

## A Muse: Shavuot

The giving of the Law, the major event in our religious history is depicted in the Bible with high drama as the scene of the Hebrews encamped at the foot of the mountain unfolds and is accompanied by “thunder and lightening...and the sound of the shofar”. We have been taught that the event described in Exodus 19 was the singular event marking the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. However it appears that by reading the text more critically it seems that in addition to Mount Sinai there was an additional place where our ancestors received the Law, at Marah in the Wilderness of Shur.

Three days after our ancestors crossed the Sea of Reeds they traveled through the Wilderness of Shur, and not having found water they complained (the first of many). They came to Marah and there they found water, however it wasn't potable due to its bitterness. Moses crying out to God for help is shown a tree which he throws into the water and miraculously it is sweetened. In this very same verse in which he sweetens the water the text continues “there He established for the nation a decree and an ordinance and there He tested it”. (Exodus Chapter 15 verse 25) The test was the bitter waters, but because they weren't of strong faith, they were given the Law. The proof that they were tested by God at Marah can be validated if we skip ahead to verse 17 when the Hebrews arrived at Elim which is described as a sort of oasis which had 12 springs of water and seventy date palms. Had God wanted He could have had them there sooner and avoid the entire incident of Marah.

After giving the Law at Marah Moses warns the Hebrews in verse 26:

“If you hearken diligently to the voice of God and do what is just in His eyes, give ear to His commandments and observe all His decrees than any of the diseases that I placed in Egypt I will not bring upon you for I am God your healer”.

This promise of good health, the bitter waters and the relationship to Egypt brings to mind the first plague in which the Egyptians had no water to drink because the waters were smitten with blood.

In reality, the giving of the Law at Marah was the beginning of the process of the dramatic pageantry leading up to the receiving of the Torah at Sinai. Chazal understood the connection between Marah and Sinai and identified those laws which were given at Marah. Ten laws were given at Marah against the Ten Commandments at Sinai. The seven Noachide Laws and three additional laws: shabbat, dinin and parental respect. (Sanhedrin 56b)

There is a midrash Michilta (B'shalach, 1) that says that the Hebrews were in the desert for three days without studying Torah and therefore they rebelled against God. Moses settled the issues by having them study Torah on Shabbat, Tuesdays and Thursdays. In other words three days weren't to go by without the study of Torah. It appears from this midrash that the Hebrews had received the Law in Marah. The Mechilta d'rebe Yishmael also draws a correlation between Marah and Sinai, inferring that Marah was the prelude to the giving of the Law at Sinai.