

## A Muse: Bamidbar

“God spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt, saying: Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers’ household, by number of the names, every male according to their head count. From twenty years of age and up-everyone who goes out to the legion in Israel- you shall count them according to their legions, you and Aaron.” (Numbers 1:1-3)

The midrash inquires why was the Torah was given in the desert and not in the land that was promised to them. The midrash also inquires into the purpose of the forty year journey in the desert. Was it destined to purge us of the Egyptian cultural experience? To forge a new generation of people who knew not the whip of the task masters? Or perhaps was the purpose to create a condition of “bitul hayesh”, collective abnegation, in order to rebuild the national psyche? The midrash comments that a radical metamorphosis was necessary in order to change the normative behavior as well as their prevailing ideas about god. They required a period of time where they would be free of existential considerations without which they wouldn’t be able to undergo this necessary radical change. The Tanchuma (Beshalach, 1) comments that a radical disconnect from everything they ever knew was essential in order for them to be able to process the message of Torah.

Eric Fromm, psychologist and philosopher comments that the forty years in the desert was a period of forty years of “being” without being defined by status or possessions. Usually, one is defined by one’s status or one’s possessions, because normally we are in a state of “having”. The Hebrews had to transcend that plateau of “having” to that of ‘being’. To Fromm, the desert symbolizes the freedom from “having”. The desert didn’t have support centers, cities and weren’t centers of civilization. Those moving through the desert had what they needed to survive. They were people who lived in a state of “being” not in the state of “having”.

The symbols of two of our central holidays, according to Fromm, the Succah and the Matzot validate this thesis. The Succah and the Matzot weren't possessions but the basic means by which one could survive. Fromm buttresses his position by citing the text in Exodus 16:10 that says "each man according to his need". Man wasn't to aggregate but gather enough for daily sustenance. The gathering of the manna for Shabbat was treated the same way. The Hebrews were allowed only a double portion, not more. Hoarding wasn't allowed because it represented the culture of "having" and not the ideal of "being". Shabbat represents for us not only the idea of rest, but also is the antithesis of property ownership. That is the reason why we aren't allowed to make transactions on Shabbat or move property from one "reshut" to another. The point according to Fromm is that man shouldn't be defined by what he owns, but by who he is. And so it should be collectively.

Did the generation of the desert, the Dor Hamidbar, succeed in achieving this lofty goal? They demonstrated time and again their need for "having" rather than "being", yet they were deemed worthy of entering the Promised Land.