

A Land of Milk and Honey: Class #4 Desert: Desolation or Refuge?

Many Names for the Desert

יששום מדבר וציה ותגל ערבה ותפרח כחבצלת:

The arid desert shall be glad,
The wilderness shall rejoice
And shall blossom like a rose. (Isaiah 35:1)

ולא אמרו אינה יהנה המעלה אתנו מארץ מצרים המולידה אתנו במדבר בארץ ערבה ושוחה בארץ
ציה וצלמות בארץ לא-עבר בה איש ולא-ישב אדם שם:

They never asked themselves, "Where is GOD,
Who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
Who led us through the wilderness,
A land of deserts and pits,
A land of drought and darkness,
A land nobody had traversed,
Where no human being had dwelt?" (Jeremiah 2:6)

Desert, Shepherd, Leader, Speaker

ורעו כבשים כדברם וחרבות מחים גרים יאכלו:

Then shall the lambs feed as in their pasture, and fat ones and strangers shall
feed in the ruins. (Isaiah 5:17)

אמר לו הקב"ה טול מקל והך על קדקדם דבר אחד לדור ואין שני דברין לדור

There must be one leader for the generation, and not be two leaders for the
generation. (Sanhedrin 8a)

Refuge: David and King Saul

And David went up from there, and dwelt in strong holds at 'En-gedi.
And it came to pass when Sha'ul was returned from following the Pelishtim, that
it was told him, saying, Behold, David is in the wilderness of 'En-gedi.
Then Sha'ul took three thousand chosen men out of all Yisra'el, and went to
seek David and his men upon the rocks of the wild goats.
And he came to the sheepfolds by the way, where there was a cave; and Sha'ul
went in to relieve himself: and David and his men remained in the back of the
cave.
And the men of David said to him, Behold the day of which the Lord said to thee,
Behold, I will deliver thy enemy into thy hand, that thou mayst do to him as it shall

seem good to thee. Then David arose, and secretly cut off the corner of Sha'ul's robe.

And it came to pass afterwards, that David's heart smote him, because he had cut off Sha'ul's robe. (Samuel I 24: 1-6)

Why Was the Torah Given in the Desert?

“And from the wilderness Mattana and from Mattana Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel Bamot” (Numbers 21:18–19)? Rava said to him that it means: Once a person renders himself like a wilderness, deserted before all, the Torah is given to him as a gift [*mattana*], as it is stated: “And from the wilderness Mattana.” (Nedarim 35a)

Why “in the wilderness of Sinai”? From here the Sages taught that the Torah was given with three things: With fire, with water, and with wilderness. From where do we derive fire? “Mount Sinai was entirely smoking...” (Ex. 19:18). From where do we derive water? As it is said: “The Heavens dripped, the clouds dropped with water,” (Jud. 5:4). From where do we derive wilderness? “Hashem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai.” Why was it given with these three things? Just as these are free to all who come into the world, so too words of Torah are free (Bamidbar Rabbah 1)

Torah [was given] from the wilderness, the Tabernacle from the wilderness, Sanhedrin from the wilderness, priesthood from the wilderness, Levites from the wilderness, royalty from the wilderness, as it is stated: “You will be for Me a kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6); and all the fine gifts that the Holy One blessed be He gave to Israel were from the wilderness. (Shir HaShirim Rabba 3:6)

And just as this wilderness has no end, so too the Torah has no end” (Yalkut Shimoni 247:273)

Home for Prophets and Leaders

מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד יְהוָה רָעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר :
בְּנֵאֻת דָּשָׂא יִרְבִּיצָנִי עַל־מֵי מְנַחֹת יִנְהַלְנִי :
נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבָב יִנְחַנִּי בְּמַעְגְלֵי צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ :
גַּם כִּי־אֶלֶף בְּגִיא צַלְמוֹת לֹא־אִירָא רָע כִּי־אֶתָּה עֲמַדִּי שְׁבֻטְךָ וּמִשְׁעֲנֵתְךָ הִמָּה יִנְחַמְנִי :
תַּעֲרֶךְ לִפְנֵי | שְׁלֹחַן נֶגֶד צַרְרֵי דְשִׁנְתָּ בְשִׁמּוֹן רֹאשֵׁי כּוֹסֵי רִוְיָה :
אֵד | טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל־יְמֵי חַיִּי וְשַׁבְתִּי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה לְאֶרֶץ יְמִים :

A Psalm of David. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside the still waters.

He restores my soul: he leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies: Thou anointest
my head with oil; my cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell
in the house of the Lord forever. (Tehillim 23)

Honeymoon?

הֲלֹה וְקָרָאתָ בְּאָזְנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם לֵאמֹר כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה זְכַרְתִּי לָךְ חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲהַבֶּתָּ כְּלוּלְתֶיךָ לְכַתֵּר
אֲחֵרִי בַמִּדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה:

Go proclaim to Jerusalem: Thus said GOD:
I accounted to your favor
The devotion of your youth,
Your love as a bride—
How you followed Me in the wilderness,
In a land not sown. (Jeremiah 2:2)

“From the day that I brought the people of Israel out of Egypt to this day I have
not dwelt in a house, but have moved about in Tent and Tabernacle.” (Samuel II
7:6)

לָכֵן הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי מִפְתִּיחַ וְהִלְכְתִּיחַ הַמִּדְבָּר וְדַבַּרְתִּי עַל-לִבָּהּ:

Assuredly,
I will speak coaxingly to her
And lead her through the wilderness
And speak to her tenderly. (Hoshea 2:16)

Making the Desert Bloom?

אֶתֵּן בַּמִּדְבָּר אֲרָז שִׁטָּה וְהִדְס וְעֵץ שֶׁמֶן אֲשִׁים בְּעֵרְבָה בְּרוֹשׁ תִּדְהַר וּתְאֲשׁוּר יְחִדּוּ:
I will plant in the wilderness the cedar, the shitta tree, and the myrtle, and the oil
tree; I will set in the 'Arava cypress, maple, and box tree together: (Isaiah 41:19)

Or Keeping a Desert Oasis?

מִי־יִתְנֶנִּי בַּמִּדְבָּר מְלוֹן אֲרָחִים וְאֶעֱזְבֶה אֶת-עַמִּי וְאֶלְכֶה מֵאִתְּם כִּי כָלֵם מְנַאֲפִים עֲצַרְתָּ בְּגָדִים:
Oh, that I were in the wilderness, in a lodging place of wayfaring men; that I
might leave my people, and go from them! for they are all adulterers, an
assembly of treacherous men. (Jeremiah 9:1)