

Given the centrality of Israel in Jewish tradition one might have expected that the Torah would have been given in Jerusalem. Yet our tradition is quite insistent that the Torah had to be given in the wilderness.

One reason is that the Torah, God's revelation, needed to be accessible to all the peoples of the world, and not just the Jews, but it goes further than that.

There is much discussion about how we must be like the wilderness in order to receive the Torah. The rabbis argue that there is something about the wilderness, its emptiness, its ownerless-ness, its lack of distractions, which makes it suitable for spiritual transformation.

Moses found God in the wilderness. He needed to leave Egypt, remove himself both from his high status in the Pharaoh's palace, and the danger that followed his striking the task master, to be in a place where he could hear God's call.

Elijah, at a time of great discouragement in his life, similarly flees to the wilderness, and that is where he finds God.

"And, behold, the ETERNAL passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the ETERNAL; but the ETERNAL was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the ETERNAL was not in the

earthquake: ¹² And after the earthquake a fire; but the ETERNAL was not in the fire: and after the fire, a still small voice or as some translate it- the sound of quiet stillness”.

The Revelation at Sinai is heralded by fire and smoke, by the sound of the shofar getting ever louder, but the revelation itself, may have been something much quieter. Perhaps the people heard the Ten Commandments, but not the entire Torah, or perhaps only the first commandment before they said to Moses, this is too frightening for us, you go for us. Or according to some traditions just the first word, ANI, I AM, or perhaps just the first letter, Alef, the sound of quiet stillness.

Being in the wilderness has been how some people describe their period of mourning a loved one. It is like a wilderness in that it feels barren and unfriendly. It is like a wilderness in that it is a place of uncertainty, where one lacks familiar landmarks, where one feels that it would be so easy to be lost forever. Our tradition teaches that this wilderness is difficult and unwelcome, but that there are also gifts found in the wilderness that are not accessible to us in any other place.

The Israelites found the wilderness difficult—the story of their sojourn there, the book of Numbers, is mostly a book of complaints and kvetching. But it is in the

wilderness that the people received the manna, and the protection of the clouds of glory by day and the pillar of fire by night. It is there that they learned how to live a new life, one very different than the one they had lived in Egypt.

As we gather for Yizkor this evening, it is with the hope that during your time of wandering in the desert, there was sustenance provided by others, like the manna in the desert. We pray that you found some guideposts to lead you through the difficult time as the Israelites had the cloud and pillar. We recognize our role to be both the providers of these gifts, and a recipient, as the cycle of our lives turns and shifts. Above all we pray that like Elijah in his darkest hour, that in your time of wandering in the wilderness, the still small voice was there for you, and that your travels lead you to a new stage in your life, one which nourishes new beginnings as well as endings.