

The book of Numbers begins with the statement:

“And the Eternal spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai. (Numbers 1:1)”

The Rabbis understand this statement as referring to the giving of the Torah in the desert and ask why God would decide to reveal the greatest truths of history and the cosmos in the middle of nowhere. Would it not have made more sense to reveal the Torah in the midst of one of the ancient world’s great civilizations to show God’s power? Or why not wait till the Israelites had reached Israel and reveal the Torah there, cementing the connection between God’s revelation and Promised Land?

One midrash suggests that this was done to ensure the Torah was understood to be the property of all people equally. Had it been given in Israel the nations of the world could have denied it had anything to with them. And there would have been dissension in Israel with tribes claiming the Torah had been given in their territory and thus their exclusive property. As the Torah is a universal truth, a gift to the whole world, neither of these possibilities would be desirable and so God gave it in the middle of nowhere, a place that belonged to no one so the Torah could belong to everyone.

Another midrash argues that the Torah, a revelation of wisdom, was given in the wilderness to teach us an important lesson about wisdom. It says: Anyone who does not make themselves “ownerless” (or “throw himself open”) like the wilderness is not capable of acquiring Wisdom and Torah.

Truth and wisdom come when we are open to them. Perhaps the most dangerous phrase in the English language is “Perception is reality.” It concretizes our natural tendency to close our eyes and our minds to realities that do not fall within the bounds of our narrow preconceptions. When we already believe we know how the world is, we stop looking for wisdom. This is only natural. As human beings we are limited by nature and our perceptions of reality are limited by the scope of our personal experience of the world we live in. But to truly be wise we must be willing to look beyond the limits of our perception and learn from the experiences of others whose lives are different from our own. We must remind ourselves of what it meant to be a people in the wilderness. In doing so, we open our minds to all that we see and not just what we

want to see, and we open our hearts to the wonders of God, of the world and of each other.

Rabbi Emanuel