilience closer. We become stronger and at the same time bring God into our lives and into the life of our society. Contrarily, by our bad deeds – through things like *lashon hara*, bad dealing and infidelity – we become weaker and our distance from God grows.

In the same way by which the desert has been likened to a place of barrenness and escape, the crossing of the Jordan River into the promised land at the end of our wanderings has become a metaphor for redemption and salvation.

As we travel through this desert we inhabit together, in our time, seeking a righteous path through study and its application, through deepening of our spiritual understanding, and through building up of the land and society in its application, we get closer to God and bring God closer to us, merging the healthy society and revitalized land that we build with the metaphorical Jordan River that becomes nearer with every step. As we rise, so does heaven descend.

As it says in the second section of the Shema:

...that your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, upon the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers to give them, **as the days of heaven on the earth.**

Deuteronomy Chapter 11:21

Shabbat Shalom