

IT IS ALWAYS A JOURNEY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

It is Always a Journey¹

Every word of the Torah is eternal. There are no exceptions.

The purpose of every section of the Torah is to show us how to live our lives according to the Will of Hashem. Here, too, we can expect consistency. Every section of the Torah, every event recorded, should impact our behavior.

The description in our *parshah* of the unusual phenomena that attached themselves to the *Mishkan* would seem to belie the certainty of the last statements. What can they tell us thousands of years after having emerged from the wilderness and having no recent memory of the *Mishkan*?

Plenty, it turns out. One passage orients us in the direction of discovering the message. "On the day the *Mishkan* was set up, the cloud covered the *Mishkan*....and in the evening there would be upon the *Mishkan* like a fiery appearance until morning. So it would always be....According to the word of Hashem would *Bnei Yisrael* journey, and according to the word of Hashem would they encamp."²

Every person is charged with erecting his own *mishkan*. (The Torah commands, after all "They shall make for me a Sanctuary and I will dwell within them."³ Hashem does not endeavor to dwell within the Sanctuary, but to cause His Presence to dwell within us. Each of us must create the space, fashion the inner environment that can successfully invite an indwelling of the Divine.) Note that the Torah does not say, "On the day that Moshe set up the *Mishkan*," which would have been more direct and more accurate. It opts instead for the passive voice - on the day the *Mishkan* was set up. This broadens the *pasuk* beyond Moshe's *Mishkan* to the personal ones that we all labor to construct.

Our passage warns us about some of the pitfalls along the way. On the very day that a person brings the *Shechinah* to a firm standing within him, he can expect dark, obscuring clouds to envelop him. Hashem will send challenges that seem to darken his clarity, to shroud it in murkiness. The night - the natural time of darkness and hiddenness - will bring an unwanted fire: flare-ups of passions and desires that his *yetzer hora* has prepared for him. "So it will always be. The cloud will cover it, and an appearance of fire by night."⁴ This is the way of the world, the lot that a Jew can expect. He must know that there will always be challenges, tests that hide Hashem from him, and inflame him with *yetzer hora*.

"And whenever the cloud was lifted from atop the *Ohel*, afterwards the *Bnei Yisrael* would journey."⁵ It is always a journey. The challenges, the darkness, the struggles - they all lead a Jew to a better place. The darkness will lift, and the cloudiness will dissipate. When that happens, a Jew will either rise to the next level, or at least begin on the road to achieving it.

The Torah hints as well at a very nuts-and-bolts suggestion about how to time our self-induced journeys to higher places. "The fool walks in darkness."⁶ The fool wishes to walk, to travel onward while shrouded in darkness. But darkness is not a time for traveling, but for staying put. We should not attempt to reach new spiritual levels when we can detect that our internal *mishkan* is clouded over. Our *avodah* in such times is to remain firm and resolute, to hold on to what we have. We must react to the darkness with strength and conviction to stay the course, to keep at our appointed tasks loyally and steadfastly, despite the gloomy nocturnal mists. Such a time, however, is not auspicious to setting off on expeditions to conquer new spiritual heights; it suffices at such times that we try our hardest not to fall.

It will do us no good to chafe at our restraints. "When the cloud lingered upon the *Mishkan* many day, the *Bnei Yisrael* would maintain the charge of Hashem and not journey."⁷ However long it takes, as long as the darkness hovers, any marching we do must be marching in place. Our job at such times is to maintain Hashem's charge, not to charge onward. It is sometimes His Will that we serve Him in darkness, that we continue to do His bidding while He hides His countenance from us. We should not blame ourselves for these periods of time, but understand that they are orchestrated by Hashem Himself. Sometimes, He simply asks of us that we serve Him in such a state.

Ironically, even our experience at Sinai, the time of our most intense and clearest encounter with Hashem's presence, did not ignore the phenomenon of *avodah* shrouded in darkness. "I come to you in the thickness of the cloud, so that the people will hear as I speak to you."⁸ The Torah found it important to convey that Hashem speaks to us at times from the midst of a cloud. We should not conclude that at such times He has withdrawn, as it were, distancing Himself from us. He is near; He speaks even at such times.

Elsewhere, the Torah goes even further. "Moshe drew close to the *arafel*, the thick cloud where G-d was."⁹ *Bais Avrohom* points out that the Torah uses three expressions, in ascending order: darkness, cloud, and thick cloud. Moshe revealed to us that even in the thick cloud, the most oppressively dark of the three, Hashem is still to be found. He may ask of us to serve Him while He seems hermetically sealed off from us. Really this is not so. He may be obscured, but He remains close to us.

The *parshah* suggests to us an important component of our *avodah*. A Jew must be able to discern at all times what tasks Hashem requires of him, what purposes He wants him to advance, what He asks of him at each particular moment. The messages we get from Him may differ from time to time. But there always is a message, and it always draws us closer to Him.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom pgs. 47-48

² Bamidbar 9:15-17

³ Shemos 25:8

⁴ Bamidbar 9:16

⁵ Bamidbar 9:17

⁶ Koheles 2:14

⁷ Bamidbar 9:19

⁸ Shemos 19:9

⁹ Shemos 20:17

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