



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Bamidbar

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Bamidbar

**What is the Language
of the Desert?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

What does it take to give a beautiful speech?

In the Song of Songs, King Solomon writes, *Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your speech (u’ midbarech) is beautiful...*

U’ midbarech, “and your speech,” may also be read as “and your desert.” The same letters of *midbar* in Hebrew mean both speaker and desert.

But what does speech have in common with a... desert?!

Herein lies the secret to *Bamidbar* – traveling through a desert to the Promised Land. Turning a desert into a dessert.

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF THE DESERT

1. Dry Humor (Joke)

A fleeing camel, desperate for water, was plodding through the Afghan desert when he saw something far off in the distance. Hoping to find water, he hurried toward the oasis, only to find a little old Jewish man at a small stand, selling yarmulkes.

The camel asked, "Do you have water?"

The Jewish man replied, "I have no water. Would you like to buy a yarmulke? They are only \$5."

The camel shouted, "Idiot! I don't need no over-priced yarmulkes! I need water! I should kill you, but I must find water first!"

"Okay," said the old Jewish man, "It does not matter that you do not want to buy a yarmulke and that you hate me. I will show you that I am bigger than that. If you continue over that hill to the east for about two miles, you will find a lovely restaurant. It has all the ice-cold water you need. Shalom."

Utilizing language unbecoming a camel, the humped-backed creature staggered away over the hill, towards the restaurant.

At the entrance, panting, fainting, three-quarters dead, the camel whispered with parched words, "Habibi, please bid me entry so that I may partake of your water."

To which the host replied: "It is well known that no one, not even you holy camel, may enter this oasis without a yarmulke."

2. Desert Sands

Deserts are arid places without water. This is not breaking news. Deserts are windswept wastelands without civilization, sustenance, or vitality.

We thirst in deserts. Often for more than water. As the Prophet Amos states:

“Behold, days are coming,” says the Lord God, “when I will send a famine into the land, not a famine for bread nor a thirst for water, but to hear the word of the Lord.”¹

We all thirst for something. Sometimes we thirst for health, sometimes for children, and sometimes for a better job. Sometimes we thirst for the positive; sometimes we thirst for things that are detrimental to us.

As the camel joke hints, usually there is a prerequisite to quenching our thirsts. If we need a yarmulke to enter a certain restaurant to purchase a glass of water, then the prerequisite for satisfying our thirst is a yarmulke. The prerequisite for an inquisitive scholar to quench his thirst for knowledge is study. The prerequisite for a gossiping yenta to quench its thirst for information is Facebook. And the prerequisite for a soul to quench its thirst for God is a journey through the desert to a destination called the Promised Land.

The desert symbolizes our thirst for the beyond. The Promised Land symbolizes our yearned-for destination.

There are certain vehicles and devices that can help get us over the desert dunes and to that cool glass of water. (In other words: when someone sells you a yarmulke in the desert, buy it.)

Now the question becomes: What are they?

3. No Man’s Land

This week we begin reading the fourth book of the Torah, the Book of Numbers, called in Hebrew Sefer Bamidbar, which means “in the desert.” This book describes the period of time that the Nation of Israel spent in the desert – the period between the confining slavery of Egypt and the infinite possibilities of the Promised Land.

¹ Amos 8:11.

It begins:

*The Lord spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert, in the Tent of Meeting.*²

As mentioned, a desert, a wilderness, is usually associated with desolation; with bleakness and lifelessness. A desert is not habitable. Nothing grows in a desert; nothing lives there. The Sinai wilderness in particular is described as: “the great, terrifying desert, where there were snakes, vipers, scorpions and drought, where there was no water.”³

The prophets describe it clearly:

*In the desert, in a land of plains and pits, in a land of waste and darkness, in a land where no man had passed and where no man had dwelt ...*⁴

*[A desert is] a land where no man dwells ...*⁵

*[It is place] in which there is no man.*⁶

This is the Sinai Desert.

Yet, the very words “in the Tent of Meeting,” seem to suggest something completely contrary to a no man’s land – rather a land where God and man have found a meeting place.

4. Tent of Meeting

If there ever were a contrast of polar opposites it would be *Bamidbar Sinai* (in the Sinai Desert) and *b’Ohel Moed*, (in the Tent of Meeting).

The desert is a place of loneliness; the Tent of Meeting is a place of connection. The desert represents parched nightmares; the Tent of Meeting represents vivid dreams. In the desert nothing grows; the Tent of Meeting is the source of all life and energy.

² Numbers 1:1.

³ Deuteronomy 8:15.

⁴ Jeremiah 2:6.

⁵ Ibid 51:43.

⁶ Job 38:26.

What is the Torah trying to teach us by juxtaposing a no man's land of the desert with the divine abode of the Tent of Meeting, the Sanctuary in which God said He would dwell?

Tomorrow is the first day of Shavuot, a holiday celebrating the giving of the Torah in the desert on Mount Sinai. A rudimentary reading of the story would inform even the novice student that the most sacred and formative divine innovations occurred – not in Jerusalem, Hebron, Tzfat, or Tiberius, not anywhere in the Holy Land but – in the desolate wilderness of the desert.

The Torah was given in the desert. The Sanctuary that was the precursor to and template for the Temple was constructed in the desert. The manna fell in the desert. The Clouds of Glory happened in the desert. The loftiest of generations, the *dor hadeah*, “the generation of knowledge,” that did not only experience miracles but breathed and lived them daily, was the desert generation.

5. Beautiful Speech

Perhaps we may address and, with God's help, explain the above perplexity with a verse from King Solomon's Song of Songs:

Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your speech (u'midbarech) is beautiful...⁷

U'midbarech, “and your speech,” can also be read as, “and your desert.” Your desert (*midbarech*) is beautiful when it inspires scarlet lips to articulate beautiful words which in turn lead to deeds of righteousness more numerous than the seeds of a pomegranate.

⁷ Shir Hashirim 4:3.

6. The Individuality of the Tribes

In the holy tongue, *loshon hakodesh*, the language and code with which God created (and perpetually creates) the world, every letter is weighted and every root word sprouts out into many branches bearing various fruits.

Midbar, the Hebrew word for “desert,” is spelled with the four Hebrew letters – *mem*, *daled*, *bet*, and *resh*. *Medaber*, the Hebrew word for “speaker” or “communicator,” is spelled exactly the same way – *mem*, *daled*, *bet*, and *resh*. *Medaber* also refers to the human species, who are the articulators or communicators.

The beautiful speech of the *medaber* has the power to turn a barren wasteland into a luscious oasis. And that indeed, reflects the real power of a true speaker.

And this is exactly what the Jewish people were learning to do in the years they spent in the desert, the time between Egyptian slavery and the Promised Land. The giving of the Torah in the desert, the establishing of the Sanctuary, the manna, the glorious clouds, everything we read about in four of the Five Books of Moses, comes to teach us what it means to turn a desert (*midbar*) into an articulate world (*medaber*), which expresses its divine beauty.

7. Alter Rebbe’s Explanation

In Likkutei Torah,⁸ the 18th century founder of the Chabad Movement, Rabbi Schnuer Zalman of Liadi, also known as the Alter Rebbe, explains what this means in a scintillating way, and his explanation offers many practical lessons for all of us in our personal lives. This is what he says in a nutshell:

When God spoke and created the world, the world knew exactly who its Creator was and for what purpose it was created.

⁸Likkutei Torah, Bamidbar, p. 2aff.

But then as that divine word made its way down, farther along the chain of creation, the more it became concealed in creation, and the speech, *dibbur*, began (on the surface) to lose its vitality, until it became a desert, a *midbar*. And the farther along the chain that the divine energy traveled, the less revealed was the Creator and Source of that energy.

Now, of course, the divine word always remains in the desert without one iota of compromise; otherwise, without God's perpetual speech, the desert would cease to exist. However, from our human perspective, the more material and physical creation became, the more we can forget what the speech and its Speaker sounds like.

A (divine) communication (*medaber*) became a desert (*midbar*). Both are the same four letters, but their experience is very different.

The solution is to build an *Ohel Moed*, a Tent of Meeting, a holy temple in every desert we encounter.

By using our ability as a *medaber*, our power of speech to become "communicators" of divine ideals, we effectively turn the world's deserts into Promised Lands.

8. Lamplighters (Story)

In 1907, Rabbi Sholom DovBer of Lubavitch was staying in Würzburg, Germany, and a group of Chassidim came to spend a Shabbat with him there. Among them was Reb Yosef Yuzik Horowitz.

The Rebbe prayed for many hours that Shabbat morning, as was his custom. In the meantime, the Chassidim recited *Kiddush* and made many *L'Chaims*. Later, when the Rebbe had finished and they sat with him at the Shabbat meal, Reb Yosef Yuzik asked:

"Rebbe, what is a Chassid?"

Replied the Rebbe: "A Chassid is a lamplighter. The lamplighter walks the streets carrying a flame at the end of a pole. He knows that the flame is not his. And he goes from lamp to lamp to set them alight."

Asked Reb Yosef Yuzik: "What if the lamp is in a desert?"

"Then the Chassid must go and light it," said the Rebbe. "And when he lights a lamp in a desert, the desolation of the desert becomes visible. The barren wilderness will then be ashamed before the burning lamp."

Continued Reb Yosef Yuzik: "What if the lamp is at sea?"

"Then the Chassid must undress, dive into the sea, and go light the lamp."

"And this is a Chassid?" Reb Yosef Yuzik asked.

For a long while the Rebbe thought, then he said: "Yes, this is a Chassid."

"But Rebbe, I do not see the lamps!"

Answered the Rebbe: "That is because you are not a lamplighter."

"How does one become a lamplighter?"

"First, you must reject the evil within yourself. Cleanse yourself, refine yourself, and you will see the lamp within your fellow. When a person is himself coarse, he sees coarseness; when a person is himself refined, he sees the refinement in others. So start with yourself."⁹

9. Lesson: Turn Deserts In Desserts

The word "desert" is the root of the word "deserted," referring to something or someone that is forgotten or abandoned.

A desert is a place where the source of all energy, the root of all life, seems to be deserted, forgotten and abandoned.

⁹ As told by the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn; translation/adaptation by Yanki Tauber.

And when you come upon such a place – and who of us had not? – what are you to do?

“What if the lamp is in a desert?”

“Then you must go and light it. And when you light a lamp in a desert, the desolation of the desert becomes visible. The barren wilderness will then be ashamed before the burning lamp.”

All you have to do is reveal the true potential of the desert, the life that is buried within it, and the desert itself will come to life; it will be too ashamed to do otherwise.

And we do with our words, with our speech (*medaber*): When we communicate to others beautiful ideals our holy words transform a desert (*midbar*) into a dessert.

It is then and there that a Sanctuary, a Tent of Meeting is established, and that leads us to the Promised Land.

10. Desert to Promised Land (Conclusion)

We are less than a day away from Shavuot, when we celebrate the giving of the Torah.

In English, turning an arid *desert* into a delectable *dessert* happens with the addition of a mere single letter. Desert is spelled with one “s” while dessert is spelled with two. One letter can transform a hellish experience into the sweetest culmination of a meal.

In Hebrew, however, no extra letter is needed. *Midbar* and *medaber* are the same four Hebrew letters. All that is necessary is taking our mouths and directing our words toward virtuous and compassionate ends. That alone has the power to change a desolate universe into a flourishing garden.

We may have to travel through the desert, but it's only so that we may reach the dessert. Indeed, so that we convert the desert into dessert.

As will be realized with the coming of Moshiach in the final redemption, when the entire material world will see the words of God permeating every fiber of creation.

May it happen speedily in our days!

Shabbat Shalom and chag sameach!