

Text Study on Becoming the Wilderness  
By David Buckman and Rabbi Jennifer Clayman  
Temple Emanu-El, Westfield, NJ  
Religious School Structure Task Force

ברכת לימוד תורה/Blessing for Torah Study

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו,  
וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסּוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה:

*Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav,  
v'tzivanu la'a'sok b'divrei Torah.*

Praised are you, Adonai, sovereign of the world, for sharing your holiness with us through your mitzvot, and commanding us to occupy ourselves with words of Torah.

Numbers 1:1

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי בְּאֶהֱל מוֹעֵד בְּאֶחָד  
לְחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשֵּׁנִית לְצֵאתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר:

**Adonai spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai** in the Tent of Meeting on the first [day] of the second month, in the second year of their going-out from the land of Egypt, saying...

From B'midbar Rabbah (Numbers Rabbah) 1:7

כָּל מִי שֶׁאֵינוֹ עוֹשֶׂה עֲצֻמוֹ בְּמִדְבָּר הֶפְקֵר אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל  
לְקַנּוֹת אֶת הַחֲכָמָה וְהַתּוֹרָה לְכַדְּ נֹאמֵר "בְּמִדְבָּר סִינַי."

One who does not make himself like the wilderness, **hefker**, it is impossible for him to attain wisdom or Torah. Therefore, it is written, "...in the wilderness of Sinai..."

הֶפְקֵר = ownerless

In what ways is wilderness *hefker*, or like something that is *hefker*?

What would it mean for us to make ourselves *hefker*?

What are the Rabbis saying that you have to be, in order to learn Torah?

from *Honey from the Rock*, by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner

Wilderness is not just a desert through which we wandered for forty years. It is a way of being. A place that demands being open to the flow of life around you. A place that demands being honest with yourself without regard to the cost in personal anxiety. A place that demands being present with all of yourself.

In the wilderness your possessions cannot surround you. Your preconceptions cannot protect you. Your logic cannot promise you the future. Your guilt can no longer place you safely in the past. You are left alone each day with an immediacy that astonishes, chastens, and exults. You see the world as if for the first time.

\* \* \*

The wilderness is not just a desert through which we wandered for forty years. It is a way of being. Even if only just for a moment now and then each day. For it is the only way to begin.

כָּל מִי שֶׁאֵינוֹ עוֹשֶׂה עֲצֻמוֹ בְּמִדְבָּר הֶפְקֵר אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לְקַנּוֹת אֶת  
הַחֲכָמָה וְהַתּוֹרָה לְכַדְּ נֹאמֵר "בְּמִדְבָּר סִינַי."

*One who does not make himself ownerless-open like the wilderness, will be unable to acquire human wisdom or God's word. That is why what was said, was said in the wilderness, Sinai.*

\* \* \*

In what ways is this task force like the Israelites in the wilderness?

What would it mean for us to make ourselves *hefker*, like the wilderness?

What can the idea of wilderness teach us about the process of educational change?