

# JUST DESERTS

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

## Friday Night:

G-d told Moshe in the desert of Sinai, in the Appointed Tent, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after leaving Egypt ... (Bamidbar 1:1)

There are many ways to look at life in This World, but, they all come down to variations of two extremes, and all the gray areas in-between. For the sake of these week's parshah, we will call these two extremes 'exile' and 'redemption.'

Now, when one thinks of the life-supporting system of a city versus the dry and deadly desert, one usually relates redemption to the former and not the latter. Yet, there are times when one might find a journey in the desert to be a 'liberating' experience after spending time in an 'oppressive' city.

Thus, it is not necessarily an issue of where you are that determines one's status as an exile, but, under what circumstances one finds himself there, or, at least, what transpires while one is there. For, sometimes we are compelled to be places at which we do not wish to be, only to find them good places to be, in the end.

Then, of course, there is the concept of a 'self-imposed' exile, exiles undertaken by individuals as a corrective device in terms of personality and spiritual rectification. If it is taken on by choice, then, can it truly be called 'exile'?

The Torah definition of exile is any 'experience' -- short or long term -- that lessens one's ability to focus on and serve G-d. That was Adam HaRishon's curse of work. G-d wasn't saying to Adam that he'd never find a job that he could enjoy; He was telling him that his new life outside of Paradise would involve responsibilities, such as earning a living, that would lessen his ability to directly serve G-d.

Thus, by contrast, 'redemption' is any process that makes the direct service of G-d easier. While serving Egypt, the Jewish could not serve G-d well. That was exile. Being released from Egypt was only redemption if it led to improved service of G-d; otherwise, it was just a release from one form of exile into another.

Without this definition, one is lost in life. For, not all exiles make themselves well-known to the

people they entrap. Some can be so subtle that they can even give the people they oppress -- either physically, emotionally, or spiritually -- the impression that they are, in fact, redeemed ... liberated ... free of all oppression.

That is the worst kind of exile of all, because, the person can not sense the need to seek redemption. They are living in an illusion and think that it is reality. They dream during waking hours, and feel no need to wake up.

Sefer Bamidbar is about this. It is about the Jewish people's struggle to come to terms with the definition of 'exile' and 'redemption,' of 'golus' and 'geulah.' They left Mt. Sinai in a hurry, we are told, like children who flee school -- like children who view their ticket to maturity, and therefore, freedom, as a portal to exile instead.

Then, shortly after, they will avoid entering Eretz Yisroel like people who are forced into exile, like they were forced to LEAVE Eretz Yisroel 889 years later into Babylonian exile. All their troubles in the desert, and ours throughout the generations, were always, and have always been because we view aspects of life as redemptions when G-d sees them as exiles, or, as exiles when G-d sees them as redemptions.

When we line up with G-d, then we truly experience redemption. When we don't, then we truly experience exile. It's as if G-d says, "You call THAT exile? Here, try THIS ONE and see what you think. Now THAT'S exile!" Teshuvah, especially on a national level, is none other than our buying into G-d's version of exile and redemption -- avoiding the former and pursuing the latter.

That's one of the reasons why the parshah begins with a reference to 'Midbar Sinai' (Sinai Desert) in the opening verse, as we prepare to move on to Eretz Yisroel. It teaches that 'exile' is not just a question of where you are, but, a matter of when you are and with whom you are. If you are some place for the sake of a mitzvah -- even in the driest desert of the world -- to come closer to G-d then you are, by definition, in the process of redemption, on a course to fulfill the purpose of creation.

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## **Shabbos Day:**

*The Levites, however, were not included in the census. G-d told Moses, "Do not number the tribe of Levi or include them in the sum of the children of Israel. Appoint the Levites in charge of the Tabernacle and all its implements, and over all things that belong to it. They will carry the Tabernacle and all its implements, and will service it. They will camp [in the immediate vicinity] around the Tabernacle." (Bamidbar 1:47-50)*

As a Levi, one cannot help but take pride in this Divine singling out from the rest of the nation. True, we basically undid that honor in Ezra's time when we refused to return to Eretz Yisroel, and we're

subsequently 'fined' as a result. Nevertheless, at this stage of Jewish history, we stood alone as a special 'force' within the Jewish people, set aside to take care of the holy Mishkan.

And, this was because of the golden calf. After the Jewish people sinned with the golden calf, and Moshe set out to purge the camp of perpetrators, only Levi came forth and answered the cry, "Whoever is for G-d come to me!" As a result, they were forced to kill even people to whom they were close, not an easy thing to do.

And, even though Levi seemed bold enough for the job, one has to remember the origin of this tribe. Levi was the third child born to Leah, Ya'akov's wife, completing her contribution of one-quarter of the Twelve Tribes. Thus, she saw Levi, and even said so upon his birth, as the child that would finally bind her to Ya'akov, who had married her against his will.

Thus, the name 'Levi' itself comes from a word which means 'to accompany.' It is a name that implies closeness, and bonding -- just the opposite of what Levi did at the base of Mt. Sinai upon Moshe Rabbeinu's command. This only serves to make their action and willingness to purge the camp even more heroic.

"But," you will ask, "wasn't it Shimon and LEVI who went into Shechem and murdered all the men there for the violation of their sister, Dinah?" If so, then, it would seem that Levi has a propensity for such forms of zealousness, especially when you consider that it was Pinchas, another Levi, who killed Zimri at the end of Parashas Balak! So, what did Leah mean?

She meant that now, after the birth of her third and what might have been her final son, it would become eminently clear to Ya'akov that her marriage to him was neither accident or mistake, but a precise act of Divine Providence necessary for the sake of the Jewish people.

This was bound to, Leah knew, make her precious in Ya'akov's eyes, and, eternally unite them. And, it did just that, which is why it is with Leah, and not Rachel, that Ya'akov is buried, even though Rachel was the chief matriarch of the family, and remains to be so.

Thus, Levi's main function is to act as the 'chibur' (connector) between G-d and the Jewish people, which is why they are also the source of the kohanim as well. There are times this can be done through peaceful and loving means, and, there are times that this must be done in less-than-peaceful means.

However, no matter which method that reality demands be used at the moment-of-truth, it must be clear from the act that it is from G-d. In other words, the action of the zealot must make as many people as possible aware that everything happens as a function of Divine Providence, and ultimately, bring people close to G-d and one another.

In fact, according to the Pri Tzaddik, one of the reasons why Zimri did not scream in fear and for help when he saw Pinchas coming after him with a spear, was because he understood that what was happening to him was from Heaven, and necessary. The sight of Pinchas alone raised his level of

realization of what he had done, and how his death was the only way for rectification.

This is the hallmark of a Levi: to direct attention to G-d and His omnipotence, to be a 'connector' between G-d and His people. Thus, they are set apart and were made the guardians of the Mishkan.

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## **SEUDAH SHLISHI:**

(Shavuot)

The Talmud speaks of four rabbis who entered some place called 'Pardes,' and the effects of doing so (Chagigah 14b). From the calamitous results to three of the four FAMOUS rabbis, we quickly get the impression that their journey into this 'Orchard' was no normal walk in a park, to say the least.

Tradition confirms this. For, as we are taught, 'Pardes' is a Hebrew word composed of four letters, each of which is the first letter of a different word: Pshat, Remez, Drush, Sod (PaRDeS) -- Simple (Meaning), Hinted (Meaning), Exegetical (Meaning), and, Kabbalistic (Meaning). These are, of course, the four levels upon which Torah can be learned.

A simple example. The very first word of the Torah is the word 'Bereishis,' which, classically, is translated as, 'in the beginning.' That is called the 'pshat' of the word, the simplest meaning possible.

However, as Rashi points out, in the context provided by the Torah, 'Bereishis' is grammatically incorrect for the most obvious pshat of the posuk: In the beginning, G-d made the Heaven and the Earth. In such a construct, Rashi teaches, the word 'berishonah' would be correct, and, assuming that G-d knew this -- a fair assumption -- Rashi moves up to the level of 'Remez' to explain a deeper, intended meaning of the word: for the sake of 'reishis' -- that which is 'first' to G-d, that is, Torah and the Jewish people, G-d made Heaven and Earth.

Rashi -- a 'pashtan' by definition -- stops there and satisfied.

However, if you look into the holy books, you will eventually find even deeper meanings of the word, not so visible to the eye. After all, the Zohar HaKodesh has no less than SEVENTY explanations of this first word of the Torah, one of which divides the word into two parts: bera-shis -- He created six ('shis' is Aramaic for 'six'), as in the six days of creation, at the initial moment that G-d made ALL matter. That is the 'drush' of the word.

What is the 'sod' of this word? It is similar to the 'drush,' except that the 'shis' refers to the six Sefiros: Chesed, Gevurah, Tifferes, Netzach, Hod, and Yesod, all of which govern the six thousand years of history of which we are a part, one for each of the six millennia. Thus, the 'pshat' on this level would be: He created six sefiros (with which) Elokim created the Heaven and Earth.

Thus, as one moves from the simplest to the Kabbalistic explanation of an idea, the concepts become more complex and more abstract. However, they also become more accurate in terms of

their description of reality, and therefore, truer expressions of the will of G-d and His Divine Providence:

"... This is the main rectification that comes from the learning of Kabbalah more than from any other level of Torah-learning. For, all other levels are 'encloded' in everyday matters, unlike Kabbalah, and especially the words of the Arizal, which are built upon the deep secrets of the Zohar ... and the (more direct) light of G-d." (Rabbi Shlomo Eliyashev; 1841 - 1925)

In other words, when an abstract idea is brought 'down-to-earth,' it may be easier to fathom, but, it is also less accurate a truth. It is like answering a difficult question for a child, knowing that his mind can only handle so much information and only so much sophistication. You haven't lied to the child, but, you haven't given the child the entire story either.

Thus, if we are talking about the 'simplest explanation' of an idea, then 'pshat' is it. However, if it is the most accurate description of reality that we seek, then, the higher one climbs the ladder of 'Pardes,' the more accurate their understanding of G-d and Divine Providence will be.

This is what Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi told his son, who had just suffered a near-death experience, and described to his father what he had seen (Pesachim 50a). "It was an upside down world I saw," his son told his father, "where, what is up over here is down over there, and, what is down over here is up over there."

Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi corrected his son: "No, my son -- THERE is where everything is right-side up; it is here that everything is upside down, and, you have just gotten used to it."

Thus, we walk around in pursuit of 'pshat' and afraid of 'sod,' thinking that we know all we must to make life work as it should, and then wonder why it doesn't. It is 'Sod' that is closest to G-d in the hierarchy of learning, and though you can't soar in the clouds until you learn to first walk on earth, you must learn to walk on the earth with the goal to one day soar in the clouds.

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## **MELAVE MALKAH:**

(Sefiros HaOmer)

Sunday night, b"H, begins the holiday of Shavuot, and thus, the counting of the Omer will once again have come to an end, and a process of redemption that began with the night of the Seder and continued for the next fifty days.

One of the issues that comes up with regard to the Omer-Count is what happens if you miss a day: is it business as usual the next day, or, has something be irretrievably lost? In other words, is one still allowed to make the blessing before counting the omer the rest of the days, or, has that part of the mitzvah been lost for that year?

At the root of this discussion is one's understanding of the mitzvah of Sefiras HaOmer: is it one long, continuous mitzvah with fifty parts, or, does each day's counting stand as a separate mitzvah? If the former, then the blessing has been lost because the mitzvah is no longer complete (though you still count each subsequent day without its blessing); if the latter, then, what was, was, but, what is coming up is what counts now and therefore, say the blessing.

When it comes to Tefillin, a mitzvah that is also performed most days, missing one day does not change tomorrow's obligation in any way. What was missed is lost, but, every new day is a new chance to do the same mitzvah, and therefore all blessings must be said. How many single mitzvos are there that are performed over such a long period of time?

Halachically, we have decided to treat Sefiras HaOmer, which lasts over FORTY-NINE days, like a single mitzvah, which means miss a day, lose the blessing for the rest of the counting. It's a phenomenal concept which certainly puts pressure on males to make sure that, for forty-nine days, they do not forget to count the omer -- which some do, for one reason or another!

However, one can understand why when comparing the mitzvah of Tefillin, for example, and, the mitzvah to count the omer. Tefillin is the same mitzvah each and every day, though, one should be using that 'same mitzvah' to grow spiritually so that, the next time Tefillin are worn, it is a different, spiritually more elevated act than all other times before. However, the actual performance of the mitzvah remains the same.

Not so with Sefiras HaOmer, for, though each day the counting-process is the same, the wording is different for each count, revealing an obvious build-up toward the holiday of Shavuos. The Omer-Count is a spiritual construction process, whereby the end result justifies all the 'work' and 'expenditure' until that end-result is realized.

This is because on Shavuos night, a Heavenly light, an exceedingly sublime, yet powerful godly light will be commanded to leave its Upper World in order to descend and elevate all those whom can 'hold' it. Like rain that falls from the sky above, this light descends to fill all the containers below that can hold it.

As Rashi points out on the fourth posuk of Parashas Bereishis, this a light that cannot be held and used by evil people, and, the extent to which one can use this light will depend upon how righteous he has become. If a person brings a cup riddled with holes large and small to 'catch' rain, what will he retain in the end? If a person brings an 'unholy' vessel to receive the light of Torah on Shavuos, how much of the light will he receive, and how much will he retain?

During Sefiras HaOmer, we are spiritual glass-blowers. We are molding ourselves into vessels capable of receiving and retaining the light of Torah. Counting the omer each day, and then using the day to perfect the 'middas-hayom,' is the way we 'plug' whatever holes remain in our spiritual self, to perfect our personal 'k'li,' our personal 'vessel.' Miss a day and you miss a 'hole," and the entire k'li suffers as a result.

However, that does not mean that we cannot still work on the remaining holes of our vessel, which we must do, to limit the amount of light that can slip right through us. And thus, though we count without a blessing the rest of the days, still, we count each subsequent day, nevertheless.

Have a great Shabbos and wonderful Shavuos,  
Pinchas Winston

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