



5 stages in the wilderness

Suggestion: As you follow the Israelites' wilderness trek, keep a 'log book', noting key places and events. It will assist your memory and imagination as the journey unfolds. Names will recur in the text, and the events of those places will be significant for understanding future events described in the Torah.

1. Marah.

After three days without water in the wilderness of Shur, the Israelites come to Marah where the water is bitter. (15:23) The people grumble against Moses. Moses cries out to the Lord. The water is made sweet.

2. Elim.

Their campsite at Elim is beside a plentiful watersource: 12 springs and 70 palm trees. (15:27)

3. Wilderness of Sin.

Somewhere in the Sinai peninsula food supplies are running low and the people pine for the 'fleshpots' and bread of Egypt. They grumble against Moses who cries out to the

Lord. The Lord responds with the gift of meat (quail) and bread (manna). See Chapter 16.

4. Rephidim.

At this camp the people lack water and again grumble against Moses. By this time Moses is at the end of his tether, and fearful: "*What shall I do with this people? Before long they will be stoning me!*" (17:4).

5. Mount Horeb.

In reponse to the Lord's instruction, Moses goes to Mt Horeb (another name for Mt Sinai). In the sight of the elders of Israel he strikes the rock. Water flows and the site is named **Massah** and **Meribah**. (17:7)

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

Let's be honest: how often do we Catholics go to church, listen to the first reading, usually selected from the Hebrew Scriptures ('Old Testament'), and find ourselves completely at a loss as to what it is talking about. Often it's because we do not know our bible well enough. Names, places and events in the text, which are obviously significant enough for the Church to have a particular reading proclaimed on a given day, wash over us as a strange and sometimes tedious vocabulary.

True, this may not be everyone's experience, and it may not be at every Mass. But it happens often enough in our congregations to be concerned. How can we improve our biblical literacy? How can we help one another to discover the vitality, solace, challenge and delight of God's Word?

There are, of course, many ways to work at a solution. This *Light of Torah* series makes a contribution by inviting parishioners to read the Torah, the first five books of the bible, over the course of a year, drawing on insights from the Jewish tradition and learning helpful techniques for interpretation from traditional wisdom.



Exodus 13:17—17:16

Beshalach:
[he] let go'



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 13:17–17:16

This is the first Torah portion in the biblical sequence which deals with the Israelites' wilderness trek to the promised land. The people have only just won their freedom through miraculous events at the Red Sea, and already they are complaining: food is scarce, the water tastes bitter... *we'd be better off in Egypt!* The grumblings of the Israelites and the leadership frustrations of Moses will be a familiar theme as we continue our Torah reading, so it is interesting to pause to consider this early example of it.

Tasting Torah

Moses to them: *"Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you try the Lord?"* (Exodus 17:2)

Pay close attention to the desert journey described in Exodus 15:22-17:7. It may help to sketch a list of their encampments after setting out from the Red Sea: Marah, Elim, the wilderness of Sin, Rephidim (the site of rebellion) and finally the wonder of water flowing from rock at Mt Horeb. (see overleaf)

At each stage, follow the water-supply situation, the people's complaints, the response of Moses, the miracles of God. With your havrutah partner ponder the text, put yourself in the shoes of the characters. Consider the various relationships: Moses and people; God and people; Moses and God... With whom do your empathies lie?

Touching Torah

Now, let's hone in on the rebellion at Rephidim (17:1-7) and join the sages in puzzling over this phrase:

"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Pass before the people...'" (17:5).

In response to Moses who is upset and struggling, God is about to bring forth water from the rock that Moses is told to strike. But why this apparently superfluous instruction to 'pass in front of the people'? Would it change anything if omitted? What purpose does it serve? Having entered deeply into the rebellion scene, draw on your prayerful, creative energies: how do you interpret this phrase in the context of the exodus story?

Depthing Torah

As Moses vents his frustration perhaps we are thinking that he deserves an extra pat on the back or a word of assurance from God for all his unappreciated efforts. But look how our puzzling phrase is interpreted by the Midrash:

*"The Holy One blessed be He answered Moses: Is that the way you talk? Pass on before the people and we shall see who will stone you! [Moses finds the people standing in respect.] How often have I told you not to order them about, but to lead them like a shepherd his flock; remember it was for their sake that I brought you out of Egypt..."*¹

Rashi² interprets similarly and simply:

"And see if they stone you. Why have you slandered my children?"

The Zohar³ is even more explicit:

"God replied: Now is not the time to stand up for your rights. Are you in their power or Mine?"

In one subtle phrase, the Torah puts the predicament in perspective: God's priority is not to reassure an anxious leader whose feelings have been hurt; it is to show relentless love for his people; to believe in them and expect the best of them. A tough but necessary leadership lesson for his chosen servant Moses.

Doing Torah

Share your response to this interpretation. Do you interpret differently? As God teaches Moses about leadership, how is God teaching you in your unique leadership role in life?



More from the tradition

Echoing midrashic commentary on 17:4, Nehama Leibowitz⁴ says:

"Moses does not use the affectionate term 'my people' ... but the distant one of 'this people'. The Almighty, on the other hand, understands the feelings of His people. They had not shaken off the dust and mortar of Egypt; the task master's shout was still ringing in their ears... [God's] answer was full of compassion and understanding."

It is interesting to recall that Moses had not shared the people's experience of slavery.

1. Midrash Tanhuma Beshallah 22

2. Rashi: 11th. c. Torah scholar

3. Zohar: commentary from the tradition of Jewish mysticism. First publicized in 13th c. Spain.

4. Leibowitz: one of Israel's greatest Torah teachers in the 20th c.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996). Scripture: JPS.