

***Bamidbar* – In the Wilderness**  
Silent Center of Things  
5775 Text Study by Yael Shy

Avivah Zornberg, in her recently book, *Bewilderments*, describes an interesting contradiction with regards to *Bamidbar*, or the book of Numbers. On its face, Zornberg writes, “The book of Numbers is the narrative of a great failure...what should have been a brief journey from Mount Sinai to the Holy Land becomes a forty-year death march.” (4) Indeed, the census that is taken at the very start of this week’s parsha instructs Moshe to count each Israelite, only for the text to tell us twenty-five chapters later that none of this generation survives the trek through the desert. What was the point of the counting? What was the point of the journey at all if the only task of this generation is to die?

And yet, Zornberg notes, Hasidic masters such as the Sefat Emet see the generation counted in the first census as the most extraordinary receivers of the Torah, experiencers of miracles and intimacies with God unimaginable and unparalleled in other generations. “They are known as *dor de’ah* – a generation of *special knowledge*.” (4)

What happens to this generation that makes their “failure” a spiritual journey of special knowledge? What is the point of their existence?

***Bamidbar*: What is the wilderness?**

The parsha begins with The Divine speaking to Moshe “בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי” – in the Sinai wilderness. The fact that they are in the wilderness is explicitly mentioned as an indication not just of their physical location, but perhaps their spiritual one as well.

What is the wilderness, the *midbar*? What does it mean to be within it?

Jeremiah calls the *midbar* “a land of deserts and pits, a land of drought and darkness, a land no person had traversed, where no human being had dwelt” (Jer. 2:6). Zornberg writes, “the wilderness *bewilders*; it undermines the very ability to speak, to know one’s own experience.” (9) In the wilderness, Zornberg says, nothing matters. It is a void and emptiness beyond our comprehension.

This definition of “wilderness” is similar to the mystical concept of the “dark night of the soul,” first described as such by a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish poet, mystic and monk, Saint John of the Cross. This “dark night” is not an everyday type of sadness, grief or confusion. It is a total disintegration of the way one previous saw the world and a dark and confusing period of grappling with a

radically different reality. Eckhart Tolle calls it “a collapse of a perceived meaning in life” and “an eruption into your life of a deep sense of meaninglessness.” From the Jewish perspective, it is the feeling God’s hiddenness.

This “dark night” sounds depressing, but those who experience it actually see it as a necessary step on the journey to insight and wisdom. Tolle describes the process of waking up from a “dark night of the soul” as a type of re-birth. Once the old structures and ego-centric constructs fall away, new clarity and insight emerges. It can be painful and scary, as death is always painful and scary, but it is also profound and transformative.

The same can be said for the *midbar*. The generation of freed slaves enters the wilderness on a doomed journey to death, but the Israelite people emerge on the other side of the book of Numbers, reborn. They must go to the emptiness and darkness of the *midbar* for this process to take place.

### **What happens in the Midbar?**

The wilderness – the “dark night of the soul” – is a time of witnessing the world that we constructed in our minds crash around us. It is terribly painful and scary, and we don’t have control over when we will face it. What we *do* have control over is how we handle that time of darkness and desolation.

Milarepa, a wise Tibetan monk, often faced dark nights of the soul. On his own for months at a time, demons would come to visit him and disturb his meditation. Lust, greed, anger, doubt and despair would start dominating his thoughts and his body and he would have terrible visions that he couldn’t shake. When Milarepa tried to kick these demons out of his cave, they multiplied. When he tried to ignore them, they multiplied. Switching course, he tentatively accepted them and allowed them to remain in the cave. All but the most persistent demons fell away.

When the most vicious, most persistent demon continued to attack Milarepa, Milarepa turned toward this demon, frightened as he was, and laid his head in the demon’s mouth. Milarepa surrendered completely. It was at that point that the final demon disappeared and Milarepa became free. In more Jewish terms, Milarepa let go into God.

One night several years ago, I too found myself in the wilderness of a dark night of the soul. I had recently had a terrible break up, and I was convinced that I would never find love and happiness. My old demons and fears about my essential un-love-ability came to visit and would not leave. I stayed up all night tossing, turning, crying, and upset – feeling completely alone and filled with longing. Like Milarepa, every action I took to soothe the pain failed. There was nobody I could call (it was 3am) and nothing I could do. Finally, out of nowhere, I asked myself (or perhaps God asked

me) the question, “What would a life without a partner feel like?” *Terrible. Scary. Dangerous. Sad.* How did I know this? I had never lived this reality. Perhaps it would be wonderful, independent, and rich with love of other kinds! It was then that the truth dawned on me: What I was feeling was not longing for love, it was grief for my past. It was the trauma of not feeling loveable and adopting that as part of my core story. When I surrendered to that grief and let myself fully cry out that pain, my fever broke, and I finally fell asleep. I woke up the next day immeasurably lighter and clearer.

In the Torah, we will see much adventure, crisis and turmoil take place in the darkness of the wilderness. As the Israelites wander, God will become hidden and revealed, and death will take place so that new hope and possibility can be born. What we know is that the *midbar* is precious and unavoidable, even as it’s painful. The truth and light of God, or “what is” is always there, waiting for us on the other side of the confusion.

### **Practice Questions**

Have you ever experienced a time in the wilderness, as described above? What characterized it for you? What had to die there and what was born in its place?

Some psalms to contemplate:

“[The Eternal] split rocks in the wilderness and gave [the Israelites] drink from great depths.”  
(Psalm 78:15)

“[The One] led them in the depths, as in a wilderness.” (Psalm 106:9)