

We begin the fourth book of our sacred Torah today. The title of the Book and its first portion is *B' midbar*, in the desert. We are told that the Israelites have been in the desert for a little over a year. During that time, they gathered at Mount Sinai to hear the 10 Commandments, built a *mishkan*, a traveling sanctuary for God to dwell with them and initiated Aaron and his sons into the Priesthood. All of this was to create the foundation of their new religion. And all of it happened in the desert, *b' midbar*.

Other important events in Jewish history also happen in the desert. As Jacob was fleeing from his brother Esau who threatened to kill him, he encountered God in the desert when he lay down to sleep.

Moses had his first encounter with God as a burning bush in the desert while he was tending his sheep.

Moses wanted to take his people to pray in the desert when he asked Pharaoh to let them go.

It's significant that all of these things happened in the desert, uncivilized, unmapped, wild. The desert is a place of great beauty and awesome desolation. During the day, as the sun moves across the sky, the scenery changes, the hues lighten and darken. Flowers on the cactus plants create an explosion of color.

At night the experience is just as dramatic. As overpowering as the heat is during the day, the cold at night is chilling to body and soul. It is a place of intense opposites. And it's impossible to ignore its power.

We are often so busy living our lives, with all our obligations that we can often be surprised to find ourselves in the desert, in the wilderness with no warning at all. All it takes is for our car to break down, to know what the desert feels like. We have errands, classes, work, appointments. And suddenly, we aren't going anywhere.

We are literally forced to seek another mode of transportation. But in a more figurative way, this same thing can happen. We can have a plan about our lives which seems to be working out exactly as we planned but with no warning, that can change.

Often when we are in that place, the place of trying to understand and reconfigure our lives, we can turn to the real or imagined desert for comfort. Its emptiness can give us the psychic room to explore what's next. It can help us accept our disappointments and find a new path that will be even more fulfilling and exciting.

As our ancestors found out the desert can be a place to communicate with God, with holiness, with the unknown. It is often in the desert that we call out for and receive answers.

We can establish or renew the foundation of our own spiritual understanding. We can take a much needed break from the hectic pace of our lives. Let's allow ourselves to be to be *b' midbar* in the coming week, to be in the place where we stop and assess what we have in our lives. Let us take the time to change what's no longer working and solidify what is.

Shabbat Shalom.