



# Naked as the Desert

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## Parashat Bemidbar 5784

The five books of the Torah—like the 54 *parshiyyot*—are by tradition<sup>1</sup> each named after their first significant word or phrase. In the case of the fourth book, the name is taken from half of a *semikhut* (construct) phrase: “בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי - In the Sinai Desert” (*bemidbar Sinai*). The custom has developed to use just the first of the two words: *bemidbar*,<sup>2</sup> meaning just: “In the Desert.” That leaves us with a particularly evocative title, one that casts us out into a vast unknown, and vaguely suggests impending danger.

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<sup>1</sup> We can date this tradition as far back to the geonic period (Rav Sa’adia Gaon uses it, for example). The Talmud, however, refers to this book in several places as חומש הפקודים, literally the Fifth of Counting. See Yoma 68b. This meaning parallels the Greek name for the book, *Arithmoi*, which then becomes the English, “Numbers.” This talmudic naming tradition also emphasizes the holistic nature of the first five books of Moshe’s prophecy, referring to them not as “books” but “fifths” of one great book. Ironically we now more commonly refer to each fifth as a book (e.g. Sefer Bemidbar) and the only lasting legacy of that older tradition is that we often refer to the **whole** Torah as the Humash.

<sup>2</sup> When I was younger, it was much more common to see the name written as “Bamidbar,” with an “a” as the first vowel. It has become increasingly standard to write the name instead with an “e” as the first vowel: Bemidbar. The reason for this is that as the word appears in the verse, there is a *sheva* under the *bet*, rather than a *patah*, so it is indeed pronounced, *bemidbar*. However, that is because the word is in a *semikhut* with the next word in the verse and the grammar of this construction causes the vowel under the *bet* to shorten. But when the word is used independently, as a name, and the word Sinai drops off, it seems to me that it should retain the *patah* vowelization (*bamidbar*). Otherwise, the name of the book would mean “In **a** desert,” rather than “In **the** desert.” We often change the form of the word from the verse itself when it turns into the name of a *parashah* or a whole book of the Torah. The Book of Devarim, for example, is not called, *ha-Devarim*, though that is how the word appears in the verse.



It is a title that speaks well to the themes of this book, for the Children of Israel do indeed face all kinds of dangers out there in the desert. There are the expected perils of travel: attack or starvation. But even more prominent are the crises that continually erupt from **within** the group: panic leads to doubt in the mission; internal power struggles result in all-out mutiny; lewd displays of orgiastic idolatry provoke violent conflict.

What is it about being “in the desert” that pushes this newly formed society to all of its breaking points? Is the harsh landscape bringing out something harsh and terrible in the people who wander through it?

Long after the 40-year desert journey had ended, the great prophets of Israel continued to recall the image of the Sinai Desert in their poetry, interweaving it with other biblical references to develop a rich tapestry of “desert metaphors” for our relationship with God.

The first to do so was Moshe himself, whose own final formal poem, in Parashat Ha’azinu, begins working with what will become a trope that recurs in the later prophets: the image of God “finding” the people of Israel in the desert:

#### דברים לב:י-יא

|                                  |                               |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| וּבְתֵהוּ יִלֵּל יְשֻׁמִּן       | יִמְצָאֵהוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִדְבָּר |
| יִצְרְנֵהוּ כְּאִישׁוֹן עֵינָיו. | יִסְבְּבֵנֵהוּ יְבוֹנְנֵהוּ   |
| עַל-גּוֹזְלָיו יִרְחֹף           | כְּנֶשֶׁר יַעִיר קֶנֶן        |
| יִשְׁאַהוּ עַל-אַבְרָתוֹ.        | יִפְרֹשׁ כְּנָפָיו יִקְחֵהוּ  |

#### Deuteronomy 32:10-11

|                                                                                     |                                            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| He found him in a <b>desert</b> region,                                             | in the howling <b>void</b> of a wasteland. |
| He encircled him, watched over him,                                                 | guarded him like the pupil of His eye.     |
| Like an eagle who rouses his nestlings,                                             | and <b>hovers</b> over his eaglets.        |
| So did He spread His wings and take him, and carried him along with their strength. |                                            |

Moshe imagines the Children of Israel in the desert as a baby bird, tenderly attended to by their father eagle, and then carried away on his wings. This image surely is a callback to the description in Exodus (19:4) of God carrying us out “על כנפי נשרים - on eagle’s wings.” But Moshe artfully embeds in these two successive verses two other callback words, both of which take us back to the same verse. Because the noun, for this howling void, תהו (*tohu*), and the verb for our eagle’s hovering, לרחף (*lerahef*), can each only be found in one other place in the Torah,<sup>3</sup> way back in its second verse:

#### בראשית א:ב

והָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תְהוֹ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹקִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם.

#### Genesis 1:2

And the earth was **void** and chaos, and darkness was on the face of the deep; and the spirit of God **hovered** over the water.

The void of the vast, barren desert reminds Moshe of the great void that preceded the world. There was nothing but a howling, primordial chaos. But there was a presence, a spirit of God “hovering” there, the Torah says, as if we could hear the flutter of its wings. That presence would soon speak and bring light out of the darkness and, eventually, bring humanity into the light of this new world.

Moshe is thinking about that presence, and he can hear that fluttering sound when he imagines God as a great eagle coming down from the sky, to pick us up and deliver us from darkness. In the desert of the world, there is hope.

<sup>3</sup> See Ibn Ezra, who notes connection in his commentary on Genesis 1:2.



Many centuries later, the prophet Hoshea, railing against the people of Israel on God's behalf, paints a far less hopeful image of the desert. In his metaphor, God is an angry and abusive husband railing against his cheating wife, the people of Israel:

### הושע ב:ד-ה

רִיבוּ בְּאֵמְכֶם רִיבוּ כִּי הִיא לֹא אִשְׁתִּי וְאֲנִי לֹא אִישָׁה וְתִסֵּר זְנוּנֶיהָ מִפְּנֶיהָ וְנֹאֲפוּסֶיהָ מִבֵּין שְׁדֶּיהָ. פֶּן אֶפְשִׁיטֶנָּה עֶרְמָה וְהִצַּגְתִּיהָ כִּיּוֹם הֵלְדָּה וְשִׁמְתִּיהָ כַּמִּדְבָּר וְשִׁתָּהּ כְּאֶרֶץ צִיָּה וְהִמַּתִּיהָ בְּצָמָא.

### Hosea 2:4-5

Rebuke your mother, rebuke her! For she is no longer my wife and I am no longer her husband! And have her remove her harlotry off her face, and the adultery lodged between her breasts. Lest I strip her down **naked** and present her as she was on the day of her birth. And I will make her like a **desert**, render her like a wilderness land, and let her die of thirst.

This time the desert is not where God finds us, but where God leaves us to die. The “adultery” here is a metaphor for idolatry, and a reference surely to the idolatry in Hoshea’s own time, but in the long relationship of this husband and wife pair, it also recalls all the old “affairs,” going back to the Golden Calf.

But what is the meaning of this reference to the “nakedness” of our infancy? What was the day we were born? Rabbeinu Behaye, in his commentary on Exodus (33:4), just after the people have built the Golden Calf and God is threatening to abandon them, refers to these verses from Hosea, and offers an explanation:

### רבינו בחיי שמות לג:ד

הוא שאמר הושע (הושע ב:ה) פן אפשיטנה ערומה והצגתיה כיום הולדה, יאמר פן אפשיט מישראל כבוד שכינתי שהיו מתלבשים בה וישארו ערומים ממנה כמו שהיו עד שלא נתנה תורה הוא כיום הולדה.

### Rabbeinu Behaye on Exodus 33:4

This is like what Hoshea said, “Lest I strip her down naked and present her as she was on the day of her birth”—that is, lest I strip from Israel the glory of my Presence, which they had been cloaked in, and leave them naked, as they were before the Torah was given, for that was like the day of their birth.

Our time of national nakedness was the period between the Exodus from Egypt and our receiving of the Law at Mount Sinai. We were freed into existence, but we remained exposed and vulnerable, without any guidance or purpose. It was only when we were given the commandments that we became clothed, wrapped up lovingly in the covenant. These laws would be our protection from the elements, our layer of defense against the dangers of the world.

So why, then—now that we have left Mount Sinai, with the laws of Exodus and Leviticus well in hand, and we are heading out into the desert—does Hoshea suggest that we may become naked again?

Hoshea gives us a clue with his word for nakedness: ערומה (*arumah*). This word also has its origins early on in Genesis. In fact, it is in the Garden of Eden narrative where we find the only use of the word in the Torah. Adam and Hava are in the infancy of their lives. And, we are told:

### בראשית ב:כה

וַיְהִיו שְׁנֵיהֶם עֲרוּמִים הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלֹא יִתְבָּשְׁשׁוּ.

### Genesis 2:25

The two of them were **naked**, the man and his wife and they felt no shame.



Of course they felt no shame. This was the nakedness of innocence, an unconscious nakedness. In such a state they were meant to stay. Their lives would be carefree and pleasant, a kind of eternal childhood, with no labor or responsibility.

They had but one rule to follow. Alas, they broke that rule right away. They ate from the tree, and gained the knowledge of good and bad. And in the first moment after eating, the very first thing they came to understand was:

### בראשית ג:ז

וַתִּפְקְחֶנָּה עֵינֵי שְׁנֵיהֶם וַיֵּדְעוּ כִּי עֲרֻמִּם הֵם וַיִּתְּכְרוּ עֲלֵה תְאֵנָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם חִגְרֹת.

### Genesis 3:7

Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realized that they were **naked**, and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.

Again they are naked, but now they experience it very differently. Before they never even noticed. Now they have the knowledge to know how exposed they are, and they are ashamed. So they rush to cover themselves.

This is the state the people of Israel find themselves in, out there in the Sinai Desert. They were naked when God first found them—but they were so new to the world, they hardly knew the difference. Then God “robed” them with commandments, and they were protected with the assurance of a clear path. But no sooner had they forged this covenant with God than they broke it. First they built a Golden Calf and danced around it in idolatrous ecstasy. That was the most blatant rejection of the commandments. But the transgressions continued to spill out as they wandered into the desert: greed, jealousy, anger, lust, and so much violence.



Through sin after sin they unwrapped themselves, stripping layer by layer until they were naked again, barren like the desert itself. That will be the story of Bemidbar.

Like Adam and Havah, the people will eventually have to come to **realize** that they are naked, that they have damaged their relationship with God, and been cast out into the world alone, exposed and vulnerable. They will have to figure out how to rebuild the broken trust, and to “dress” themselves once again in the garments of Torah. It will be in the next and final book of the Torah, Devarim, that they once again take on new *mitzvot*, and once again stand before God and enter into a covenant.

This is the journey that lies ahead for the Children of Israel. But insofar as Moshe and Hoshea have cast the images of the desert back onto the earliest stories in Genesis—of the creation of the world and the origins of humanity—they have invited us to see in that desert journey the arc of a universal journey, that all people must walk through. Just as the world is birthed out of a void, so do we all emerge from darkness into light. We begin our lives in innocence, naked and totally dependent on those who brought us into being. When we are ready, they begin to give us rules to live by, guidance for walking safely through the desert of the world. But like Adam and Havah in the garden, and like our ancestors in the desert, we, too, are only human, and we will inevitably break the rules, make terrible mistakes, and be stripped down once again. This time, knowing better, we will be without innocence and full of shame.

We will have to learn how to sew new clothes for ourselves, to repair the damage we have done to our relationships—with each other and with God—and then to trudge forward through the desert of our lives. We take hope from our ancestors who, despite all their struggles in the desert, eventually made it to the other side and entered the Promised Land.

