

REMOVING THE BIASES

by Rabbi Moshe Peretz Gilden

"And G-d spoke to Moshe in the Sinai desert." (Bamidbar/Numbers 1:1) Medrash Rabba (1:6) inquires about the Torah's emphasis that this conversation took place in the desert? The Medrash expounds that the Torah's motivation is to teach that the Torah was given in a desert with fire and water. Alternatively, the Medrash comments that anyone who does not make himself like a desert will not be able to acquire the Torah.

But how does one derive from the word "desert" that the Torah was given with fire and water? And what does the Medrash mean by making oneself like a desert?

Rabbi Chizkiyahu Eliezer Kahan (1) explains the answer stems from the two types of commandments we find in the Torah, the positive acts incumbent upon us to complete and the negative commandments from which we are implored to refrain. Thus, in order to properly observe G-d's will, we need to be permeated with two opposite forces. We need to have a burning, active side, comparable to fire, which continually seeks growth and elevation; at the same moment we must maintain a cool, passive side that, like water, is a natural coolant and seeks out the lowest point to which it can drop. But having these attributes is not sufficient. Mesilas Yesharim (2) writes that "one's evil inclination can distance many matters which can be made to look evil but in reality are good. It can also embrace many things that appear to be good but in reality are evil. One needs that his heart be completely straight with no motive to do anything other than what is pleasing to G-d." It is not enough to embrace the attributes that assist us in properly following G-d's commands, for one can find his energies placed in the wrong direction under the influence of one's own agenda. The Torah, therefore, emphasizes that G-d spoke to Moshe in the desert, a barren place that symbolizes complete humility. The G-d conscious Jew must be a desert, barren of his biases and personal agendas. Only then will he possess clarity when to engage his burning drive for growth and when to exercise his cool passivity. The byproduct of the Torah being given in the desert is the proper use of the attributes of fire and water.

We are now in the waning days of the count from Pesach, the festival when we relive the experience of our release from bondage, to Shavuot, when we experience again our acceptance of the Torah and the mitzvos (Divine commands). Our Sages teach us that just as our forebears used the seven week period to develop their relationship with G-d and with one another, we, too, are charged to refine our character in preparation for renewing this Covenant. Our success in this holy but most essential venture is assured when we excise from within ourselves the passions and desires that too

often lead us astray, when we make ourselves like a desert.

Have a Good Shabbos!

(1) in his volume of expositions in Torah ethics, Nachlas Eliezer

(2) "Path of the Just", one of the most popular Mussar (introspective Jewish self-improvement) works in Jewish literature; a moving, inspiring work describing how a thoughtful Jew may climb the ladder of purification until he attains the level of holiness; authored by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, 1707-1746 of Padua, Italy, and Amsterdam

Text Copyright © 2005 by [Rabbi Moshe Peretz Gilden](#) and **Torah.org**.

Kol HaKollel is a publication of The Milwaukee Kollel Center for Jewish Studies • 5007 West Keefe Avenue • Milwaukee, Wisconsin • 414-447-7999