

**Comments on Bemidbar**  
**Rabbi Eliot Malomet May 20, 2023 29 Iyyar 5783**

<p>וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה  בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי  כָּל מִי שֶׁאֵינוֹ עוֹשֶׂה  עַצְמוֹ  כְּמִדְבַר הַקֶּקֶר  אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לְקַבֵּץ  אֶת הַחֲכָמָה וְהַתּוֹרָה  לְקַדֵּךְ נַאֲמַר:  בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי.  בְּמִדְבַר רַבָּה א:</p>	<p><i>And God spoke to Moses  in the wilderness of Sinai  One who does not make  her/himself  as the wilderness, unclaimed  cannot acquire  wisdom and Torah  therefore it says,  in the wilderness.  Bemidbar Rabbah 1:7</i></p>
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The metaphor of *person as desert* runs through the interpretive history of this verse like a vein of gold. In general, it is a metaphor for humility, which is to say that a person comes to Torah with no prior positions, no predispositions, or prejudices, or with a readiness and willingness to learn the way that the desert appears always ready to receive precipitation in order to produce even the smallest kind of vegetation. The *desert as metaphor* is a very captivating idea. Lee Bollinger, surely unaware of this week's parasha, cited this metaphor earlier this week in his final commencement address as President of Columbia University.<sup>1</sup> To paraphrase his central point: to acquire knowledge, we need to be like a wilderness because human nature, "is not naturally open to other beliefs and ideas. We are made of intolerance, not tolerance." Human beings have the remarkable tendency to acquire beliefs and opinions and be stuck in them. "We need to reject these natural impulses," he said. Perhaps that is the deeper sense of the rich interpretive vein. We are naturally inclined to hold fast to our views, support them by sources that comfort us and reinforce us, and resist the argumentation and logic of views that we oppose. Our natural disposition leads to a culture of polarization. Augmented by media, we can become closed to the thinking of others. To *make oneself into a desert* then means to be open, to resist the natural impulse of intolerance. Bollinger went on to describe 10 ways to cultivate a more open disposition.

<sup>1</sup> This address can be accessed at <https://president.columbia.edu/content/2023-commencement-address>.

<sup>2</sup> Lecture given at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, The Franz Rosenzweig Research Center for German Jewish

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| 1. Know your bad impulses.                                   |
| 2. Feel our vast ignorance.                                  |
| 3. Work at seeing the complexity of things, not the answers. |
| 4. Make it a habit.  |
| 5. Ask more questions than provide answers.                  |
| 6. Imagine you are the person you disagree with.             |
| 7. See complexity in ordinary life.                          |
| 8. Be open and empathetic in relationships.                  |
| 9. Keep notes.   |
| 10. Let age help you out.                                    |

Cultivating any one of those suggestions would contribute to a more open disposition. In that vein, I think we should argue with every one of those suggestions!

What if we dug further into the idea of *desert as metaphor*? German-Israeli writer Chaim Noll argues that the desert always represents potential.<sup>2</sup> He notes that Ben Gurion spearheaded the creation of an institute dedicated to desert research because the desert, "despite its apparent emptiness is full of enormous potentials for man's future."



Thus:  
***make yourself into a desert***  
means,  
***understand your human potential.***

Other ideas from Chaim Noll	Metaphorical Meaning
The desert...is rich in micro-organisms, insects and animals...The greatest surprise is the abundance of vegetable life hidden in the desert soil that begins to unfold the moment the soil is watered.	<i>If you make yourself a desert, a little sprinkling of the water of Torah will yield incredible surprises in your life.</i>
Man in the empty desert is a beginner, he develops a more optimistic, future-orientated psychological structure.	<i>To make yourself into a desert means to always see yourself as a beginner. It fills you with hope</i>
Desert border zones were the cradles of civilization. The development of higher cultures had its beginning in frontier areas where desert and water meet...	<i>Make yourself aware of the boundaries of your knowledge. Your greatest growth will emerge at that boundary, the way all great civilizations emerged.</i>

Literature and Cultural History, May 7th 2006.  
[https://www.academia.edu/34459744/The\\_Desert\\_as\\_a\\_Metaphor\\_of\\_Human\\_Life](https://www.academia.edu/34459744/The_Desert_as_a_Metaphor_of_Human_Life)

ואלה שמות האנשים אשר יעמדו אתכם					
אור	שדי	בן שדיאור	צור	אלי	אליצור
לשמעון	שלמיאל	שלמיאל	אל	אל	אל
ליהודה	נחשון	נחשון	נחשון	נחשון	נחשון
ליששכר	נתן	נתן	אל	אל	אל
לזבולן	אליאב	אליאב	אב	אב	אב
לבני יוסף					
לעפרים	אלישמע	אלישמע	אלי	אלי	אלי
למנשה	גמליאל	גמליאל	גמלי	גמלי	גמלי
לבנימין	אבידן	אבידן	אבי	אבי	אבי
לדן	אחיעזר	אחיעזר	אחי	אחי	אחי
לאשר	פגעיאל	פגעיאל	פגעי	פגעי	פגעי
לגד	אליסף	אליסף	אל	אל	אל
לנפתלי	אחירע	אחירע	אחי	אחי	אחי

Tribe	Chieftain	Meaning	Son of	Meaning
Reuben	Eli tzur	My God is my Rock	Shdey ur	Shaddai is my light
Shim'on	Shlumi el	My peace is my God	Tzuri Shaddai	My Rock is Shaddai
Yehuda	Nahshon	?	Ami Nadav	My people has given
Yissachar	Netan El	Given by God	Tzuar	
Zevulun	Eli Av	My God is my father	Heilon	
Sons of Joseph				
Ephraim	Eli Shama	My God heard	Ami hud	My people is glory
Menashe	Gamli El	Bestowed upon me by my God	Pedah Tzur	The Rock redeemed
Benjamin	Avi dan	My God judges	Gidoni	
Dan	Ahi ezer	My brother is my strength	Ami Shaddai	My people with Shaddai
Asher	Pag'i El	God met me	Achran	
Gad	El Yasaf	God will add	Deu El	Know God
Naphtali	Ahi Ra	My brother is my companion	Eynan	

*Bemidbar* is, among other things, a book of lists. In almost every chapter there is a list of some sort. In this parasha alone, we have several lists: the list of the tribal chieftains who will assist in the census, the list of the populations of each tribe, the list of the tribal encampments, the genealogy of Aaron, the list of the Levite families and their populations, the duties of the Levitical families. Above is a chart of the names of the tribal chieftains and their fathers. We note that there are some very interesting characteristics to the names in that list and that there are some important differences between the names of the fathers and the names of

their chieftain sons. 7/12 of the fathers' names (58%) are compound names. 11/12 of their sons names (91%) are compound names. Perhaps that tells us that there was a bit of a generational shift in naming between the generation of the fathers and the generation of the sons. We can offer the following explanation. 8/12 of the sons' names have a divine element in them compared to 5/12 for the fathers' names. The fathers were the last parental generation of Egyptian slavery. While some have names with a divine element, the majority were named without any expression of divine connection or hope. However, the majority of their Egyptian born sons, on the other hand, the leaders of the Exodus Generation (Gen-X!) were named with a sense of promise and divine connection. That means that when it came to naming their children, the second-to-last generation of Egyptian-born Israelites (ie. the fathers) were already deeply hopeful and eagerly anticipating the redemption that was to come. In Jewish life today, we have also experienced a transition in naming our children. Names that were popular a generation ago, have fallen by the wayside. New names have taken their place. Israelis currently prefer non-biblical names (see chart) and American Jews, since the Six-Day-War of June '67 (whose anniversary we just observed on Friday with Yom Yerushalayim) are also trending towards more contemporary Hebrew names. That demonstrates the Israelification of American Jewish culture.

PRE-1940	1940-1960	1960-1980	1980-1999	2000 -
1. Sarah	1. Ester	1. Michal	1. Adi	1. Noa
2. Rachel	2. Rachel	2. Rachel	2. Rachel	2. Shira
3. Ester	3. Sarah	3. Ester	3. Michal	3. Maya
4. Hanna	4. Miriam	4. Yael	4. Yael	4. Tamar
5. Miriam	5. Hanna	5. Anat	5. Sarah	5. Yael
6. Rivka	6. Shoshana	6. Miriam	6. Shani	6. Sarah
7. Leah	7. Rivka	7. Keren	7. Noah	7. Talya
8. Khaya	8. Rut	8. Ronit	8. Ester	8. Michal
9. Rosa	9. Yehudit	9. Orly	9. Khen	9. Adi
10. Shoshana	10. Leah	10. Merav	10. Hila	10. Roni
PRE-1940	1940-1960	1960-1980	1980-1999	2000 -
1. Yossef	1. Yossef	1. David	1. David	1. Noam
2. Avraham	2. David	2. Moshe	2. Daniel	2. Itay
3. Moshe	3. Moshe	3. Yossef	3. Moshe	3. Ori
4. Yaakov	4. Yaakov	4. Avraham	4. Yossef	4. Daniel
5. Issac	5. Avraham	5. Yaakov	5. Avraham	5. David
6. David	6. Issac	6. Issac	6. Yaakov	6. Yossef
7. Haim	7. Michael	7. Michael	7. Roy	7. Moshe
8. Shlomo	8. Haim	8. Alexander	8. Isaac	8. Yehonatan
9. Shmuel	9. Shlomo	9. Haim	9. Michael	9. Ido
10. Mordechai	10. Eliyahu	10. Shlomo	10. Shay	10. Avraham