

WHERE IS YOUR FURNITURE?

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This weeks parsha begins the Sefer of Bamidbar. "And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Midbar (wilderness) of Sinai... saying. (1:1)" The Ramban writes that this sefer primarily deals with the mitzvos that we were commanded to perform in the midbar and the miracles that accompanied us through our travels.

The Midrash states that the Torah was given through three mediums: water, fire and the wilderness. Avraham passed through the fire of Uhr Kasdim in his steadfast refusal to deny Hashem's existence. As we left Mitzraim we passed through the waters of Yam Suf. We then traveled into and through the midbar. The Ksav Sofer explains how each of these, teach us the underlying foundations of our connection to the Torah.

The Torah is compared to water. Just as water flows from a high place to a low one, so too Torah flows from a haughty person to a humble one. The Torah was given on Har Sinai, the lowest of the mountains, to demonstrate this aspect of the Torah.

In order to develop and grow in Torah, one must properly recognize his position vis-a-vis Hashem. He must realize the incredible gift that has been offered to him to connect to the will of his Creator. Only such a humble approach will allow him to properly access the Torah and thereby properly access Hashem.

The Torah is compared to fire. Fire illuminates the path of life for a person and allows him to choose the proper direction.

Rav Shalom gives a parable of a person who had never yet seen a movie, who wandered into a theater. Upon seeing the screen and wanting to get a better understanding of what was happening, he shined a flashlight onto the screen. The mesmerizing, moving shapes and figures turned into a blank white screen.

The fire of Torah illuminates this world, and gives us the perspective to distinguish between tempting illusions and reality.

The Torah was given in the midbar. This relates to the Torah being given to 'the eaters of manna'. Such people had the perspective of the proper priorities of life and that which is unimportant. They had perfect faith that Hashem would provide for their needs as the need would arise. Luxuries were seen as impediments to proper growth.

There is a famous story of a wealthy businessman who was passing through Radin and took advantage of the opportunity to visit the Chofetz Chaim. He was astounded by the lack of furniture in the Chofetz Chaim's home. Unable to contain himself, he asked, "Where is your furniture?" The Chofetz Chaim responded by asking him where was his furniture. The man, a bit surprised by the question, explained that he was only passing through. The Chofetz Chaim smiled and explained that in this world, he too, was only passing through.

A lesser known story is told that when his wife asked to decorate the house with wallpaper, the Chofetz Chaim suggested that they just take pages from the gemara and paste them on the wall! The time spent obtaining the necessary money to buy the wallpaper comes at the expense of learning. On the level that they were on, sacrificing that time in order to get wallpaper was tantamount to pasting the pages of the gemara on the wall.

This, of course, is a level that is far beyond us. With the environment in which we were brought up, with yesterdays luxuries becoming our necessities, we would not be able to function, must less to grow, in such surroundings. Nevertheless, we must try, each on our own level, to minimize our dependence on the luxuries.

The Torah, for this reason, was given in the midbar to 'the eaters of manna'. To focus on the purpose of our lives and not get sidetracked by the many distractions.

Our parsha also discusses the 'digei midbar' - the flags of each tribe and the formation in which they camped and traveled. Why was it necessary to have these flags and this formation?

Rav Dessler writes that, in the physical realm, there are three reasons for order and organization. 1) There is order for the sake of order. One gets enjoyment from seeing things arranged in an organized fashion. 2) There is order to enable us to find something when we need it. 3) There is order to bring a unity and an efficiency of action. An intricate piece of machinery will only function optimally if each piece is in its proper place, accomplishing its objective.

In the spiritual realm only the third aspect applies. Neither divided groups nor a confused mixture can accomplish our purpose in this world of 'kiddush shem shamayim' - sanctifying Hashem's name.

Each individual must develop according to who he is, in an environment that is conducive to, and promotes, such growth. All groups are working toward this same goal, and each is gaining and learning from the other. When there is this diversity of experiences and this diversity of situations all leading to the same point, then the greatest kiddush shem shamayim is attained.

This is what we learn from the 'digei midbar', the formation of encampment in the midbar. As the Ramban writes, Yehuda was royalty, Yissachar- Torah, Zevulun- wealth, Reuven- tshuva, etc. Each, necessary and crucial aspects of serving Hashem. Each tribe had its path to travel on. That was their midah, their attribute, their strong point. At the same time, each midah was necessary for all of the

tribes to internalize. Each contributing his area of expertise to elevate the level of the group. All simultaneously combining their diverse talents into the symphony of kiddush shem shamayim.

Elazar, the son of Aharon, was in charge of transporting the oils, the incense and the flour (4:16). The medrash relates that, although Elazar could have easily delegated the carrying to others, he carried it all himself. How did he manage this feat? The oil for the menorah was in his right hand. The incense was in his left.. The flour for the morning offering hung from his arm and that for the evening offering hung from his belt.

The Ramban explains the amounts of some of these. The incense was 365 portions (weighing close to 400 pounds!) and the oil was 183 'lug' (about 15 gallons - quite a bit of lugging!).

If Elazar needed to carry such tremendous amounts why didn't he have someone help him?! The medrash explains that from this we learn that there is no haughtiness before Hashem! Those with the proper view of serving Hashem don't see anything as a burden. Every chance to serve, even if it leaves one with flour hanging from his belt, is seen as a golden opportunity that can't be passed.

When Rav Yerucham came to Kelm he saw the Saba MeKelm carrying out the bowl of water into which the kohanim had washed their hands. When Rav Yerucham tried to take the bowl from his hands he was given a reproachful look. "You are new here... you don't yet know how things here work!" The honor of carrying out the water was not easily earned!

As we draw close to Shavuot, may we use all of our capabilities to prepare for kabalas haTorah - the receiving of the Torah- sharing our strong points with others and drawing inspiration and strength from theirs. Realizing that only through lowering oneself before the Creator does one truly become elevated.

Good shabbos.

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