

In the Desert ***Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer***

ג"ו

Parshat B'midbar

The Eternal spoke to Moses in the desert. (Numbers 1:1)

Well, yes, but we already know that we were in the desert. What, then, is the point of the Torah's repeating information which we already have?

Or, to rephrase the question, what is the connection between the Torah and the desert?

Our first impression of the desert is that it is deserted. There is no water, no shade, nothing but unremitting oppressive heat. Those of us who know the desert (I grew up in Phoenix, Arizona) are aware that this first impression is far from the truth, for the desert teems with life, but it is most people's idea of the desert.

So what is the connection? Why does G*d speak to Moses particularly in the desert? Moses, we are told, was the most humble man in the world, and in this we can liken Moses to the desert. The desert is the most humble environment in the world. The desert does not proclaim its many life forms. It does not announce to all and sundry how much life it supports. The species of animals and plants which live in the desert are, generally, small and unprepossessing. Even the desert elephants of Namibia, large as they are (for they are, after all, elephants) are smaller than other subspecies of African elephants. So G*d spoke to Moses because Moses, as the desert, was humble.

But we know of Moses' humility from other Scriptural references, particularly Numbers 12:3. So the question remains. Why the desert?

The desert has space. In the desert there is plenty of space. If I sit in one place in the desert, there is still plenty of room for plenty of other people. I can take a place in the desert without taking someone else's place, for there is plenty of room for us all.

And this, perhaps, is the lesson of the desert. When we make ourselves humble enough that our space, our presence, does not interfere with someone else's space and presence, then we will be able to hear G*d's voice speaking to us, and we will thus, so to speak, enable G*d to speak to us as G*d spoke to Moses. In the desert.

Shabbat Shalom.