

## Episode 30 Bemidbar

The word for desert in Hebrew is “midbar.” The word for speech in Hebrew is “devar.” Devar is also the same word for “thing.” The word for I am speaking is “ani medeber.” That is such an important point, I am going to make it again. The word for desert in Hebrew is “midbar.” The word for speech in Hebrew is “devar.” Devar is also the same word for “thing.” The word for I am speaking is “ani medeber.”

Once you see this connection, you immediately wonder how you might have never noticed it before. They are the exact same words, except that desert has a “mem” letter at the front. Me-devar. Devar. Yet, I never quite figured this out on my own.

When I was living in Israel, I was at a Shabbat lunch in Tzfat with a Canadian and now Canadian-Israeli family. They had made *Aliyah* a few years before. Their Hebrew was not so impressive—not that mine was much better—but they were at least trying to learn. At one point during the meal, the husband got everyone’s attention. He said to us: do you know why the desert is called *Midbar*. Hmm, good question. I had never thought about it before. Because, he said, building up the suspense for a moment, because *the desert speaks*. When he said this, I experienced a brief moment of awe. Ah, *midbar*, *dvar*—the desert and speech have the same root. He naturally anticipated everyone’s follow-up question. If, he said, you go out into the desert, it will *speak* to you. The wind, the sand, the birds. He took a drink of wine. Here is where I began to get a bit suspicious. Sand doesn’t make noise. Are there even birds in the desert? What the hell does that mean, the desert speaks to you? Sounds like a bunch of BS.

About two years later, I found myself at a dinner with two Israelis and a handful of Americans in Eilat. The conversation was getting pretty dull, so I decided to think of ways to entertain or at least educate myself. It was then that I remembered the conversation in Tzfat with the Canadian gentleman.

“You know how the word for desert is *midbar*, right?” I asked my two native-Hebrew speaking companions. “I heard that it’s called this because the desert *speaks*. Is that true?”

The two Israeli guys both burst out laughing. Okay, so clearly that *wasn’t* the reason.

“So, then what *is* the reason?” I asked. “Why does desert have the same letters as speaking?”

Silence. They didn’t know either. But then, as Israelis tend to do, they began to argue with each other. They began to debate as to what the connection between desert and speaking and thing could be. Finally, one of them, who coincidentally was named Moshe, got the upper hand.

“It’s because *devar* means thing,” he said. “And *meh* means from. The desert is the place which is away *from* all things, which is empty of things.”

Moshe was starting to make a bit of sense. At least compared to the Canadian guy.

As Moshe stated, *meh* in Hebrew is a preposition meaning *from*. *Dvar* means both speech and thing. And as I discussed in episode 27, in the pre-ancient world, thing and speech were intertwined ideas if not the same, well, *thing*.

In preparation for this week’s episode, I decided to do a bit of research on the connection between *midbar* and *devar*. What I found wasn’t very helpful. The late Rabbi Sachs said that the connection is because it was in the desert that the Hebrews *heard* God’s speeches. Yet, there is a problem with this interpretation. This interpretation is based only on the world of the Torah

where God *diber* with the Hebrews in the *midbar*. Yet, it doesn't account whatsoever for *diber* and *midbar* as words on their own terms.

I then looked further on the internet. I found a very unappealing Facebook video with a guy with the most American-sounding accent I've ever heard—yes, ever heard. And of course, someone with *this* American of an accent could only be talking about you-know-who, one of the most famous Jews of them all, Jesus. This guy's theory was that Jesus was in the desert—*midbar*—and he *spoke*—*midaber*—to the people his gospel. This was an interpretation similar to Rabbi Sachs', although without the elegance and gravitas.

The more I consider this question, the more the explanation of my Israeli friend Moshe makes sense. What my friend Moshe hit upon is that the desert is symbolic of a place of *nothingness*. Actually, the English word “desert” is a good way to understand this. Desert is the same root as *deserted*, that is, a place emptied of objects, emptied of things. The desert is the ultimate “ground zero.” Now, as we discussed in episode 27, the word “thing” has been degraded today to simply mean “object.” But in both ancient Hebrew, old English, old German, and likely countless other languages, *thing* used to mean *something* of great significance, of import, of totality. This is why, as I discussed in episode 27, the Torah continually uses the word “*devar*” when God speaks or gives speeches to Moshe. They're not just up there *chatting* on Mount Sinai. A *transmission* is occurring. A *transmission* of speech or of things—at that time, they were one and the same.

The parsha for this week is *Bih-Midbar*. In the desert. Yet, we could also read this as in the place emptied of all things. *Bih-Midbar*: In the place of emptiness, of nothingness. This is not only the name of the parsha for this week, but also the name of the fourth of the Torah, which we call in English, *Numbers*.

We just finished, therefore, the third book of the Torah, *Vayikra*, or in English, *Leviticus*. Nearly every chapter and parsha in *Vayikra* begins with the line: *Vayidiber Elohim el Moshe Leemor*. God spoke to Moses, saying. What I want you to focus on, however, is this first word. *Vayideber, vayideber, vayideber*. Over and over again in the last book, the paragraph will begin with *deber*—thing, speech. Never with *midbar, meh-devar*—away from things, away from speech, desert. Yet, when we open up this fourth book of the Torah, we are immediately hit with this word: *bihmidbar*.

The Torah is trying to tell us something here. Hundreds of times in a row, we get the word “vayidaber.” And this time we get, “bihmidbar.” So, what is the Torah trying to tell us?

To understand what the Torah wants to tell us, we need to take a step back and forget what we think we know about the concept of *nothingness*. With this word “bemidbar”—in the place removed from all things, the desert—the Torah is rather blatantly telling us: welcome, my son, welcome to the world of nothingness. Nothing, quite literally, no-thing, has a bad reputation. Bob Dylan once said, “when you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose.” Well, that's cold comfort if I have ever heard. I guess it's good to have nothing to lose, but I certainly don't want to descend to the point where I ain't got nothing. We also associate nothingness with *nihilism*, the idea that life is meaningless. Nihilists are life's buzzkill, life's killjoy, *par excellence*. Nihilists have done irreparable damage to the notion of *nothingness*. Yet, the television series *Seinfeld* has, perhaps more than any other phenomenon, poisoned and sickened the reputation of *nothingness*.

*Seinfeld* is known, and is self-proclaimed as, a “show about *nothing*.” Yet, in fact, the show is not about *nothing* at all. The word “nothing” here is being recklessly misused. *Seinfeld* is a show about trivialities. The plots of *Seinfeld* are based on the most unglorified, mundane,

routine, frivolous situations: waiting for a table at a Chinese restaurant, going to a famous soup counter, trying to figure out why your girlfriend wears the same dress every time you meet. The famous motto of the *Seinfeld* writers was, “no hugging, no learning.” In comparison to previous sitcoms, *Seinfeld* conspicuously avoided any kind of moralizing, character development, or grandiose plots. But that doesn’t mean it’s a show about nothing. If anything, it is a show about how what seems at first glance to be uninteresting is actually a fascinating phenomenon: waiting at a restaurant, trying to find your car in a parking garage, sleeping under your desk at work. *Seinfeld* isn’t a nihilistic show. If anything, is it the opposite. It conveys how much fascination there is to discover in seemingly everyday life, how we tend to dismiss the seeming banalities of the everyday when these moments are, in fact, packed with intrigue. *Seinfeld* is cynical, dark, pessimistic. That doesn’t mean it’s about *nothing* or even that it’s nihilistic. Yet, the problem with calling *Seinfeld* a “show about nothing” is that it tricks people into thinking that nothing is the equivalent of trifling, or that people who have no core values (as the *Seinfeld* characters did not) are preachers of nothingness.

*Nothingness* is a concept which is much more delicate, intricate, and mysterious. To create art which truly depicts *nothingness* is no small task. When you picture nothingness, you might just see a white room, or outer space without the stars, or maybe even a desert. But these things are not really nothingness. A white room is a white room. A black chasm is a black chasm. A desert is a desert. According to Kabbalah, nothingness is an almost ungraspable concept. But, according to Kabbalah, the closest we can get to understanding nothingness is to imagine that we are looking through the back of our head. What happens when you look behind you? What do you see? Absolutely nothing. Not white, not black—just, nothing. Can you look with the eye in the back of your head? Probably not. That gives you an idea of how difficult it is to envision *nothingness*.

Unlike *Seinfeld*, which was not a show about nothing, the literature of Franz Kafka seems to at times inspire to be literature about nothing. To better understand this, let’s look at his short story, written in 1922, entitled, “A Hunger Artist.” This story is about an artist, a performer, a savant, whose *art* is fasting. Crowds gather around him to see how long he can go without eating food. He is cheered by the crowds, laurel wreaths are heaped upon him, children stare at him in awe and wonder. Yet, what is his art, really? It is doing nothing. The more he does nothing—that is, stands in a cage and withers away—the greater is his accomplishment.

But the Hunger Artist can never really be an artist of *nothing* in the way he wishes. Because there is a rule that his manager places on him. After forty days, he must eat something. Forty days is the limit. Otherwise, the crowds become bored. They can no longer handle someone’s fasting for more than forty days. This infuriates the Hunger Artist. Why must he stop fasting? Why must he stop short of absolute nothingness when he is so close? Because nothingness cannot be grasped by the crowds. Here, Kafka seems to be drawing a parallel between the Hunger Artist and Moses. Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days in which he spoke directly to God, face-to-face, as it were. And Moses, like the Hunger Artist, ate no food and drank no water during this time. In short, he fasted. Yet, eventually, he had to come back down. He had to convey God’s message to the Hebrews. There is a sense in which had Moshe stayed on Mount Sinai longer than forty days, the message would have become too abstruse for the Hebrews to understand. Or put another way, God’s message would have come to close to nothingness to be understood by the Hebrews.

But artistic tastes change. The heyday of fasting begins to pass. Soon, the hunger artist finds himself alone in his cage. Audiences have lost their interest in him. He is a relic of another

era. Yet, the hunger artist does not give up on his craft of doing nothing. Now, nothing stands in the way of his total and ultimate fasting. He no longer must obey the forty-day limit. He therefore fasts and fasts for so long that even he loses count of the days. One day, he is found inside his cage. He has become so emaciated that the custodian can barely distinguish him from the straw on which he lies. We do not know exactly what happens to the hunger artist from that point. The custodian orders that the cage be swept up and cleaned out, much like Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* was swept away by the maid. There is a sense in which the Hunger Artist has dissolved, evaporated, vanished, merged with the straw on the floor of his cage. His art has reached its apex. He, and his art, have become *nothing*.

Now, here you might think, isn't this nihilistic? What good is art if its ultimate goal is to disappear? If we associate God with nothingness, isn't that saying that God doesn't exist, or that God is nothing? Isn't God *everything*, all *things*? Jewish mysticism, or the Kabbalah, teaches that nothingness is not God *per se*. Rather, nothingness is the closest one can come to *imagining* God. In the Kabbalah, is more real than anything else that exists. However, there is nothing in the human mind that can relate to God as He actually is. Nothingness, therefore, is the closest thing we can imagine to God. God and Nothingness share the distinct commonality that neither can be placed in any category, neither can be depicted, both are above all language, impression, all, quite literally, *things*. Kabbalah teaches that when one imagines *nothingness*, it is God which is just behind this nothingness.

The concept that nothingness situates us on the gateway to ultimate meaning is a matter which I discussed in episode nine. In meditation, it is taught that when we truly experience the moment, what we experience is a kind of nothingness. Yet, this experience of nothingness is when we are prepared to make the final leap into *nirvana*. Nietzsche expresses a similar idea in his philosophy. Nietzsche's entire philosophical mission, we might say, was to *overcome* nihilism. Yet, if you read Nietzsche's philosophy, it might at times sound nihilistic. There is no Truth, all values are relative, morality doesn't really exist. Yet, Nietzsche understood that to defeat nihilism, one must go deep into nihilism, deep into nothingness, and then emerge on the other side into ultimate meaning. For Nietzsche, it was the *Übermensch* who was to undertake this lofty task. For Kafka, it was the artist. And for the Hebrews, it was Moshe.

The nihilist, we might say, goes into nothingness and dwells there, luxuriates there, finds satisfaction in this empty world devoid of value, meaning, purpose. The Nietzschean, the Buddhist, the Hunger Artist, and the Hebrew, it would seem, go into nothingness not to dwell there but to use it as a ground zero on which to build anew. It is only when all has been deconstructed that real Truth and transcendence can emerge.

We are not yet done with this week's *parsha* of *Behmidbar*. The Hebrews now find themselves in the desert, in the emptiness, in the place of no-*thing*. But what does the Torah discuss immediately after this word *Midbar*. What is this week's *parsha* about? It is about the Hebrew military. After telling us that we are in the emptiness, the Torah then tells us how this emptiness is going to be filled. It goes through each Hebrew tribe and tells us how many thousands of soldiers can be found in each tribe. It then tells how the tribes will organize themselves as they march through the desert, the flags they will carry, the names of the commanders of each tribe. In total, the Hebrew army had now grown to the size of 603,550 troops.

Now, I know what you're thinking. Moses and God took us into the divinity and holiness of nothingness just so we could come out with an elaborate military parade? Isn't the Torah a peace-loving book about spirituality and Enlightenment. Is a military campaign really how we

want to use our coveted foray into nothingness? Well, before you jump all over the Torah, remember that we are dealing with the ancient world. A world before the United Nations, UNICEF, and the Hague. The Torah is one long saga leading up to the moment when the Hebrews will enter and conquer Israel to form a new homeland, the homeland which God promised Abraham. This is not just a military adventure; this is the Torah's reason-for-being, this is the entire purpose of the Exodus, the fulfillment of all of God's promises. This is, put another way, salvation. What transcendental meditation is for a Buddhist monk is the military conquest of Israel for the Hebrews. The assembling of the troops in the Sinai desert is no more or no less than the Tibetan monk's inhaling and exhaling of the breath of nirvana.

As the fourth book of the Torah opens, Moshe is now come down from Mount Sinai. The message from God has brought the Hebrews into the desert, into the nothingness. Now, in the *Midbar*, the Hebrews must decide where they will go from ground zero. And the Torah is clear what one should do when one ascends into the free realm of nothingness: one should take action, move forward, conquer.