

## Parashat Bamidbar: Milk, Shaddai, and Abundance

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Dear Friends,

Tomorrow evening you are all invited to join Veahavta's traditional Tikkun Leil Shavu'ot program. Four 20-minute TED-style presentations will remind us all of the richness of our sacred texts. Before, in between, and after, we will indulge in delicious cheesecakes, fruit of the land, dips, pastries and wine. We welcome your edible contributions, and hope to see as many of you as possible at the Tikkun (there will be a track in Hebrew and in English).  
May 19th (tomorrow night), 9:45 PM through 00:00 (midnight). All are welcome (no charge, of course).

This Shabbat we begin a new book, Bamidbar - In the Wilderness. Am Yisrael is preparing to leave Mount Sinai after camping at its base for a year. It is there, at the foot of this mountain, that Am Yisrael was really born.

Before continuing on their journey to the Promised Land, an extensive census is taken, the first ever.

The most popular name among the heads of the tribes in the census is "Shaddai". Three of the leaders have the word "Shaddai" in their name:  
"These are the names of the men who shall assist you: From Reuben, Elizur son of **Shedeur**. From Simeon, Shelumiel son of **Zurishaddai**... From Dan, Ahiezer son of **Ammishaddai**...." (Bamidbar 1:5-16)

This Sunday - Shavu'ot - we will eat dairy products and read the Book of Ruth. Naomi returns from "**Sdei** Mo'av" after an exile of ten years. Her husband and two sons have died. Her friends in Bethlehem remembered her as a proud, wealthy woman, and now see her as a broken vessel:  
"Is this Naomi?' And she said to them: 'Call me not Naomi, call me **Marah**; for **Shaddai** has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the LORD has brought me back home empty; why call you me Naomi, seeing the LORD has testified against me, and **Shaddai** has afflicted me?" (Ruth 1:19-21)

Who is Shaddai?

Shaddai is the first Israelite God! In Israelite consciousness, He preceded Adonai. Of course, God is one, but human beings meet different aspects of Him at every stage

of their development. The God of children does not appear as the God of soldiers, or the God of women in labor, or the God of grandmothers.

El Shaddai is the God of the book of Bereishit. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah knew no other.

Avraham and Sarah were infertile, as were Isaac and Rivka, and Yaakov and Rachel. The God to whom they prayed, begged for children, and brought sacrifices to was naturally the God of fertility - El Shaddai. (Shaddai literally means "my breasts".) But then the gates of fertility opened wide, so much so, that even Pharaoh - the king of the land of fertility - tried to curb their natural growth by attempting to kill every son born. Once this small family became a nation, El-Shaddai was abandoned. There was no use for Him anymore.

Now, in the desert, the People meet a different aspect of the same, single God - the God of freedom and of the God of seeking and searching. These new aspects are called Y.H.V.H. El-Shaddai has not disappeared forever. Every time abundance ceases, the womb closes, and continuity is interrupted, Shaddai appears again. Anyone who has been in this situation is familiar with this aspect of God.

The nation being counted in the desert this week comes from a prosperous place. They left Egypt with a great deal of human and material abundance.

This, perhaps, is the secret of the journey of Bamidbar which we begin this week: to stop taking the abundance for granted; to remember how to appreciate the fruit of our womb; to acknowledge the blessing of fertility; to recall the inner strength we have to call upon in times of need, of deprivation, when we wish to plead.

Naomi too, a few hundred years later, went to Sdei Mo'av wealthy and content. Her husband and two sons turned their backs on their people who were facing famine and deprivation in Beit-Lechem Yehuda. Elimelech and Naomi had everything they needed, but they sought more, and they refused (according to the Midrash) to share their wealth with the needy. So they left. However, El Shaddai, who was so generous to Naomi and her family until this point, did not go with them to Sdei Mo'av. In their arrogance they took their abundance for granted and turned their backs to El-Shaddai.

When one turns his back to El-Shaddai, El-Shaddai abandons too! The Jerusalem Talmud (Brachot, 14.4) states that: if you abandon me for one single day, I will abandon you for two.

And indeed, Elimelech dies, his two sons die too, and Naomi is left childless and poor.

But El Shaddai did not really abandon Naomi. He never abandons anyone forever. Naomi did not want to leave the country. She was the victim of the greed and betrayal of the men in her family. When Naomi is finally free to return to Judea, she does so right away. And from that moment on, the wheel begins to turn in the other direction: from despair, bitterness, poverty, and humiliation, she returns to the circle of fertility and the seemingly-impossible occurs: she embraces a grandson.

Both the book of Bamidbar - in the Wilderness - and the book of Ruth, describe a journey from abundance and plenty, which are taken for granted, to scarcity, in which gratitude and generosity are the keys for change.

El Shaddai is always ignored, abandoned and forgotten in times of plenty. This is how we humans are. We take things for granted.

This coming Shabbat, with its parasha - in the Wilderness - and the festival of Shavu'ot that follows, remind us of this forgotten secret: abundance seems to vanish when it is taken for granted or when we take credit for it. Things turn around again when gratitude, humility and generosity are restored.

Abundance - Shaddai - is always there, flowing from the infinite Source into the finite creation. However, somehow, our awareness of it, and our recognition that nothing really originates from us and nothing is ours to hoard, opens the floodgates for more of it to flow.

In the Land of Egypt the Nile River always flows - regardless of human consciousness. In the The Land of Israel water comes from rain and not from the rivers. It "falls" from the "heavens", so to speak. Throughout the Torah God reminds the Israelites - and we read it twice a day in the Sh'ma - that the rains depend on our consciousness and on our deeds. When we are connected to the Source of abundance, the Land of Israel flows... not only with water, but with milk and honey too.

Ruth - the feminine version of Avraham - and the entire festival of Shavu'ot, serve as reminders of this deep deep truth: Milk, Shaddai, and abundance flow when the heart and mind are grateful.

We have so much; so much to be thankful for, and we need to share with those in need.

El-Shaddai is a very sensitive God. Not zealous, but sensitive - not the same thing!

Be grateful. Be generous.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach,

Elisha