

Silence

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The fourth book of the Torah, Bamidbar, literally means “desert.” It covers the main events of the forty-year period of wandering through Sinai and the Arava into what is Jordan today, before reaching the East Bank of the River Jordan.

In mystical terms words have significance on many different levels. The most obvious example is the Hebrew root SFR which means a book SeFeR which involves reading. The same root SoFeR is a scribe, and applies to writing. The root LiSFoR is to count. And finally, to speak is LeSaFeR. The same root applies to all different ways in which we communicate and understand each other. Only the vowels change. When we look at a text or an object or a person there are so many ways of relating. There are many different levels, superficially, emotionally, objectively, with involvement or dispassionately, with commitment or detachment. Understanding a person, a text or an idea can involve a lot of different approaches or it can be simplified and thereby reduced to banality.

MIDBAR, wilderness, is another example of a word with multiple meanings. It has the same root as DaBeR to speak, and DaVaR an object. On the face of it a desert is empty. It is a silent zone of physical emptiness. But an expert, whether a scientist or a Bedouin, will be able to see amazing stories and worlds in the rocks and sands. Biologists discover the creatures and organisms that eke out a secret life in what appears to be barren lifelessness. Even silent objects can “speak” to one. The desert is a place of such silence that one can almost hear it. There is none of the constant noises and hums and rumbles and sirens that assail our ears and consciousness all the time in cities.

That is why the greatest of spiritual minds (of all religions) came alive in the desert. You need silence to be able to open your mind to God (just as you need people to be sensitive to humanity). The Israelites were taken out of metropolitan Egypt and into the empty silent desert to be more receptive to a Divine message. And its why in today’s busy noisy world we need occasions to take a break and retreat into a religious atmosphere.