

# FIRE, WATER, AND THE DESERT

*by Shlomo Katz*

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**Bamidbar**

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Today's Learning:

Kil'ayim 9:3-4

Orach Chaim 102:1-3

Daf Yomi: Sukkah 44

Yerushalmi Shekalim 30

As this parashah opens, Hashem speaks to Moshe in the desert. Why in the desert - wasn't the entire Torah given to Moshe at Har Sinai? R' Zvi Hirsch Kalisher z"l (1795-1875) explains that it is partially from our verse that the midrash derives the lesson that the Torah is acquired through three things: fire, water, and the desert. What does this mean?

R' Kalisher writes: If one would be a scholar, it is not enough that he study Torah. Rather, a fire must burn within him that leads him to teach others and, if necessary, to jealously defend Hashem's honor. One cannot say that he loves Hashem if he does not devote himself to seeing that others live a Torah life as he does.

Sometimes, however, the fire must be doused with water. In order to influence others, one must

often speak softly, as it is written (Melachim I 19:12), "After the earthquake came a fire; 'Hashem is not in the fire.' After the fire came a still, thin sound." One who fears G-d must pay careful attention to how His people should be led - sometimes with "fire" and sometimes with "water." This is the symbolism of the burning bush which was not consumed, i.e., that a Torah scholar must burn like a fire but must not destroy his students.

Finally, in his personal life, the would be Torah scholar must live in a \_desert\_, i.e., he must live a life which is not devoted to chasing physical pleasures. Also, just as the desert is open to all, so the Torah scholar must be selfless and available to all. (Sefer Ha'berit: Bemidbar 1:1)

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"This is the census of Bnei Yisrael according to their fathers' households; . . . six hundred three thousand, five hundred and fifty"

(2:32)

Why are we told the total number of Bnei Yisrael again after we were told the number earlier in the parashah (in 1:46)? Rabbenu Bachya z"l (Spain; 1263-1340) explains that our verse in fact refers to a different census than the one in the previous chapter. That first count took place on the first day of Iyar (see 1:1), while this count took place on the twentieth of Iyar, as Bnei Yisrael prepared to break camp and leave Har Sinai (see 10:11). The Torah's intention is to teach us that a miracle occurred and \_not\_one\_person\_ died during those 20 days [although in a population the size of Bnei Yisrael one would have expected at least one death in 20 days]. (Midrash Rabbenu Bachya)

According to R' Yechezkel Landau z"l (died 1793; the "Noda B'Yehuda"), the miracle was even greater. We read in verse 9:6 that several Jews were tamei/ritually impure when Pesach arrived, and they were therefore unable to bring the Korban Pesach. The gemara (Sukkah 25a & b) asks who these tamei individuals were and offers three possible answers.

What is the gemara's question? asks R' Landau. Presumably these individuals were family members of someone who had died! It must be, he writes, that the gemara knew that not one person died during the entire period between the first census (Sh'mot 38:26) and the census described in our parashah, a period of six- and-a-half months. (Tziyun Le'nefesh Chayah: Sukkah 25)

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"Do not let the tribe of the family of Kehat be cut off from among the Levites."

(4:18)

The midrash comments on this verse: "'Do not let the tribe of Levi be cut off' - regarding this it is written (Tehilim 33:18), 'Behold, the eye of Hashem is on those who fear Him, upon those who await His kindness.' But, [the midrash asks,] do not all creations need Hashem's kindness? Nevertheless, the tribe of Levi awaits Hashem's kindness more than do others because they have no portion in the Land."

R' Yosef Yoizel Horowitz z"l (the "Alter of Novardok"; died 1919) asks: Why does the midrash misquote the pasuk? (The pasuk refers to the family of Kehat while the midrash speaks of all Levi'im.) He explains:

Our pasuk contains a mitzvah to recognize and protect the special status of the Levi'im from the family of Kehat, for they had the most important role of all Levi'im during the era of the mishkan. However, the pasuk cannot be understood literally to mean that the special role of the Kehat family will never be lost, for today, when there is no Temple, it is lost. The midrash therefore teaches us that there is another Levite-like role that can be attained today, not only by the family of Kehat and not only by Levi'im, but by all Jews. What is that role?

Our sages teach that working to earn a living is not inconsistent with the obligation to trust that Hashem will provide one's needs. Nevertheless, one who wants to is permitted to place his fate completely in Hashem's hands. In this way, one imitates the Levi'im. (Madregat Ha'adam: Darchei Habitachon, ch.g)

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Pirkei Avot

Rabbi Meir says: "One who studies Torah le'shmah/for its own sake merits many things . . ." (Chapter 6, mishnah 1)

R' Zvi Yehuda Kook z"l (1891-1982; Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav in Yerushalayim) taught: This mishnah speaks of the pinnacle of Torah study le'shmah. It is Hashem's will that the Torah's "potential" be brought out through our actions and our studies. This is what the Torah is about. It follows, that one who learns Torah le'shmah, for the sake of the Torah itself, attaches himself to the essence of Torah and is elevated by having realized the ideal existence. Every person must aspire to this ideal.

[Ed. Note: The concept of studying Torah for the sake of the Torah itself derives from the writings of R' Chaim of Volozhin. Briefly, it means that one should study Torah with the intent of knowing it, understanding it and adding his own insights to it, thereby making the Torah "bigger" (see Nefesh Hachaim 4:3). What R' Kook explains is that one who studies the Torah in this manner brings out the Torah's potential and thus fulfills G-d's will. R' Kook continues:]

If the Torah itself had not taught us that one is permitted to study Torah without the le'shmah aspect, we would assume that it was forbidden to do so. However, the Torah does teach us (Sotah 22b): "One should always study Torah and perform mitzvot, even not le'shmah, because from doing so not le'shmah, one will come to do so le'shmah." The value of Torah study which is not le'shmah, but whose goal is to reach the high level of le'shmah, is in the fact that it is a tool, like a step that one climbs to Torah study le'shmah. Just as a person's worth is revealed when he joins a group - "When I am alone, what am I?" [Avot 1:13] - so, too, the close connection between Torah study which is not

le'shmah and Torah study which is le'shmah gives the former a whole new meaning.

R' Kook adds: To the extent that we remember that the Torah comes from the Creator of the world, then there is value to [our service of Hashem even when it is on] other, lower levels. All levels [of serving Hashem] come from this premise, but they are not the goal. The way that leads to realizing the ideal of Torah study [le'shmah] is itself through Torah study.

The 48 things listed in this chapter are the way that Torah is acquired. There is no other way [to acquire Torah] and no step may be neglected. However, we must realize that the true worth of the steps listed here is only when they are coupled with the realization that G-d's will reveals itself in the Torah. Creation was strengthened by the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai. Today, too, yeshivot add to and strengthen the continued existence of the heavens and the earth. The Torah of the Creator of the world exists forever through us. We must remember on every step of our way this foundation that the Torah that we study is the Torah that was given by G-d from the Heavens. When there is a weakening of the connection between the different levels [of Torah study], then there is a general weakening. However, if there is an attachment to the recognition of [the need for] Torah le'shmah, then there is a general improvement in man's condition. (Kinyan Torah pp.10-11)

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### Letters from Our Sages

This week's letter was written by R' Samson Raphael Hirsch z"l (1808-1888) to Dr. Isaac Leeser z"l (1806-1868). The writer was the rabbi of Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany and the leading warrior for Torah-true Judaism in 19th century Germany. The letter's recipient, a layman, was the spiritual leader of the Orthodox community in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was also the founder and editor of the monthly The Occident, the first English language Orthodox periodical in the United States.

The letter is printed in Shemesh Marpeh, page 231, letter 29.

To Dr. Isaac Leeser, United States B"H, Frankfurt a.M., Wednesday night of Parashat Ki Tetze 5618 [August 18, 1858] Ketivah va'chatimah tova, peace, and all good things!

His honor:

We suffer from insufficient time, and therefore I must ask your forgiveness that I am answering your pleasing letter only now. When I returned from a long journey, I found your letter together with a great deal of work which forced me to delay answering letters for some time. Today I have some time, and I am using the time to clear away that which is pressing and important.

Honored sir! Do not let your spirit fall. Things are improving here in Germany too. True, progress is slow, but we hope that it touches the fundamentals. Our greatest sorrow is not the treachery of the traitors, but the indifference of the religious. However, this apathy is slowly diminishing, and it is our obligation to not falter but rather to awaken our compatriots - so long as our voice can reach them -

and to warn them to come to Hashem's aid against the mighty [see Shoftim 5:23], to protect and save our holy ones. If we do what is expected of us, the Holy One Blessed Is He will do His own when He is ready.

[The remainder of the letter addresses two halachic questions sent by Dr. Leaser. One question relates to the status of the child of intermarriage. The other question involves the disinterment of a woman's body in order to bury her in her husband's family plot.]

The small one, Samson, son of my father and master Raphael Hirsch Frankfurter zatzal

*Sponsored by The Siegel family, in memory of Dr. Manfred R Lehmann a"h father of Barbie Lehmann Siegel*

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