This is a time when religion isn't looking so good. The news we read of religion is mostly to do with violent Muslim extremism, or of fundamentalist efforts to undo hard won fights for liberty in our own country. As we prepare for Shavuot, the holiday of receiving Torah, I want to examine what it means to actively envision religious tradition as a force for openness and unity, and I actually found a midrash on this week's parashah that inspired me in that regard.

We begin a new book of Torah this week, Bamidbar. Literally, Bamidbar means "In the wilderness," reflecting the fact the first verse of the book contains that the phrase, "Hashem spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai. One of the quirks of Torah commentary is that ancient commentators believed that every single word of Torah had to have deliberate meaning. Nothing could be superfluous or redundant. Given that the line "Hashem spoke to Moses" appears over and over again in Torah, multiple times in most parshiyot, the midrash I am about to share stems from an implicit question: Why, at the beginning of this book, does that phrase appear with the added location information: Bamidbar Sinai, in the wilderness of Sinai?

An early midrash, Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7, teaches:

"And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Wilderness"(Numbers 1:1)." Why in the Sinai wilderness? From here the sages taught, the Torah was given through three things: fire, water, and wilderness. [The midrash provides proof texts for each of those assertion. The prooftext for wilderness, is our verse, Numbers 1:1. Then the midrash asks:] And why was the Torah given through these three things? Because **just as these three are free to all the inhabitants of the world, so too are the words of Torah free for them.**

This is fascinating notion to me, especially given that our tradition tends to make a particularist claim to Torah. Multiple midrashim abound about why the Jewish people and no other received Torah, about how difficult it is to properly study Torah, about the distinction between those literate and illiterate in Torah. We'll be looking more at these midrashim in my teaching this coming Tuesday evening at our Tikkun Leil Shavuot.

And here we have this ancient midrash saying that Torah is equal opportunity, like fire, water, and wilderness. Though perhaps this is actually aspirational. Perhaps, like fire, water, and wilderness, Torah should be equal opportunity, but are in constant danger of being privatized and commodified.

We know fairly well what that looks like in regard to fire, water, and wilderness. Private utilities hike up rates for heating, belying the claim that fire is free to all. Activists all over the world continue to fight to stall and stop water privatization efforts in major cities. Recently, a US House Representative from Detroit, likely in response to the crisis in Flint, Michigan, introduced a bill to shore up funding for public water utilities and to close corporate loopholes. And we need look no further than the Oregon debate about the state of the Elliot state forest, to see that the accessibility of wilderness as a free public good remains more of a question than a fact. So the aspiration of food, water, and wilderness as "free to all of the inhabitants of the world," is alive and well - but the reality has not reached that aspiration.

What, then, does this comparison mean for Torah?

As I pondered this question, I remembered another story, which appears in several midrashic sources, particularly in Vayikra Rabbah:

Once Rabbi Yannai was walking along the way when he met a man who was elegantly dressed. He said to him, “Will the master be my guest?” He replied, “Yes.”

Rabbi Yannai then took him home and quizzed him in Bible, but he knew nothing; on Talmud, but he knew nothing; on Aggadah, but he knew nothing. Finally, he asked him to say Birkat hamazon, the grace after eating. The man, however, replied, “Let Yannai say grace in his house.”

Rabbi Yannai then said to him, “Can you repeat what I tell you?” The man answered, “Yes.” Rabbi Yannai then said: “Say: “Echol kalba pistei d’Yannai,” which means: ‘a dog has eaten Yannai’s bread.’”

The guest then rose up and seized Rabbi Yannai demanding, “Where is my inheritance that you have and are keeping from me?”

“What inheritance of yours do I have?”

He replied, “The children recite, ‘Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob’ (Deuteronomy 33:5). It is not written, ‘congregation of Yannai,’ but ‘congregation of Jacob.’” (Vayikra Rabbah 9).

Yannai clearly is not operating in a framework where Torah is free to all; but rather in a framework in which Torah is associated with wealth and stature, and when one appears to have the latter without the former, Yannai experiences it as betrayal.

I think the authors of the story share the aspiration that Torah be free to all, as they put the righteous indignation in the mouth of the ignorant man: “this is my inheritance, and you are withholding it!”

The ignorant man, despite his lack of formal learning, knows that Torah is as much his inheritance as it belongs to the learned and obviously arrogant Rabbi Yannai. Furthermore, he points out to Yannai that his learning, his commitment to religion, should lead him to compassion and generosity, rather than to arrogance.

In our historical moment, the lesson that Rabbi Yannai learns from the well-dressed but ignorant man is still important. There is a battle going on for the meaning of religion; with both secularists in the western cultures and religious fundamentalists of all kinds holding that the function of religion is to set up hierarchies, and to sow violence, division and domination. This week's terror attack in Manchester, for example, fuels that narrative, both for those who religiously support terror and those whose claim that that fact of terror delegitimizes any - or all - religion.

And yet there is also a vision, echoed in the first midrash, of religion as a source of equal opportunity inspiration, ideally as free to all as water, fuel and wilderness should be. That is the vision held, I dare say, by most of here. It's the vision held by the numerous Muslim organizations that have already started raising money to support the victims of the attack in Manchester. It's the vision that our neighbors hold when they show up in solidarity with us, and that we hold when we show up in solidarity with our neighbors: of Torah not as something that divides us, but that inspires us to show up better in the world for each other.

Of course this vision is not fully realized all of the time, any more than the aspiration that fire water and wilderness be free all of the time is realized. But it matters that we put our energy there. As we approach Shavuot, which is traditionally a sort of renewal of vows for the Jewish relationship with Torah, let's commit to being inspired by our tradition - not in a way that makes us arrogant, but in a way that helps us seek the good in other traditions as well, a way that makes us more open, more whole.