

# Dvar Torah by Rabbi Chanoch Yeres

to his community at

Beit Knesset Beit Yisrael, Yemin Moshe

*Graciously shared with PhiloTorah*

## Bamidbar

There is a practice that the beginning of the Book of Bamidbar should be read in the synagogue on the Shabbat before Shavuot. We begin to read Bamidbar this week as a prelude to the holiday that we will celebrate next week.

*Ed. note: There are years when Bamidbar is the Shabbat before the one right before Shavuot, but Bamidbar is usually read on the Shabbat right before Chag. This does not change the point of this D'var Torah.*

The relationship of Bamidbar to Shavuot is not only a matter of coincidence, but also one of requirement. We frequently double up the Torah readings of prior weeks, in order to permit the reading of Bamidbar just before Shavuot.

The Torah reading of Shavuot itself begins with a reference to Bamidbar, to the wilderness of Sinai. The whole Shavuot story takes place in the barren wastes of the Sinai desert. By contrast, the holiday of Shavuot is also called Chag haBikurim, the Festival of the First Fruits, a time of green and blossoming.

At first glance, one might suggest that these two observations are contradictory ones. Midbar is a wasteland, a place barren of blooming. Bikurim is the first fruits symbolizing blossoming. How do these concepts merge to identify one festival?

Perhaps, the contrast has an obvious meaning. The world without Torah, is a midbar, a barren wasteland. With Torah, it is bikurim, a blossoming orchid. Moreover, a world without Torah, though it may appear to be a paradise, quickly becomes a wasted desert. And a world with Torah, though it may be vast and forbidding, like a desert, can become a Gan Eden, a paradise.

Shavuot was not only a day of giving the Torah, but a day of re-creating the world. Until that point, the world was a midbar - a TOHU-VAVOHU, a void. Our sages see the physical creation of the universe as an empty performance, until the Torah was given. Commenting on the concluding phrase of Creation: "And it was evening, and it was morning: The Sixth Day", our Sages proclaim that this refers not only to the Sixth day of Creation, but to the sixth day of Sivan, as well, to the festival of Shavuot. For G-d, as it were, made the whole of creation conditional,

pending the acceptance of the Torah by Israel. If the Torah will be accepted by mankind as the framework of civilized existence, then heaven and earth and all that they contain, will have found fulfillment.

The Jew who reads Bamidbar Sinai knows that he must accept the Torah if he is to transform this midbar into a descent place for growth. If he does not reach out to Shavuot and Kabbalat haTorah, then he remains with bamidbar, lost in a desert, one insignificant number amongst the many. In accepting the Torah and committing oneself to Torah life, man plants in that wilderness and brings forth fruit. By doing so, one fulfills the prophetic vision of Yeshayahu (51:3) - "He has transformed the wilderness into Paradise, and the wasteland into the Garden of the Lrd." 