

“Bemidbar, Shavu’ot, and the Torah of the land of Israel”

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

The book of Bemidbar, meaning “In the desert,” is commenced, in most years, on the Shabbat immediately before Shavuot, when we commemorate the Giving of the Torah, which was also “in the desert.”

This begs the question of the association between the desert and the Torah, or, put it another way, why the Torah was given in the desert when so many of its laws apply exclusively to the situation of the nation when safely ensconced in its own land, an event that was not to happen for over a century after the Torah was given?

The story of Ruth underscores this, with the laws of agriculture, of *leket*, *shik’chah* and *pe’ah* - the obligation to leave areas of the field for the poor, or sheaves that have been forgotten or dropped by the harvesters – laws which formed the backcloth to the events that unfolded to enable Ruth to find happiness and to ultimately find her place in history as the ancestress of the royal Davidic dynasty.

The book of Ruth, which we read on the festival of Shavuot, commemorating the giving of the Torah in the desert, actually bears little relation to the desert situation, but rather reflects the conditions of a later, settled, Judean agrarian society, with its own unique judicial structure wherein disputes over land and inheritance were heard before an *ad hoc*

committee of *asarah anashim miziknei ha'iyir*, ten city elders, stationed at the city gate and available to be selected by both parties to hear their dispute (See Ruth 4:2).

The book of Ruth might seem, therefore, a strange book to link to the festival of the giving of the Torah in an arid desert, long before the Israelites had had land apportioned to them, long before the laws of agriculture relating to the seven-year cycles of the shemittah and the yoveil years, had any application.

This also raises the issue of the Sinai Desert as a rather strange place, and a premature time, for the giving of the Torah to Israel, given that so many other major areas of Torah legislation – such as the laws relating to the monarchy, military affairs, treatment of slaves purchased from the surrounding nations (Lev.25:45), the *ger* and the *toshav*, foreigners who come to take up residency in Israel (Lev.19:33-34) – were only applicable at a much later period.

Then there were the commemorative laws such as the dwelling in the Sukah which was “to remind *future generations (lema'an yeid'u doroteichem ki basukot hoshavim et b'nei yisrael...)* that I made the Children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of Egypt”: Lev. 23:43) - another example of a law that had relevance only after the Israelites were settled in their land, long after the generation that had used the sukkah booths of the desert had died out. Its purpose was to ensure that the nation never forgot its history, humble origins, and, above all, the divine providence that guided it.

Then there were the laws of usury and the lending of money (Lev. 25:37), as well as the regulations dealing with the disposal of property and the redemption of ancestral land that had been sold out of necessity by one who had fallen on hard times (25:25-34). All of which, again, presupposes a far more advanced and settled society than the one that emerged from Egypt to stand by Mount Sinai three months later.

There is one episode, however, that sheds light on this issue, namely the matter of the five daughters of Tzelafchad (Numbers ch. 27) whose father had died leaving no male issue to inherit. They came to Moses with a plea for women's rights, to inherit the land already allocated to their father in the land of Israel.

This provides an enlightening insight into the psyche not only of the daughters of Tzelafchad, but of all the Israelites as they stood by Mount Sinai. At that period they had never visited Israel, only dreamed about it. They also knew that they would never see it because of the divine punishment that the entire generation of the desert would die out, and only their children would enter the land. Nevertheless, their primary desire was to secure a share of that land for their posterity, even at that early stage before any of them had even contemplated marriage.

That love of Israel, which the Patriarchs exemplified in so many different ways – with Jacob and Joseph even imposing oaths on their offspring that they should carry up their remains for burial in Canaan – was so all-consuming that it became the entire focus of the lives of the Israelites throughout the period of their enslavement in Egypt. It was

assuredly that dream, not just of liberation but of a return to the land of their ancestors – the only land where their faith, identity, language, and culture, could be nurtured and their law comprehensively applied – that sustained the nation’s spirit and assuaged its pain for such a protracted period.

Hence, when they stood by Mount Sinai, they were not given a desert Torah, related exclusively to the narrow constraints and conditions of their immediate desert situation, but a Torah for which they were already psychologically conditioned: the Torah of Eretz Yisrael, comprehensively covering the laws relating to the situation of the homeland for which they yearned.

It is undeniable, therefore, that our title to Israel long pre-dates any alleged association with that land that any other religion or people may claim. And that should provide us with the absolute determination to resist the challenges to our title at this time by our many enemies – in a host of subtle and not-so-subtle ways – exploiting the weapons of violence and suicide bombing, the distorted writing of revisionist history, the employment of the big lie, political intimidation, academic and economic boycotts, and the attacking of soft Jewish targets around the world.

This forthcoming festival of Shavu’ot, commemorating the giving of a Land of Israel-based Torah while our people were still in the desert, underscores, therefore, the inextricable bond between our people, our faith, our identity, and our land. It also

renders the notion of an anti-Zionist Jew not only an anachronism and an act of treachery but also a rejection of the entire word and spirit of our Torah.

So, this festival may be understood as the festival of religious Zionism, on which we are called to renew our commitment to the Torah, to Israel, and to Am Yisrael.

Shabbat shalom v'chag same'ach,

Rabbi Jeffrey