

# WHAT'S FOR DESERT?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

## FRIDAY NIGHT:

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

As we prepare for another holiday of Shavuos, it is important to keep the following in mind. What makes Kabbalos HaTorah meaningful, is the lack that was a result from the breaking of the first set of Tablets (Lucos), and having to live with a second, less holy set until Moshiach comes, and may it be quickly in our time.

Deserts are not the most appealing places to live, unless you are a scorpion, snake, or cactus. They seem to represent death, lacking so many of the elements upon which human life depends, and so many of the comforts human life prefers. And, for the most part, they are avoidable.

As to why deserts exist, it is just the way the world is. Some places are fertile, while others are arid. Some places have lush vegetation, others are barren wastelands. Each have their own kind of beauty, but few travel agents are usually booked solid on excursions to sand dunes in the middle of no man's land, which is one of the reasons why the desert was not so appealing to the Jews fleeing Egyptian slavery.

However, from a Kabbalistic point of view, everything in the physical world is really just a reflection of something in the spiritual world. Every mountain, tree, and stream has its own angel, rooting for it in Heaven, acting as its spiritual pipeline to provide the necessarily Divine sustenance to survive. Thus, a desert is the way it is because of the angel responsible for it, which just happens to be one of the deadliest around:

When they went into the desert to see, The Holy One, Blessed is He, took the Light of Glory from there, and they went to look at it but could not find it . . . Rebi Shimon said, "While they were still walking in the desert (immediately after they came to the desert) another domain was revealed to them, that of the rest of the nations. That is, he who has control over the desert (the Sitra Achra) met up with them (to mislead and draw them away through his trickery), and Israel saw that it was not the Light of Glory of their King, as it says, 'They came to Marah and they could not drink the water because it was bitter' (Shemos 15:23)" (Beshallah 60a). Thus, even though the Clouds of Glory surrounded them they could already begin to feel the treachery of the Sitra Achra, and worried that the revelation of the light of Atika Kadisha would cease, as they said, "Is Hashem amongst us or

Ayin?" (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 113)

The Sitra Achra, arch-enemy of the Jewish people called the "Angel of Eisav," who is the one responsible for obstructing our path to truth, and to make us work harder to achieve it. Unfortunately, many people don't know that, or fail to choose to overcome his trickery, and instead fall prey to the spiritual challenge meant to help the person become stronger.

However:

Moshe Rabbeinu knew quite well that this was to test them, and therefore he led them into the desert, into the place of the Sitra Achra, as it says in [the Zohar in] Parashas Tetzaveh (184a): It is the place of the Sitra Achra, etc. [and they were brought there] in order to battle against his trickery so as to break his power and strength, and to smash his head and subjugate him, as we mentioned above in Section 3:5. (Ibid.)

Thus, the question remains, were we fleeing from Egypt, or running to the domain of the Sitra Achra? We left Egypt to distance ourselves from the depths of spiritual impurity, but it is the Sitra Achra who is responsible for their existence, so what was to be gained by going into the desert?

To finish the job that we started, and should have finished back in Egypt.

### **SHABBOS DAY:**

*If any man's wife go aside (sisteh). . . (Bamidbar 5:12)*

What does it mean to break the power of the Sitra Achra? On the simplest level, it means to not succumb to temptation. The Sitra Achra is not like someone who can put a gun to a person's head and say, "Here! Eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, or else!" While it seems as if that is more than enough, the best he can do is to bring a person to a lower level of understanding of reality that he will be willing, on his own, to make a decision to put a gun to someone else's head and say something like, "Your money or your life!"

If, as the Talmud states, "A person never sins unless a spirit of insanity ("ruach shtut," a play on the word "sisteh") enters him" (Sotah 3a), the best the Sitra Achra can do is to lead us to such insanity. But, at the end of the day, he will always be just taking advantage of our own weaknesses, weaknesses that we could have reinforced, but chose not to.

After all, as the GR"A says, we're here in this world to break our bad character traits to achieve perfection on whatever personal level we can achieve it. Indeed, the whole point of a Divinely-sent personal test is to reveal to US (and G-d already knows the results even before we take the test), where we are spiritually weak.

Thus, if we find ourselves succumbing to temptation and actually committing a sin, chances are, it was inevitable. It's like saying, if you find yourself at five minutes before sundown on a Friday afternoon, yet to cook for Shabbos or to clean your home, chances are, you'll have a messy home

for Shabbos, and very little cooked food to eat.

If you were to call your neighbor and say, "Quick! Can you help me? I had a memory lapse, and until five minutes ago, I thought it was Thursday! Now, Shabbos is almost here, and I have nothing to eat!"

If you have credibility with your neighbor, then he or she will feel bad for you and show you mercy. However, if you are someone who is notorious for putting off things until the last minute, and are always being caught unprepared, your neighbor might just say, "Well, we'd love to help you out, but, you know, when we started preparing for Shabbos OVER FIVE HOURS AGO, we only prepared enough for our family . . . Maybe we can find something in the freezer for you . . ."

What your neighbor will really be saying is, "Anyone who doesn't prepare on Erev Shabbos, has nothing to eat on Shabbos itself!" (Avodah Zarah 3a). To paraphrase for this essay, it means, "Anyone who does not prepare himself in advance of a sin, cannot expect to avoid it at the moment of crisis."

"Well, the way I see it, the pipe's weak right about there," a cautious technician says to his penny-pinching boss.

"It seems to be holding up just fine the way it is," the boss answers with obvious skepticism.

"Sure," the technician retorts, "for now. But one water surge, and BOOM! You'll have water shooting out in every direction you can possibly imagine."

Slightly agitated, the boss says, "Yeah, but what are the odds of that happening?"

That's a loaded question. If we are talking about a world that is random, as the boss would like to believe, then the chances are slim. If you look back over the last 5700 years of history, and ask yourself, how many things should not have happened, according to the odds, but did happen instead, which sometimes resulted in unimaginable success, and other times, in unmitigated disaster?

Personally, I have found, in just those areas that I have been lazy and careless something always seems to happen to me that leaves me shaking my head with regret, saying, "If only I had just . . ."

### **SEUDOS SHLISHIS:**

*This is from G-d, that which is wondrous in our eyes. (Tehillim 118:23)*

And that which is not wondrous is random, G-d forbid?

The Hebrew word for random is "mikreh," spelled, Mem-Kuf-Raish-Heh. However, the word is describing an effect rather than an actual reality, because from a Torah standpoint, there is no such thing as randomness. Indeed, a more accurate definition of mikreh is: the APPEARANCE that when certain events occur, G-d is not involved in history where the results look consistent with everyday, "natural" life.

However, there is no such thing as randomness, only Hester Panim-the hiding of G-d's direct involvement in the affairs of man, something He does to make free-will choice possible. If reality revealed G-d as it should, it would be impossible to deny His existence and involvement in every last aspect of physical and spiritual Creation.

And, since life is about Shviras HaMiddos, the breaking of bad character traits, or to put it in the positive, character refinement, then G-d is constantly watching us in order to help us achieve this goal. That is, providing that we are open to learn lessons from the things that go right and wrong in our lives.

So, for example, Heaven may decide that it is time for me to become a little less wasteful when it comes to Torah study. Fortunately for me, someone else has "gotten" the idea to offer a seminar on using time for Torah study better, and just happens to place an advertisement in the community magazine the one week I just happen to see it, and its catches my attention.

"Wow," I think to myself, "what Divine Providence."

So, I check out the details, and it turns out that it is a five-session seminar that takes place exactly at the time of night that I enjoy coming home and spacing out after a long, hard day of work and learning. "Hmm," I say to myself, "that's tough." I can already feel my equilibrium going out of balance as feel agitated by the potential need to change my schedule with which I am COMFORTABLE.

"And look at that price!" I say to myself. "Four hundred shekels for the entire seminar, non-refundable . . . I mean that's a lot of money to dish out when I have other, more pressing bills to pay."

However, being a little experienced at this Hashgochah Pratis thing, I wonder to myself, "Maybe this is a test. Maybe Heaven wants to see how much I want to grow . . . and how much I'm willing to pay for it. Yes, it's probably a set-up, and if I go the right way, everything will work out like it usually does."

About to win my psychological battle, my yetzer hara pipes in, "But maybe it's not a test . . . maybe you are just exaggerating the point and about to give up, and foolishly I might add, your only real relaxation time, and with the money you'll need to pay the bills next month. Hah!" he says moving in for the kill, "you'll end up having to stop learning just to earn the extra money you spent on how to increase learning!"

"He may have a point," I find myself saying. So, my yetzer tov, which is just Divine Providence helping me out in the struggle in a somewhat indirect way, adds its own two cents worth, "But if it is a test, then you're about to fail it, and then you'll know what that means . . ."

Welcome to the desert, the home of the Sitra Achra, the playground of the yetzer hara.

### **MELAVE MALKAH:**

*When they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters there, because they were bitter. Therefore, it*

was called "*Marah*." (Shemos 15:23)

It says in the Zohar:

When Israel left Egypt and were 600,000 [males above the age of 20 years], the Holy Malchus was strengthened and ascended, and the moon gave off light. Then, the Evil Kingdom of the Sitra Achra was humbled, so The Holy One, Blessed is He, took them out into the strong desert, which is the place and dominion of S" M, the Evil One, in order to break his strength and ability, to smash his head and humble him so that he would no longer rule. Had Israel not sinned, The Holy One, Blessed is He, would have wanted to remove him from the world; to this end, He brought them through to be his inheritance and portion. However, since they sinned many times, the snake bit them, thus fulfilling, "It shall bruise your head and you shall bruise its heel" (Bereishis 3:15), because Israel hit his head first, but since they did not know how to stay safe from him, he hit them back after. As a result, they all fell in the desert, fulfilling "and you shall bruise its heel," and the forty years that "hit" them corresponded to the forty lashes administered by a Bais Din. Therefore it says that they saw with their eyes the master of the desert walking humbly before them, and that they took his inheritance and portion. How do we know this? Because it says, "Then the chiefs of Eisav were frightened" (Shemos 15:15); they are the snake, the poisonous snake, and the scorpion, etc. (Zohar, Tetzaveh 183b)

Commenting on this section from the Zohar, the Leshem explains:

All of this was because the Dor HaMidbar (the Generation of the Desert) was not worthy from the outset, as it says, "when you were naked and bare" (Yechezkel 16:22), as it is known. Thus, they were unable to completely pass each test, which is what caused what is referred to as the "ten tests with which our fathers tested The Holy One, Blessed is He" (Pirkei Avos 5:6). (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 343)

-showing us the crucial importance of being ready for a test . . . IN ADVANCE! Being worthy means first learning how to practice First Aid in the quiet and controlled environment of an organized class on the topic, not when someone is lying there, G-d forbid, in need of help.

Otherwise, as we move on through life, we remain vulnerable to the pitfalls of all the places we may pass along our way. To avoid dealing with our spiritual vulnerabilities is like going into the desert with only a canteen of water. The desert of the Sitra Achra is anywhere and everywhere we are spiritually weak, and therefore it can even be in places that we might have thought we were protected, how much more so in the places that we know we are not!

Thus, the Leshem continues:

It was the location that caused each test, which was the desert, the place of the S" M-the place of power of the Chitzonim. This is what caused them to stumble, as the Zohar says (Shlach 60a). Thus it says, "Therefore, they called its name Marah (Bitter) . . ." (Shemos 15:23), and another place they called Massah u'Merivah (Test and Contention) (Shemos 17:7). Likewise, in Parashas BeHa'alosechah,

they called a place Tavairah (Bamidbar 11:3), and Kivras HaTa'avah (Bamidbar 11:34), because in each case it was the place itself that was the cause of what happened there; see Sanhedrin 102a and 106a. (Ibid.)

In a sense, the journey from Egypt is a parable for the journey of every single Jew as he or she leaves the womb and enters the world of everyday life, a virtual desert filled with spiritual dangers and pitfalls. The educational process, hopefully, provides us with our survival kit, allowing us to pit ourselves against the elements in order to grow closer to G-d.

However, G-d has led us there, and controls the desert as well. For that which we are prepared, we need only to do our thing to survive and grow. For that which we did not and could not have prepared for, we are protected by G-d Himself against the elements with the "Clouds of Glory." For that which we could have prepared ourselves against, but through negligence, did not, we have endangered ourselves.

In that case, the only test we can face at that time is in our willingness to admit our shortcoming, to turn to Heaven and beg for mercy. Fortunately for us, G-d would rather see us come back to Him, even at the very last second, rather than to lose us altogether.

*Have a great Shabbos,*  
*PW*

---

Text

Copyright © by [Rabbi Pinchas Winston](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! [www.thirtysix.org](http://www.thirtysix.org)