

In the Desert

I remember a conversation I had with someone when I was at a down time. Something I had wanted had fallen through and I was left in a lurch. The person I spoke to said to me “You’re in the *midbar*,” the desert. That is a very difficult place to be.

We’ve all been in the *midbar* at various points in our lives. We’ve been stuck, not knowing where to turn. Our ancestors were at such a point in this week’s portion. While they were taking the census to prepare for battle upon reaching the Land of Israel, they were only in the 2nd year of their wandering, having 38 more to go. They had no idea about the ups and downs they would have, the battles they would fight, the rebellions lurking in their midst. Yet 38 years later they saw the light at the end of the tunnel, the Promised Land.

Having lived in a desert, I remember hiking and seeing sand and dirt everywhere I went. Sometimes I got lost and could not find my way back or to my destination. At other times I found an oasis, a source of

sustenance (perhaps a kairn, or trail marker) to get me through a difficult stretch.

We wish we could always touch the Promised Land. Yet being in the *midbar* is part of our life's journey. Not knowing where to turn or what to look for is a common challenge. At the same time, if we had all the answers at the outset, we would never grow. If we did not have to go through the treacherous terrain of the *midbar*, we would remain stunted in place.

This book of the Torah is about the struggles Israel had to encounter along the journey in order to become the people ready to conquer the Promised Land. It is not always easy to read about what our ancestors did, whether the Ten Spies, Korach, the quivering for quail, the remembrance of free meat in Egypt, the gossiping about Moses' wife, the striking of the rock rather than speaking to it. Yet we need to recognize that without these mishaps there would have been no room for growth. At times a fatal mistake is made: Moses striking the rock precludes him from entering the Land of Israel. That might be unfair but

our actions have consequences, and we cannot take them back. What we learn from them, however, will hopefully take us out of the *midbar* and into the Promised Land.

As we enter into the journey where we celebrate the giving of the Torah, let us remember that the journey from slavery to freedom is a process. Let us have compassion on our ancestors, forgiving them for their mishaps. Let us also have compassion on ourselves when we fall short as well. When we find ourselves in the *midbar*, uncertain of which direction to go, may we have patience and resolve, and may our faith in G-d and our strength lead us in the right direction for us at this given moment in our lives.

One person who has left the *midbar* for the Promised Land is Beth Blumenstock, known for her shirts with the universities' names in Hebrew. Beth is well-known at JJC as Stephanie, Alex and Melinda's mother. Her daughters return to do their B'nai Mitzvah Haftarot and to lead the Prayer for the State of Israel, as they did so beautifully today. Yet Beth is accomplished in her own right. She is extremely generous,

offering rides to people to shul and giving small gifts to others. She always has a smile on her face and a kind word to say to everyone. Today, right before we read about the giving of the Torah, she has chosen to take on the mantle of Torah and receive her Hebrew name.

We honor Beth today by bestowing upon her two Hebrew names after her grandmother Regina. Ruhama comes from *rahamim*, meaning compassion. We know the compassion and care that Beth has shown to so many in our congregation through her loving, kind presence. She knows just how to bring a smile to people's faces when they are down and to go the extra mile in visiting someone at a time of need. What a perfect name for her to take on.

Beila comes from the Hebrew Bilhah. At first I was perplexed why so many Yiddish names derive from Bilhah, one of Jacob's handmaiden. Then I recognized that she bore the first two of the children through Rachel's line, Dan and Naphtali. In other words, she gave life when Rachel could not. It was not easy to be in the background: the text indicates that Rachel had authority over Bilhah, even naming the

children she bore. With that being said, Bilhah was a crucial figure in being able to begin Rachel's line with Jacob.

Beth often shies from the limelight, not liking to take credit for things yet making important contributions behind the scenes. That is why it is so wonderful to honor her today as she acquired two beautiful Hebrew names. She is certainly one who is not in the desert but is bound for the Promised Land. In order to mark this joyous occasion fittingly, I ask that we turn to Page 841 and read responsively.