

# LIMITLESS LIMITATION

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*Hashem spoke to Moshe in Midbar Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting*

Be'er Mayim Chaim: Were Bamidbar the first *chumash*, this opening would be entirely appropriate. But it isn't. There is no gap between the three *chumashim* that precede it, other than a bit of space in the Torah scroll. The *Bnei Yisrael* arrived in the Sinai wilderness some weeks after leaving Egypt; they've been there ever since. There was no place to go between the end of Vayikra and the beginning of our *chumash*. So why begin Bamidbar with a place marker that we don't need? Come to think of it, mentioning the Tent of Meeting/ *ohel moed* strikes us as equally unnecessary. We have long become used to finding Hashem's Word emanating from that place to the exclusion of all others.

The Torah alludes here to an important reality about our comprehension of and relationship with Hashem. A beautiful *mashal*<sup>[2]</sup> conveys the thought. It tells of a king who travels to a part of the realm that he did not usually frequent. When the inhabitants of a city along the planned route of royal travel got wind of the monarch's impending visit, they were seized with fear. Not wanting to see how the king would exercise his considerable power, they fled. Arriving in the city, the royal entourage found no one home. Literally.

The next city along the route was not different. Word of the royal visit had gotten out. Having heard much about the king, the subjects were not eager to learn of his purpose, his wishes, or see the consequences of his displeasure. So they left as well. The king arrived at a ghost town.

The king's itinerary next took him a bit off the main road, passing through a desolate and mostly forsaken area. Here, too, the residents of a small village found out about the imminent arrival of the king, but reacted differently. They knew little about matters of the court. None had ever travelled to the capital of the realm, there to learn about the king's exploits, and his power. They felt genuine delight and privilege. They were eager to host such a guest – something they had never imagined would happen. Their joy and happiness was met with a similar reaction by the king, who finally found subjects who were willing to engage him.

The *mashal* tells us about the encounter between HKBH and Man. We all remember *pesukim* that speak of the sea, mountains, angels – all of them shaken to the core by Hashem's presence, shrinking from His approach, and fleeing His immediacy. How is it that the *Bnei Yisrael* were able to stand their ground and listen to His voice, especially after the frightful show of lights and sounds that

introduced *Matan Torah*?

Ironically, perhaps, it was their simplicity that enabled them to stand at Sinai, rather than their sophistication. They were so distant from the ethereal heavens that they could react with joy, rather than become frozen with fear. (To be sure, even they balked after the first moments of revelation, fearing that their souls would explode from overload. But had they understood more about Hashem going into the experience, they would never have gotten as far before pulling the emergency cord.)

We understand now why the Torah makes a point of localizing the *dvar Hashem* in the *midbar*/wilderness. We would have been unable to listen to His words were it not for something resembling the uncomplicated, unsophisticated nature of the *midbar*. We could not have functioned without some innocence and cluelessness. We came to *matan Torah* with the characteristic of the *midbar*.

Lacking deeper awareness, we walked into something far larger than we could have imagined – and gained the benefits of the encounter. Having stood literally where angels feared to tread, we quickly learned that we were infinitely more removed from Hashem's essence than we understood previously. This greatly humbled us. In other words, we found ourselves at the small, unassuming mountain of Sinai that symbolizes according to Chazal understatement and humility. We benefited from both *midbar* and Sinai.

And so it must always be. Our first encounters with HKBH may take place with child-like innocence. They allow us to come close enough that we can learn more deeply and clearly how distant we are, how much awe and reverence we need to inject into our *avodah*.

It might make it easier for us if we realized that, *kevayachol*, HKBH had to do the same. Had He not limited the manifestation of His presence, nothing else could coexist. Certainly no thinking, sentient being could function through such a display. So He limited Himself, as it were. He spoke not from the heavens, or His "place," but contained His presence and voice in the small space of the Tent of Meeting, the *ohel moed*.

This, too, is alluded to in the first *pasuk* of Bamidbar, setting the stage for more to come, until the *aveiros* of *Bnei Yisroel* would upset this relationship, and cause some withdrawal of the *Shechinah*.

[1] Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Bamidbar 1:1

[2] Bamidbar Rabbah 1:2