

The Power of the Desert



The giving of the Torah in the desert defied expectations. God selected neither a symbolic site in the Promised Land nor a date for annual commemoration. Instead, revelation occurred in a stark wilderness, on a day left unrecorded. Even Shavuot, later fixed as the holiday of the giving of the Torah, goes unmentioned in the text itself.

What inspired this unconventional setting? Perhaps the featureless desert, empty of routine sacred places or peoples, was meant to signal the Torah's timeless, boundless nature. Its truths transcend the landmarks and calendars organizing most human affairs.



As we explore, consider:

1. What impressions or meanings does the desert evoke for you?
2. Why was the Torah given in the desert??
3. Had the Torah been given elsewhere, would its teachings differ?
4. The Mishna blessings laud natural wonders as signifying creation's grandeur. What wonder might the desert epitomize?

"On seeing the mountains, hills, seas and rivers, one says: Blessed is He, Creator of the universe"

(Tractate Berakhot, Chapter 9, Mishna 2)

The blessing highlights the profound significance of the phenomena in the Mishna - they testify to the awe-inspiring power of creation. What makes the desert one of creation's wonders?



Perspectives may differ. As we explore this unit, we will uncover the desert's manifold facets.



The Torah's revelation at Mount Sinai intimates its transcendence of time - not bound to any calendar date or season. Its location underscores that the Torah defies geographic limits, radiating truth universally.

The giving of the Torah in the bare Sinai Desert symbolizes its all-embracing and infinite essence. Bestowed nowhere in particular, beyond the constraints of borders, languages, cultures or politics, the Torah in its deepest sense defies space and time, evoking the eternal.

"Why was the Torah given in the desert? If given in the Land, it might have been linked exclusively to the tribe in the territory of Midian. By choosing the desert, all tribes could equally partake in it"

(YalkutShimoni, Parashat Yitro, Parasha 1)

" "And they encamped in the wilderness" (Exodus 19:2) – The Torah was revealed in seclusion, in a place without ownership, accessible to all. Choosing the desert over the Land of Israel, a place that could imply exclusivity, signifies the Torah's accessibility in an uninhabited place, welcoming all who sought to receive it"

(Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, Parashat Yitro, Parasha 1)