

Bamidbar - Shavuos, Sivan 5777 (5.17)

Bamidbar - Shavuos: Of Flowers and Weeks

As we open the fourth book of Torah this Shabbos, *Sefer Bamidbar* and *Parshas Bamidbar*, we recall the vast and barren desert wilderness, *Bamidbar - in the desert*, wherein our forefathers and mothers roamed for forty years.

In the desert we wandered; in the desert we cried for water; in the desert we fought our arch enemy, Amalek; in the desert we quarreled with Moshe and rebelled against Hashem; and in the desert, we slandered the *Eretz Chemdah*, the cherished and desirable land, that Hashem had promised to give to us.

And yet... *Bamidbar*... In the desert, we became a nation of G-d, in the desert we became entrusted with the *Torah ha'Kedosha* (holy Torah); in the desert we pledged our allegiance to Hashem, promising that "*All that Hashem says, we will do and we will listen*" (Shemos 24:7). In the desert, we were transformed from slave men to free people.

בַּחֹדֶשׁ, הַשְּׁלִישִׁי, לְצֵאת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם--בְּיוֹם הַזֶּה, בָּאוּ מִדְּבַר סִינַי - *In the third month from when the Children of Israel left the land of Egypt, on that day, they came to the wilderness of Sinai.* וַיִּסְעוּ מֵרֶפְדִּים, וַיָּבֹאוּ מִדְּבַר סִינַי, וַיַּחֲנוּ, בְּמִדְבָּר; וַיַּחֲנוּ, שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל, נֶגֶד הָהָר - *And they journeyed from Refidim, and they came to the Wilderness of Sinai, and they camped in the desert; and Israel camped there opposite the mountain* (Shemos 19:1-2).

It is this momentous, nation-altering, life-changing event that we commemorate on *Zman Mattan Tora'sainu*, the *yomtov* of Shavuos.

One of the widespread customs observed in honor of Shavuos is to decorate the Shul and home with greenery and flowers. (It is interesting to point out that the Vilna Gaon [1720-1797, Lithuania] ruled that we should not decorate with flowers and trees on Shavuos, as the custom of the nations of the world is to decorate their places with trees on their holidays.)

Many interesting reasons are given for the prevalent custom of decorating with flowers and trees on Shavuos:

Moshe *Rabbeinu* was born on 7 Adar, and cast into the reeds along the Nile River three months later (Sivan). To remember the miracle that was done for him amongst the reeds, we decorate our holy places with greenery on Shavuos.

The greenery and flowers reminds us of the greenery that blossomed around Har Sinai when the Torah was given.

Chazal teach that when Hashem spoke the *Aseres ha'Dibros* (Ten Commandments), the entire world was full of fragrant spices. To recall this sweet scent of Torah, we decorate our holy places with fragrant blossoms.

Bamidbar - Shavuos, Sivan 5777 (5.17)

In the Torah, Shavuos is associated with the bringing of the *Bikkurim* (first fruits) as a homage to G-d. As we recall the bringing of the first fruits up to the *Beis Ha'Mikdash* (in Temple times) we decorate our shuls and homes with greenery and plants.

Another reason given is that Chazal teach that on the holiday of Shavuos, Hashem judges the earth and determines the abundance of the fruits of the trees for the coming year. Therefore, trees are placed in the shuls to remind us to daven for the trees and their fruits.

However, perhaps we can propose another reason for the flowers and trees that decorate our homes and shuls. A reason that is intrinsically linked to the name of the *Chag: Shavuos - Weeks*.

When the seed or bulb is first planted, it is just that: a seed or bulb. It looks so insignificant and paltry that it is hard to envision that life will yet sprout forth. And then we take that seed or bulb, and bury it in a portion of dank, dark, damp earth. We cover the seed and bulb and stand back to admire our work.

But what, really, is there to admire!? What, in fact, is there to show for our efforts in gardening, for our work in the dirt, for our planting of the bulb or seed? On day 1, truthfully, there is not much to show, except the dirt of the garden.

And, yet, we wait and hope, watch and anticipate, for the day when that seed sprouts, as it bursts forth from its confines and reaches the surface! On day 7, we see that there is life! One tiny leaf is growing...

On day 14, that one leaf is now two, and the plant is taller. On day 21, two become three, three become four, four sprout buds. On day 28, the buds begin to open, slowly, slowly, from their tight enclosures...

On day 35 we marvel at the beautiful plant before us! Is it possible, that just five weeks ago, this was nothing but a speck in the dirt, a seed in the garden, a bulb underground!?

On day 42, we gasp as we see the blossoms before our eyes. In just six weeks, look how far our little plant has come. From dirt to air, from dark to light, from being buried to being alive, from earth to heavens - how it has grown!

And, then, somehow, by the grace of G-d, and with much effort and perseverance on our part, on day 49, that little seed is a blossoming flower. The color is vibrant, the scent is intoxicating, the petals a vivid green, the soil has become its home.

Shavuos - The Festival of Weeks. Over the past seven weeks, we have gone from slave man to free people: we have gone from the mud of Egypt to the light of Torah, from the 49th level of impurity to the highest heights of Torah.

Bamidbar - Shavuot, Sivan 5777 (5.17)

Day by day: 1 to 2, 2 to 3, 3 to 4...48 to 49, we have counted up and out of the impurities of Egypt and have reached the holiness of Sinai.

Indeed, let the greenery and flowers remind us all of who we are, where we have come from, and how much we have grown. And most of all, let those flowers remind us that even if all you see is dirt, beneath the surface, beauty and life is just waiting to burst forth.

As water nourishes the seed in our garden, so too, the waters of Torah (A"Z 5b) nurture us, as we grow onwards and upwards.

וְעַתָּה, אִם-שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי, וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם, אֶת-בְּרִיתִי--וְהָיִיתֶם לִי סִגְלָה מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים, כִּי-לִי כָּל-הָאָרֶץ -
And now, if you surely listen to My voice, and guard My covenant, you will be for Me a treasure from all the nations, for the whole earth is Mine (Shemos 19:5).

Wishing you a flower-filled, meaningful, uplifting, and rewarding חג שבועות שמח.