

"GET A SPIRITUAL LIFE"

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God told Moshe in the desert of Sinai . (Bamidbar 1:1)

The desert is an interesting place. And though the Jewish people's journey through the desert seemed to be incidental, that is, just across an area of arid land that happened to be on the way to Eretz Yisroel from Egypt, Kabbalah explains that this is not so. Quite the contrary, it was a place that had to be crossed in order to ready the Jewish people to live in Eretz Yisroel.

The Leshem writes:

The Zohar says: 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)[1] 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 would cease, as they said, "Is Hashem amongst us or Ayin?" 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. Had the Jewish people constantly strengthened themselves so that their lives and hearts were given over to God, He would have promised them that the revelation of the great light would not leave them even while in the desert. And they would not have had to look at the Sitra Achra and his schemes at all because all of it was just a test. Indeed, this is specifically the kind of action from below that would have drawn down upon them the great light continuously. Moshe Rabbeinu knew that at that time it was dependent upon their strengthening themselves in trust in God, and for this the verse faults them: Because you did not believe in God and did not trust in His salvation (Tehillim 78:22), and it adds: "Nevertheless, they sinned further and had no faith in His wonders" (Tehillim 78:32). However, this was not due to an evil heart, God forbid, but because they did not find themselves worthy of this, as per the logic of the chassid of [the work] Duties of the Heart, Gate of Trust, Ch. 3, Introduction 4: "Only those who

perform His will and all the [possible] Torah and its mitzvos can make use of the trait of bitachon (trust in God); [only] he is a true servant of God." Therefore, when they came to the desert and found themselves constantly tempted by the Sitra Achra and his trickery they did not encourage themselves to trust in God so that He could deal with them beyond measure and with constant miracles; they felt unworthy of this. Therefore, instead, they constantly complained, "Why did you bring us up from Egypt?" since they saw that they could not maintain the proper faith in God because of the yetzer hara that kept overcoming them and renewing itself each day. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 113)

Hence, the journey into the desert had been deliberate, as part of the process to free the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery, which had been far more than physical. For, it is far easier to take the Jew out of Egypt than it is to take the Egypt out of the Jew. Going through the desert, the domain of the Sitra Achra/yetzer hara, was to do exactly that.

Hence, they were made to feel the spiritual pressure of the place that they traveled, but they had the Shechinah, and Moshe Rabbeinu as well, with them, to encourage them to remain calm and trusting, in spite of the fears that journeying through the desert evoked. It was a tough test, but since it was given and monitored by God, it was possible to pass it.

This was not a singular event. Like everything else to do with Egyptian exile and the redemption that followed, this was a prototypical experience, one that is repeated by every Jew in every millennium, on a personal level. We all enter the domain of the Sitra Achra, whether we actually travel to a desert or go through one, spiritually-speaking.

What is it about a desert that makes it so spiritually desolate? The lack of life. Even though a desert is a wondrous place, it is wondrous for a different reason than the rest of the created world. For, unlike with respect to lush places teeming with life, a desert seems to lack design. It was designed to be that way, but that is the way it appears.

As such, it is a place, that appears random, and therefore, a place that appears Godless. That is why America was called a "desert" by the pre- World War II rabbis, because American society at that time did not support a Torah way of life. It would take decades to turn that situation around into what has become a flourishing American Torah community.

Hence, just like there is Egypt the place, but Mitzrayim the concept, there is also a physical desert, and a conceptual, spiritual one as well. In other words, it is possible to duplicate some of the conditions of a desert while being quite far away from an actual one, once you isolate the essential component of a desert, which is why the Sitra Achra can operate just as well inside of a city as he does in an actual desert, if not better.

As we know from many other places in Torah, there are different levels of living. The fact that the Talmud says that righteous people, even after they die are still living, and that evil people, even

while still alive are considered dead, makes this point clear. The Talmud is being more than metaphorical; it is defining the very meaning of living.

However, if we learned Parashas Bereishis and Parashas Nitzavim, this is nothing new. God told Adam HaRishon that on the day that he ate from the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Rah he would certainly die. He did not, at least not physically. And, at the end of Parashas Nitzavim, we are told to choose life, that we may live, as if you can choose life for some other kind of reason, like death perhaps?

That is the trickiest part about life: it is so easy to define it as the state of being alive, physically. On the other hand, we intuitively know that there must be much more to life than that, that people have even come up with expressions like, "Get a life!" Presumably, they are talking to the breathing sort of people, not the ones who have nary a breath left.

Yet, the same people who use such expressions can fall vastly short of a true life as well. Indeed, when they tell someone else to "Get a life," it is usually because they assume they already have one, at least as far as they are concerned. They might as well just say, "Get a life like I have."

Yet, that same person will waste hours of time a week. He will use entertainment to blank out reality, and spend too much time and energy taking care of mundane manners, as the Talmud sums it up:

In the future to come the Holy One, Blessed is He, will say to Avraham. "Your children have sinned against Me!"

He will answer Him, "Master of the Universe! Let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your Name!"

Then He will say, "I will say this to Ya'akov, who experienced the pain of bringing up children; maybe he will ask for mercy for them. So He will say to him, "Your children have sinned!"

He [too] will answer Him, "Master of the Universe! Let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your Name!"

He will counter, "There is no reason in old men, and no counsel in children!" Then He will say to Yitzchak, "Your children have sinned against me!"

But he will answer Him, "Master of the Universe! Are they my children and not Your children? When they gave precedence to 'we will do' over 'we will listen' before You, You called them, 'Israel my son, my firstborn.' Now they are my sons, and not Your sons! Furthermore, how much years have they actually sinned? How many are the years of man? Seventy. Subtract 20, for which You do not punish, and 50 remain. Subtract 25 which comprise the nights, and there remains 25. Subtract twelve and a half of prayer, eating, and nature's calls, and there remain twelve and a half ." (Shabbos 89b)

The implication is staggering: only twelve and a half years of time to really get anything meaningful done? That's a lot of living for just for 12-1/2 years of real life! If you're going to take a break, make sure you really need it, and do it in a meaningful way, for wasted time has a way of creeping on you later on when you need that time the most. It must happen to me several times a week at least. (It also amazes me how five wasted minutes at the beginning of the day can cost you so much at the end of the day.)

In fact, if I had to think of one of the most arresting qualities of a desert it is how it saps you of all inspiration. A desert is not a very inspiring place when it comes to doing meaningful tasks in life, specifically those that enhance your relationship with God. It is amazing how something so barren can be such a distraction away from that which counts most in life. It is lifeless, spiritually-speaking, and it makes people feel lifeless, spiritually speaking as well, the very goal of the Sitra Achra.

But, so does a busy shopping mall. There are few things less spiritual in life than a shopping mall, whose entire message can be summed up by the historical phrase: Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may be dead. Tomorrow? How about right now, as store window after store window and gadget after gadget vies for our attention and pulls at our heart and wallet.

And, a mall is just a concentrated version of the outside world. Even for a Torah Jew, walking the streets of the average city can be a very large spiritual challenge, if only just to recall that God is everywhere at all time. The secular world takes a hammer to THE BIG PICTURE, and smashes it to smithereens, so that everyone can just go about his or her life unimpeded by spiritual concerns and sayings such as:

This world is like a corridor before the World-to-Come. Rectify yourself in the corridor in order to be able to enter the Banquet Hall. (Pirkei Avos 4:16)

That is why God took the Jewish people into the desert first. For, if you can make it spiritually there, then you can make it spiritually anywhere. If you can find the inspiration to serve God in a place that the Sitra Achra is the strongest, then you can do it as well where he is weaker. And, it does not make a difference if we are talking about a real desert, or a city one, where the reality of God is distant from the eyes and minds of the average person.

1. Principally, the Sitra Achra is the ministering angel of Edom, Eisav's descendants. Apparently, the desert is a place that he has been given some kind of control over, which explains why it is so barren. Thus, it is also a place of spiritual vulnerability, which is what the Jewish people began to sense as they entered the Sinai Desert.

Text

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