

Date: 9 Tammuz 5786 (June 24, 2026)

Torah Portion: Chukat / Balak

Topic: No Worries in the Wilderness

It is written, “The well that the princes dug, that the nobles of the people excavated, through the lawgiver, with their staffs” (Num. 21:18). In its literal sense, the verse refers to the miraculous well that accompanied Yisrael in the Wilderness, supplying water and sustaining vegetation throughout their journeys. Yet the Sages understood the well as an allusion to the Torah itself, which was given to Yisrael as a gift in the Wilderness.

Why was the Torah given in the Wilderness? Had it been given in the Land of Yisrael, the tribe in whose territory it was revealed might have claimed exclusive precedence over it. Therefore, Elohim gave the Torah in a place belonging to no tribe, so that every Yisraelite would stand equally before it. The Torah is not the inheritance of one family, one tribe, or one class of people; it is the inheritance of the entire congregation of Yaakov, as it is written, “Moshe commanded us a Torah, an inheritance of the assembly of Yaakov” (Deut. 33:4).

The Midrash offers another explanation. Why was the Torah given in the Wilderness? To teach that just as a wilderness is neither sown nor cultivated, so too one who accepts the yoke of Torah upon himself is relieved of the yoke of foreign kingdoms and the excessive burdens of worldly concerns. Who truly upholds the Torah? The one who makes himself like a wilderness, distancing himself from the distractions of material pursuits and dedicating himself to the service of YHWH.

According to its plain sense, the Midrash teaches that success in Torah study requires a measure of detachment from material pleasures. One need not abandon the world entirely, but he must learn to be content with necessities rather than luxuries. As the Mishnah teaches, “This is the way of Torah: Eat bread with salt, drink water in measure, sleep upon the ground, live a life of hardship, and labor in Torah” (Avot 6:4). Torah flourishes most readily in a heart that is not enslaved to physical indulgence.

Yet R’ Aharon Kotler perceived a deeper meaning. The Midrash is not merely speaking about material simplicity; it is teaching the necessity of mental focus. To maximize one's attainments in Torah, a person must protect himself from distractions. He must learn to remove from his consciousness the endless stream of diversions that compete for his attention until, in a sense, he can imagine himself dwelling in a wilderness. This is a crucial discipline, for one who engages in Torah is occupied with the most valuable pursuit in Elohim’s world. Precisely for that reason, he can expect vigorous opposition from the *yetzer hara*, which seeks to interrupt, divert, and diminish his study.

The primary tactic of the *yetzer hara* is not always overt sin. More often it fills the mind with worries. It burdens a person with anxiety over daily concerns, real or imagined fears, past mistakes that cannot be changed, future possibilities that may never occur, and matters entirely beyond his control. By crowding the mind with unnecessary concerns, it leaves little room for contemplation of the Torah.

The wisdom of Scripture points to the same danger. “The cares of this world” can choke what has been planted in the heart, preventing it from bearing fruit. Likewise, David declared, “When my anxious thoughts multiplied within me, Your comforts delighted my soul” (Ps. 94:19). The battle for Torah is often fought not against open rebellion but against mental distraction.

As part of this strategy, the *yetzer hara* may even lure a Torah student into worthy activities if they will distract him from his primary obligation. In this vein, the Talmud records that R’ Abahu sent his son to study under R’ Yochanan in Tiberias. When he heard that his son had become renowned for his acts of *chesed*, particularly for burying the dead, he sent him a letter of reproach: “Was it for lack of graves in Caesarea that I sent you to Tiberias?” (Yerushalmi Pesachim 3:7). The Gemara explains that in this case others were available to perform the *mitzvah*. Had there been no one else, leaving Torah study would not merely have been permissible but obligatory. Nevertheless, the account demonstrates that even noble pursuits can become distractions when they draw a person away from the task to which Elohim has presently called him.

A Daily Bread

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The Zohar develops this idea even further. It teaches that the Wilderness was uniquely suited for the giving of the Torah because it is a place of emptiness and self-nullification. Before divine wisdom can fill a person, he must first create space within himself. Just as the wilderness is ownerless and open to all, so the soul must become free of arrogance, self-importance, and attachment to worldly status. The Torah descends most readily into a vessel emptied of self. For this reason Moshe, the greatest recipient of Torah, is described as “very humble, more than any man on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3).

The Tanya expresses a similar principle. It teaches that the distractions of the world derive their power from the *kelipot*, the external husks that conceal divine truth. The soul's task is not necessarily to flee the world but to refuse to be dominated by it. A person may engage in work, family responsibilities, and acts of kindness, yet inwardly remain attached to YHWH. The challenge is to prevent worldly concerns from occupying the throne of the mind. When a person allows his thoughts to be consumed by anxiety, ambition, or endless distraction, the divine soul is hindered from expressing itself. But when he disciplines his thoughts and directs them toward Torah and service, he transforms his mind into a dwelling place for holiness.

The Renewed Covenant echoes this same spiritual principle. Yehoshua frequently withdrew into solitary places to pray and commune with His Father (Luke 5:16). Before beginning His public ministry, He spent forty days in the wilderness, demonstrating that revelation is often preceded by separation and focused devotion. He also warned that “the cares of this age, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word” (Mark 4:19). Similarly, Shaul exhorted believers to “set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col. 3:2). These teachings do not condemn ordinary responsibilities; rather, they warn against allowing them to dominate the heart and obscure the things of Elohim.

In light of these challenges, the Midrash teaches that to prevail in Torah study one must learn to “make himself like a wilderness.” Just as a person living in an empty wasteland, removed from the distractions of society, possesses little property to manage, few entertainments to pursue, and few peripheral concerns to occupy his thoughts, so the student of Torah must strive to quiet the noise within his soul. He must silence needless worries, cast aside nonessential demands upon his attention, and create an inner wilderness where the voice of YHWH can be heard.

The well in the Wilderness therefore symbolizes more than a miraculous source of water. It represents the Torah itself, the living water that sustains the soul. Just as the physical well accompanied Yisrael throughout their journey, so the Torah accompanies and nourishes all who devote themselves to it. Yet its waters are drawn most deeply by those who make themselves like the Wilderness—humble, receptive, undistracted, and wholly available to receive the wisdom that flows from YHWH.

As Yishayahu declares, “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters” (Isa. 55:1). The invitation is open to all. But to drink deeply from those waters, one must first learn the lesson of the Wilderness.

Shalom.