

# MAKE YOURSELF LIKE A WILDERNESS

## HOW DO WE PREPARE OURSELVES TO LEARN?

### TORAH BLESSING

#### DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

In her sermon, Rabbi Auerbach noted that the Hebrew name for the book of Numbers is “In Wilderness.” The Torah tells us God spoke to the Israelites and gave Torah while they were wandering in the wilderness.

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What is the significance of being in the wilderness for these defining moments?
- (b) How is learning different when we are outside our normal contexts?

Rabbi Auerbach turns to the following statement which is found twice in the Talmud: “If a person makes himself like a wilderness, he will be worthy of Torah.” She then explores two different explanations the Talmud offers to understand this enigmatic statement:

#### **Babylonian Talmud, *Nedarim* 55a**

Rava said to [Rav Yosef] that it means: “Once a person renders himself like a wilderness, belonging to no one, the Torah is given to him as a gift.”

#### **Eruvin 54a**

Rava said: If a person makes himself like this wilderness, upon which everyone treads, his Torah study will endure and be given to him as a gift. And if not, his Torah study will not endure.

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you think it means to “belong to no one”? To be like something “upon which everyone treads”? How do you understand these ideas as connecting to receiving Torah?
- (b) Which of these speaks to you? Why?
- (c) What, if any, problems do you see in these explanations? Why are these problems?

Rabbi Auerbach expressed initial discomfort with one of the two ideas:

“[W]e are told that for our learning to endure, we must make ourselves like a land on which everyone can tread. When I read this, I bristled. Humility is essential to learning, but surely, the key to meriting Torah cannot be allowing everyone to “walk all over us.” But think about the desert. If in our wanderings we continue to follow the same path for long enough, we will eventually get stuck in a rut. The path will become permanent, and routine, and we will miss out on other directions our wandering might take us. But if we decide to follow the footsteps of others along a number of different paths, to see where they might lead, we could end up at an oasis that we never would have seen. So it is with learning. If we allow ourselves to interact only with those who are following our path, we will get stuck in a rut, albeit with company. But if we allow ourselves to open our eyes to many different wanderers, and see where their paths might lead, we will gain a broader understanding of the variety and expanse of the world we live in.”

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- (a) What ruts have you found yourself stuck in? What keeps you from “wandering” more widely?
- (b) How do we condition ourselves to be open to learning?
- (c) If you were to institute one change in your life/thinking in order to more be “like a wilderness,” what might that thing be?

**FROM OUR TRADITION**

Earlier in the sermon, Rabbi Auerbach referenced the idea that each Israelite heard God’s voice differently. Consider the following texts, each of which deals with this idea:

**Shemot Rabbah 5:9**

Rabbi Yochanan said the voice of God [at Sinai] went forth and was split into 70 voices, 70 languages, so that all the nations would hear, and each nation would hear the voice in its own tongue...The voice of God spoke to each Israelite, that means to each and every person. God's voice was heard and understood because the voice spoke to each individual according to that person's particular ability to hear and understand...to the elderly in keeping with their ability, to the young in keeping with their ability, to the little ones in keeping with their ability, and so on.

**Shlomo Luria, *Yam Shel Shlomo***

All souls were present at Mount Sinai and received the Torah through 49 separate channels. All Israel saw the sounds with everyone seeing through their own channel according to their own power... So that one perceived complete impurity, one complete purity with a third perceiving a middle position. All are true ... they are all the words of the living God.

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- (a) The first text seems to suggest a single Truth, which everyone may interpret differently, whereas the second seems to suggest that opposing viewpoints can be equally “true.” Which image appeals to you more? Is either problematic?
- (b) Can you think of an issue where there are opposing “truths”?
- (c) How would you approach disagreements if you embraced the first image? The second?