
Found in the Desert

*"[God] found them in a desert region,
In an empty howling waste.
[God] engirded them, watched over them,
Guarded them as the pupil of God's eye.
Like an eagle who rouses its nestlings,
Gliding down to its young..." (Deut. 32:10-11).*

Our Torah passage is taken from the 'Song of Moses' just prior to Moses' death and to the Israelites' long-awaited entry into the promised land after forty years in the wilderness. Moses is remembering the divine kindnesses bestowed by God on the Israelites in the story of their developing relationship.

Jewish sages and scholars who have studied this passage over the centuries notice a curious 'absence' in the text. Asks Abravanel,¹ "What was the reason that Moses did not mention here the departure from Egypt which was the first kindness...prior to their entering the wilderness? How could he say that God found them in the wilderness when God really had found them in Egypt?" Why is the exodus event absent?

Anticipating such a question, Rashi² sees the wilderness emphasis as showing forth Israel's faithfulness to God. He associates this passage with the words found in the prophetic utterance of Jeremiah where the Lord remembers with pleasure Israel's fidelity:

*"The devotion of your youth,
Your love as a bride—
How you followed me in the wilderness"*
(Jer.2:2).

Says Rashi, it was in the desert that the Israelites "accepted upon themselves God's Torah and kingship...They were drawn by faith..."

But does this approach really answer Abravanel's question? After all, Israel exhibited a great deal of rebellion in the wilderness and our Torah portion reproves Israel for its waywardness. Can we suggest another reason why Moses begins his Song not with the Exodus from Egypt but with the wilderness experience?

An alternative view from Leibowitz³ reminds us to think about the audience Moses is addressing. They are not the generation that left Egypt but rather the next generation that was raised in the desert. Perhaps, then, Moses is speaking to the experience closest to the hearts of his listeners. Then again, continues Leibowitz, a stronger explanation can be found by pondering the real purpose of the Exodus... It was not simply to remove the people from the slavery of Egypt but to lead them somewhere positively extraordinary: to be a nation who is given the Torah, God's 'teaching,' thus entering into covenant with God... and this sublime vocational calling takes place in the wilderness, at Sinai.

In this light, the image of the eagle (which also appears just before the giving of the Torah on Sinai) is certainly apt.

*"You have seen...how I bore you on eagles wings
and brought you to Me" (Exodus 19:4).*

"Like an eagle who rouses its nestlings..."
(Deuteronomy 32:11).

The image of a parent eagle teaching its young to fly illustrates the action of God who prepares Israel to receive the gift of Torah and thus to grow into a life of covenant, of living as a holy nation, as God's own treasured people.

Reflecting on this image, how might it speak to us about the way the Lord continues to call and teach each person. Also, how does the above discussion contribute to our appreciation of the wilderness/desert as an image and theme encountered in the Bible? What further insights emerged from your Torah reading?

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1. Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508)
 2. Rashi: Rabbi Shelomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105)
 3. Nehama Leibowitz (1905-1997)

Bibliography: Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Torah Commentary* (Vermont, 2000); Herczeg et al, *The Torah: with Rashi's Commentary* (New York: Mesorah, 2001); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (New York, 1996).
Scripture: JPS.

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