

DÉJÀ VU IN THE DESERT

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Bamidbar

Déjà vu in the Desert

R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194-1270; Spain and Eretz Yisrael) introduces the Book of Bemidbar as follows: After the Torah explained the laws of the korbanot / sacrifices in the third book (Vayikra), it begins to arrange in this book the laws that were commanded regarding the Ohel Mo'ed. The Torah already warned future generations regarding the sin of bringing impurity into the Mikdash or upon the sacrifices (Vayikra 5:2-3). Now, the Torah draws boundaries around the Mishkan as it did around Har Sinai so long as the Honor [the Shechinah] was there. Therefore the Torah commands (Bemidbar 1:51 & 18:7), "The non-kohen who comes close shall die," just as regarding one who approached Har Sinai it was said (Shmot 19:13), "For he shall surely be stoned or thrown down." Here, the Torah commands (Bemidbar 4:20), "But they shall not come and look as the [contents] of the holy are packed-up [to travel], lest they die," just as at Har Sinai the Torah warned (Shmot 19:21), "Lest they break through to Hashem to see, and a multitude of them will fall." Here the Torah commands (Bemidbar 18:5), "You shall safeguard the charge of the Holy and the charge of the Altar," just as there it said (Shmot 19:22-24), "Even the kohanim who approach Hashem should be prepared . . . but the kohanim, and the people--they shall not break through to ascend to Hashem."

Ramban continues: This Book deals [almost] entirely with mitzvot that applied only while they were in the desert, and with the miracles that were performed for them--they were a wonder. It relates that He began to give their enemies into their hands, and it commands how the Land should be divided. There are only a small number of mitzvot in this Book that are for all generations.

"The number of every male from one month of age and up . . . the keepers of the holy charge."
(3:28)

Rashi z"l (on verse 15) comments: As soon as the infant reached the age of one month, he could be counted as a "keeper of the holy charge."

R' Shimon Schwab z"l (1908-1995; rabbi of the "Breuer's" community in Washington Heights, N.Y.) asks: How can we be so certain that young Levi'im would grow up to be "keepers of the holy charge"? He answers:

The Levi'im of that generation knew the secret of successful Torah education. Specifically, we read about the tribe of Levi (Devarim 33:9), "The one who said of his father and mother, 'I have not favored him'; to his brothers he did not give recognition and his children he did not know; for they [the Levi'im] have observed Your word, and Your covenant they preserved." This means that parents told their children, "I love you more than everyone in the world except Hashem. Never forget that I love Hashem more than I love you." This, writes R' Schwab, was the secret of successful Jewish parenting, as demonstrated by the Levi'im. [R' Schwab related that his own father expressed this sentiment to his sons when the Four Sons were mentioned at the Pesach Seder.] (Selected Speeches p.100)

A related thought:

R' Shalom Mantzura z"l (Yemen; 1800-1884) writes that his father once came to a Jewish town where people cried when a child was born and rejoiced when a person died. The elder R' Mantzura wondered at this custom, and the townsfolk explained: When a child is born, we cry in prayer that he not go off the straight path when he grows up. In contrast, when a person dies righteous, we rejoice that he succeeded in living his life properly. Regarding this, King Shlomo wrote (Kohelet 12:13), "The sum of the matter, when all has been considered--fear God and keep His commandments, for that is man's whole [duty]."

I, too, continues the younger R' Mantzura, heard of a grandmother who prayed upon hearing of the birth of her grandson: "Master of the universe! If this child who was born to my son will live an eternal life in Your service and with awe of You, then protect him and strengthen him. But, if the opposite, G-d forbid, then please take him from us now." R' Mantzura records that that grandmother's prayer was answered, and the newborn grew up to be R' Yichiyeh ben Yosef Tzalach z"l [known as "Maharitz," one of the great sages of early 19th century Yemen, and the teacher of R' Mantzura's teachers].

Fortunate was that grandmother's lot, adds R' Mantzura. Similarly, he concludes, every parent should pray that his children will be dedicated to the service of His Name. (Ha'pedut V'ha'yeshuah p.40)

Pirkei Avot

"Ten miracles were performed for our ancestors in the Holy Temple: . . . (8) The people stood crowded together, yet had ample space to bow down, . . . (10) No one ever said, 'There is

insufficient space for me to stay overnight in Yerushalayim'." (Ch.5)

R' Chaim Palagi z"l (1788-1868; rabbi of Izmir, Turkey) cites three explanations of the tenth item on the list:

Rashi z"l explains that Yerushalayim provided adequate sustenance for all of its inhabitants and no resident had difficulty earning a living there.

Rabbeinu Yonah z"l explains that there was adequate room in Yerushalayim for all Jews who came there.

Some say that, no matter how crowded it was, the air was always fresh.

R' Palagi observes that these three praises of Yerushalayim are alluded to in the words of Birkat Hamazon, in which all of Eretz Yisrael is described as "chemdah, tovah, ur'chavah." "Chemdah" means "desirable," a reference to the pleasant air. "Tovah" means "good," and refers to the availability of a livelihood. Finally, "rechavah" means, "wide-open," a reference to there being enough space for all Jews. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Pninei Rav Chaim Palagi p.380)

R' Yitzchak Isaac Chaver z"l (1789-1852; rabbi of Suvalk, Lithuania) writes: Eretz Yisrael is not subject to the ordinary laws that govern time and space; rather, as more students of Torah settle there, it expands to accommodate them. Thus, in Yerushalayim, the capital of Torah, no one ever had trouble finding adequate lodgings. In the Bet Hamikdash, the seat of the Sanhedrin, it was even roomier--the people stood crowded together, yet had ample space to bow down. And, in the Holy of Holies, the Holy Aron, which held the Luchot, occupied no space at all. [The entire Holy of Holies was 20 amot wide, while the Aron was 1½ amot wide. Yet if one would measure the space on each side of the Aron, he would find a full ten amot there]. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Yad Mitzrayim: Potei'ach Yad)

Elsewhere in the Torah . . .

It is written in the name of R' Eliyahu z"l (the Vilna Gaon; 1720-1797): Torah is to the soul as rain is to the earth--it causes whatever was planted there to grow. If one planted beneficial seeds, they will grow. If one planted poisonous seeds, they will grow. Similarly, if one's heart is disposed toward good, Torah study will cause his fear of Heaven to grow. If one's heart is rebellious, Torah study will cause that poison in his heart to flourish, as is written (Hoshea 14:10): "The ways of Hashem are just--the righteous will walk in them, but sinners will stumble on them." This is what our Sages mean when they say (Shabbat 88b), "For those who use the Torah to go in the right direction, it is an elixir of life; in the other direction, a poison."

Therefore, continues the Vilna Gaon, every day, before one studies Torah, he must cleanse his heart of heretical thoughts and bad character traits which may be there, so that the Torah will be fertilizing

a pure heart. (Even Shleimah #11)

Memoirs

In 1629, while serving as rabbi of Prague, R' Yom Tov Lipman Heller z"l (1578-1654), author of the Mishnah commentary Tosafot Yom Tov, was imprisoned on a charge of insulting Christianity in his writings. That experience is the subject of his memoir "Megillat Eivah"--literally, "The Scroll of Hatred." In last week's excerpt, R' Heller related that he was placed under house arrest in Vienna, and that a royal commission of inquiry was to be appointed to determine his fate. He continues:

On Sunday, the 17th of Tammuz, after the commission mentioned above had already met, the municipal judge came to me with two police officers. In his hand was an order from the Chancellor, in the name of the Emperor, to take me to the prison where those condemned to death are imprisoned. This prison was in the home of the chief judge. After my plea and request, the judge released me from the police officers and said that he alone would walk with me. Many of the leading Jews of the city also went with me and spoke words to encourage and strengthen me. I remained in that prison all day and all night, until the next day, and they did not permit any Jew to speak with me--not even through the window. Hashem turned His kindness toward me, and all the prisoners treated me with respect; each and every one served me to the best of his ability. The next day, the chief judge gave me a room in his home upstairs and allowed the leading Jews to visit me.

On Tuesday, the 19th of Tammuz, toward evening, the activists succeeded in having me removed from that house and placed in the prison where the king's prisoners are imprisoned [borrowing the language of Bereishit 39:20, which Ramban z"l explains to mean that Yosef was not imprisoned with common criminals]. There I had more space, as well as a bed, table, chair and lamp. That building was on the street where the Jewish market was, and there was no shortage of Jews to sit with me and give me encouragement. I found favor, as well, in the prison warden's eyes, and he did not withhold from me anything that I requested.

On Wednesday, the 20th of Tammuz, the commission met. I was called to stand before them. First, they asked me why I praised the Talmud so highly in my introduction [to Ma'adanei Melech] when the Pope had ordered the Talmud burned; after all, all the Emperors are obligated to obey the Pope. I answered: The praise was directed to the people of my nation who are obligated to obey all the words of our Sages of blessed memory [in the Talmud], for that is the essence of the Torah. They asked me again why I wrote against their religion, as the Chancellor had asked me, and I gave the same answers. They released me to return to my prison. --To be continued--

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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