

The Giving and Receiving of Torah And The Census

Hasidic Teachings on (Re-)Experiencing the Sinai event:

1. This process is renewed each year: Pesach is the season of our freedom ... afterwards on Shavuot is the time when our Torah was given. Torah is renewed on Shavuot in accord with the freedom that has been awakened on Pesach. Something like this happens every single day as well, as we recall both coming forth from Egypt and receiving the Torah. Even though we have already received the Torah, there is still a renewed revelation of Torah in each generation, each year, and each day—a revelation peculiar to that time. That is why freedom too needs to be renewed each year; through this we are able to renew our acceptance of divinity. "*I am YHWH your God who brought you forth from the land of Egypt to become your God*" (Num. 14:41) this is something that takes place in the present and is forever being renewed. (*Sefat Emet, late 19th century*)
2. Why is it called the Occasion of the Giving of our Torah and not the Occasion of the Receiving of our Torah? Rabbi Menachem of Kotzk, in the name of Rabbi Simkha Bunem: The Giving of the Torah took place in the month of Sivan, but the receiving of the Torah takes place every day. Rabbi Menachem of Kotzk said further: the Giving of the Torah was the same for everyone, but the receiving is different for each person according to his/her ability to understand. (*Sefat Emet, late 19th century*)

Other Commentaries

1. The Torah was given to [the Israelites] in the most deserted place in the world; for if it had been given in the land of Israel, the inhabitants of the land would have said "It is ours!" And had it been given somewhere else the inhabitants of that place would have said "It is ours!" Therefore, it was given in the most deserted place in the world, where whoever wanted to take it could do so. (**Mekhilta d'RaShBi, quoted in Present at Sinai, S.Y. Agnon**)
2. Another reason that the Torah portion of Bamidbar is always read right before Shavuot, the time of the giving of Torah: to teach you that if you want to merit receiving Torah, you must make yourself like the wilderness, to have a great measure of humility and to feel no reason for pride, to know that you are bare and lacking all, like the wilderness. (**Rabbi D. Shoham, in Itturei Torah**)
3. The wilderness is the place of our journey...The harsh inner reality of the wilderness purifies whatever traces of enslavement we still carry. This wilderness is the midwife of our new life, after long and hard labor. The wilderness forces us to face the resistance, ambivalence and self-delusion that has kept us from whole-heartedly receiving our birthright: the promised flow of milk and honey that is given to us, and through us, with each moment of life. The wilderness will scare out all our old ghosts and send them forth from the shadows into the full light of awareness. In the wilderness we are stripped of disguises. Defenses fall away. Each part within us is forced to show its true face. (**Rabbi Shefa Gold, Torah Journeys**)

Guiding Questions

Wilderness

1. Which, if any, of these teachings corresponds to your experience of being in a wilderness, actual or figurative
2. What is wilderness?
3. Why did we receive the torah in the wilderness?
4. Did being in the wilderness create the optimal conditions to receive the gift of Torah?
5. Why is wilderness so appealing to some and so terrifying for others

Counting

1. Who is counted in each tribe?
2. Who is doing the counting?
3. What are the implications of who is and isn't counted?
4. How are tribes divided?? How might this relate to your family?
Community?
5. Return to the moment when you felt recognized as part of a community.
 - 1) What were the advantages and disadvantages of being part of the group?
 - 2) You could also consider the moment when you didn't feel recognized as part of a community.
 - 3) What were the advantages and disadvantages of being part of the group?
 - 4) Has that changed over time?