

LIKE A DESERT

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God 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, "Take a census of the entire congregation of the Children of Israel ..." (Bamidbar 1:1-2)

With Parashas Bamidbar upon us, it means Shavuot is just around the corner, b"H. And, though it seems as if the order of the reading of the Torah portions has little to do with the time of year (which is why we often change it for the holidays), in truth, everything is Hashgachah Pratis, and every intertwining of events has its particular meaning.

However, in this case, it is not hard to make the connection between the parshah and the time of year, since the Talmud states:

One who makes himself into a desert, which everyone tramples, his Torah will remain in his hand — talmudo miskiyum b'yado. (Eiruvim 54a) Notice, however, that it does not say that to learn Torah, you have to make yourself like a desert, meaning that you have to be humble. It only says that humility is necessary for Torah to stay with a person, which provides an interesting insight into the impact of Torah on one's character traits. For, we see, historically, that just about anyone can learn Torah. And, today, not just the Written Law, but the Oral Law as well: the Talmud, the

Shulchan Aruch, even parts of Torah so esoteric that they fall into the category of Sod — Kabbalah. Indeed, it is somewhat odd today how many non-Jews study Torah on all levels, while so many Jews do not care to learn it on even the most basic levels.

So, whereas once one of the main distinctions between the Jewish people and the nations of the world was our access to the Oral Law (Temurah 14b), today, it is not necessarily so. How much so is this the case today with the Internet, which allows access to all kinds of Torah sites, for anyone who cares to enter them.

The difference, therefore, is one of kiyum — the "keeping" of Torah. In other words, Torah can go into anyone, but it usually doesn't stay, passing instead right through the person, like passengers catching a connecting flight. Torah won't affect them, or change them, or reveal itself through them, and that is precisely what Torah, in the true sense of the term, is all about.

For, even though Torah just seems like another book, just another area of intellectual study, it is far from that. Like superheroes with dual identities, whose mundane, common lifestyle is meant to

conceal the true nature of the superhero, the physical books and words in which Torah is found conceal the true nature of Torah, and what it is capable of doing, and THAT is not something just anyone can access, no matter how many times they pore over even the deepest of Torah secrets. For that, you have to make yourself into a midbar, a desert.

This is alluded to by Rashi, and later, the Leshem:

God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated between the light and the darkness. (Bereishis 1:3-4)

He saw that the wicked were unworthy of using it. He therefore set it apart for the righteous in the Future Time. (Rashi)

He made a separation in the illumination of the light, so that it should not flow or give off light except for the righteous, whose actions draw it down and make it shine. However, the actions of the evil block it, leaving them in darkness, and this itself was the hiding of the light. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 133)

Just as the evil people of history can use the light of the sun, moon, and stars, as easily as the righteous can, likewise can they open a book of the Torah or Talmud and read. They can even learn to read them in the original Hebrew or Aramaic text, to better understand the words they are reading. So therefore, the verse, Rashi, and the Leshem are obviously not talking about this level of Divine revelation.

The following story indicates what this means.

Once, when I was looking for an English translation of the Talmud for a source for an essay I was working on, I went to the Internet to see what was available at that time (cutting and pasting is much easier for me than keying in the text myself). As a result, I came across a site that had uploaded sections of the Soncino's English translation of the Talmud, and being familiar with it from earlier days, I checked it out.

However, though they had remained loyal to the Soncino's translation itself, the authors of the site had decided to link sections of the Talmud to different commentators, so that the reader, should he want to, could quickly travel to a specific commentator's work and see what he had to say about the discussion taking place in the Talmud.

Now, it was clear from the outset that we we're not talking about the "Rosh," the "Ran," of the "Rif," or any of the classical Talmudic commentators. These were names I did not recognize, and some didn't even sound Jewish. Curiosity got the better of me, so I decided to take a peak and see who they were, and what they had said about the Talmud. However, based upon where the link appeared, I could already sense what kind of discussion was going to ensue.

The truth is, the first one I went to was more than enough for me, being an anti-Semite, someone whose hate for the Jewish people had found an outlet while commenting on sections of the Talmud.

The person's disdain for the rabbis of the Talmud belied a pathological hatred of the Jews reminiscent of the Dark Age; if Talmud burning was in vogue today, this person would throw the first match.

However, when considering the sections of the Talmud that this person chose to ridicule, I could see how such a person could have no problem writing such comments. On the surface of these words of the rabbis, they sound strange to someone with little Talmudic background, and certainly to someone who feels excluded and insulted by them.

And yet, those same sections of Talmud are learned by Torah Jews far younger, who do not scratch their hands in wonder or snicker at what they read. For, these Torah youths learn the words of the Talmud with reverence and patience: reverence for the Torah they are learning, and patience for the time it will take for them to properly understand and appreciate what, at the time, might seem strange or even outlandish. Being humble as the desert, the Torah remains with them.

I remember learning Talmud with someone for his first time, decades ago. Being a ba'al teshuvah, he was trying, at a late age (22 years old), to make the leap from Chumash and Mishnah to Talmud. However, knowing that many of the concepts we would see would be new for him, and that the Aramaic itself would be a obstacle, I chose a section of Talmud that I thought might interest him enough to smooth over some of those bumps. Not only did the section we learned do that, but many ideas resulted in some very lively discussion. However, though I didn't have to worry about his being turned off of Talmud, since he was clearly committed, still, he didn't yet quite have the respect for the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud necessary to temper his reaction to ideas that, for me, were already part of my consciousness.

We didn't end up agreeing on everything, but we certainly enjoyed learning with each other: him with me because it was a good start in Talmud, and me with him, because he sensitized me to how others on the "outside" perceive what seems so natural and logical to us on the inside. For a writer, that is an extremely important trait to hone.

Decades later, my friend teaches Talmud himself. Since that earnest beginning, he has gone on to become a talmid chacham in his own right, and I dare not remind him of our first few sessions together. He would probably blush, recalling how chutzpadik he must have sounded when he put his opinion on par with the rabbis of the Talmud. Today, he discusses all aspects of Torah with tremendous respect and humility, not to mention awe. In the processing of doing teshuvah, he became more like a desert, and therefore, Torah remained with him.

I remember hearing a story about a priest who, in the 1800s, feigned conversion in order to be taught the entire Talmud. Many years later, and after returning to his former way of life, he wrote a book called, "The Folly of the Rabbis," mocking sections of the Talmud that he had "learned," but which he did not comprehend according to tradition. He had thought that he had, but having never become a midbar, Torah did not stay with him, and therefore, he never related to it properly.

He, and many others like him, made one crucial error: he assumed. He assumed that what he read and understood was all there was to read and understand, as he did. It didn't occur to him, apparently, to say, "What can these rabbis possibly mean? They were intelligent people, so even if what they say sounds silly to me, perhaps they meant something more." Humility, when it comes to Torah, is a hugely important character trait. With it, you are a better person: a better spouse, father, employer, employee, etc. With humility, life is good, because you have far fewer complaints than the person with chutzpah, who has high expectations of what should automatically be coming his way. The chutzpadik person wants a refund if things are not just so, whereas the humble person is grateful for every aspect of the gift of life.

Most important of all, the humble person is a friend of truth, and a companion of Torah. As the Talmud states, Torah is compared to liquids because, just as liquids only flow downward, likewise does Torah only flow from Heaven to a humble person, to someone who is "low" enough in his own eyes.

For, a person will not fix that which he thinks aint broke. Whereas a humble person assumes that everything about him can be improved, a proud person would rather change the entire world around him, than himself, to make the world better. If so, then what use does the Torah have with such a person, since the Torah is all about tikun — rectification.

So, there you have it, the importance of making yourself into a desert in advance of Kabbalos HaTorah. It is what the Omer Count has been about from the beginning, about increasing humility. After all, can you get much more humble than matzah, which is only flour and water? And, as the Mishnah states, we tell the Pesach story by first reminding ourselves of our humble beginnings, so that we can better appreciate how everything we have been given is a gift from God.

Therefore, 50 days later, humble as pie, we have, hopefully, cleaned house. For, the less of the "us" we have inside of us when we learn Torah, the more of the Torah God will put into us. Most important of all, the more Torah can stay with us, maximizing its impact on our lives, and enhancing us spiritually and physically.

Chag Samayach. And, much success at not only receiving the greatest gift of all, but at keeping it with you as well.

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