

# ANY FOR SOME DESERT?

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

## **God spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert, in the Tent of Meeting on the first day of the second month . . . (Bamidbar 1:1)**

To most people who live in developed cities, deserts barely exist. For the most part they are not high up on the list of places that people want to tour, especially since they can be dangerous. They certainly lack creature comforts that most people "can't" do without, like cell phone reception. You go to the desert to "rough it," end of story.

Except for people who actually live in or close to deserts, they don't mean much to anyone else. Heat and sand is their main commodity, neither of which is very marketable. People certainly don't see deserts as one of the most important educational lessons in the world—not as the Jewish people do.

This is because of the extreme emphasis on humility and objectivity, two words for the same idea, in the Torah world. The Western world acknowledges that both are good traits to have, even admirable traits. They are not, however, essential traits to have, do-or-die traits to have, not the way the Torah world sees it. There may be many Torah Jews who are neither humble nor objective, but the Torah does not sanction their behavior.

The reason for the emphasis is obvious. Any time the fudging of facts can lead to serious and possibly irreversible ramifications, it is usually avoided. Anyone who lies in such situations is considered to be evil or deranged, or both. If a pharmaceutical company lies about the potential side effects of a medication and it causes damage, they are not only financially liable, they are morally liable.

That's bad. As bad as that is, and it really is, it is far worse to fudge the word of God, to yourself and especially to others. It's like skimping on the quality of concrete and metal when building the columns that will hold up a 120-floor skyscraper. When it collapses, and it will, the results will be epically catastrophic. Misrepresenting the word of God is even more so.

Objectivity and subjectivity are oxymorons. To the extent that one is subjective that is to the extent that he will not be objective, and will twist the truth to suit his emotional needs. To the extent that one is objective is the extent to which a person will not be subjective, and they will be self-sacrificing for truth.

To be human is to be subjective. To be righteous is to limit subjectivity and reserve the right to override it. But even then it takes help, Divine help, to succeed, as the Talmud says:

Shimon ben Levi said: "Every day the *yetzer* of a man strengthens itself seeking to kill him . . . If The Holy One, Blessed is He, did not help him, he would not prevail." (*Kiddushin* 30b)

The problem comes when people think they are being objective when they are actually being subjective. Usually other people can tell the difference if they are not affected by the decision, or at least not affected by it that much. We have far less difficulty being objective for other people than we do being objective for ourselves. When you have little or nothing to lose from a decision it is easy to be honest about it.

It's like being on a diet. You hear people say constantly that they can't understand why they haven't lost weight, or more weight. They say that they watch what they eat and blame the problem on some health issue that they can't control, when in fact the only thing out of control, is their eating habit and fact-fudging.

Others may tell them, "Of course you gain weight, or don't lose much. You eat a bit too much or nosh more than you should." They of course deny the accusation, until that it is, they sit down with a dietician who only has to ask one question to take the "fudge" out of their diet, "What do you eat?"

There is no question that they want to lose weight. There is no question that they "try" to watch what they eat. And, there is no question that their *yetzer hara* gets the better of them, compelling and justifying "just a little of this" or a "just a little of that," when in fact it is just enough of the wrong food to guarantee that the person will gain weight.

I have read that people who exercise can be the worst culprits. "I exercised today," they tell themselves, "so I can afford to eat a little extra and not gain weight." Then they later complain how exercise does not help their diet since they lose little or no weight from it.

That's just in dieting. The *yetzer hara* is active in many places in life and does the same thing in each area. It entices a person to fudge business deals. It convinces a person to lie in relationships. It compels a person to indulge in pleasures that ought to be avoided. Evil people do these things as a matter of fact. Good people do these things as a matter of rationalization.

The three *chagim* are said to correspond to the three Avos: Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. Pesach, which corresponds to the trait of *Chesed* corresponds to Avraham Avinu. Succos corresponds to *Tiffereh*, which corresponds to Ya'akov Avinu. That leaves the holiday of Shavuot, which corresponds to *Gevurah*, the trait of Yitzchak Avinu.

Avraham was a very "colorful" person, so-to-speak. His life was action-packed and he had a very bold personality. The same can be said for Ya'akov Avinu, and in some ways, even more so. The lives of both are documented significantly in the Torah.

Yitzchak, on the other hand, seems to have lived behind the scenes somewhat, especially since the *Akeidah*. Even though he lived the longest of the three Forefathers his life seems to have been the least active. He doesn't even have a *yetzer hara* for most of his life, very much like a dead person. In short, the life of Yitzchak Avinu was the most other-worldly of the three Avos.

This is like the holiday of Shavuot itself. As mentioned elsewhere ("The Big Picture"), Shavuot corresponds to a level of reality that is more like *Yemos HaMoshiach* than this period of history. Pesach celebrates the redemption from Egypt and Succot, our miraculous survival in the desert for 40 years. Shavuot celebrates how the Jewish people reached the level of *Yemos HaMoshiach*, albeit temporarily. They even became immortal in the process.

In *Yemos HaMoshiach*, there will be no *yetzer hara* anymore (*Succah* 52a). It will not be a time of rationalizations or justifications. There will no longer be any subjectivity, just truth, objective truth:

*God will be King over the entire land, and on that day God will be One and His Name will be One.*  
(*Zechariah* 14:9)

Rebellion against God? None whatsoever. Doubt about His existence? Completely gone. He will be the King of Kings for all peoples, the God that everyone will acknowledge and serve. The veil over our eyes that blurs our vision of truth and reality will be completely gone. People will not only be objective about others, but about themselves as well.

It is interesting how of the three Forefathers the only one who had a problem with his eyes was Yitzchak Avinu. He was even blind, made that way from the *Akeidah*. This is what Ya'akov Avinu took advantage of when he dressed up like Eisav and "fooled" his father into giving him the blessings intended for his brother.

What may sound like a disability to us may have in fact been an enhanced ability for Yitzchak. In fact, it sounds a lot like the image of "Lady Justice" with her blindfold, indicating that she is not blinded by falsehoods or susceptible to corruption. It's justice in which the facts speak for themselves and lead to logical and fair conclusions.

Remember Chush Ben Dan, the deaf grandson of Ya'akov Avinu? While his father and uncles argued with Eisav over the right of Ya'akov Avinu to be buried in Ma'arah Machpelah, he simply walked up to Eisav and knocked his head off. Everyone else who could hear what was happening was entranced, while the body of the holy Ya'akov Avinu awaited burial. Chush heard nothing and responded to the situation decisively and swiftly.

Our senses are great and no one should have to do without any of them. However, they can also be burdensome sometimes and even cause a person to err in regrettable ways. Sight can blind a person to the reality about situation. Hearing can make a person deaf to the truth, etc. On occasion, life might make more sense without a "sense" or two.

Thus, it may have been because Yitzchak could not see that he was so objective and that his *yetzer*

*hara* had no sway over him. It made him like a desert, so-to-speak, life completely without frills, and therefore a perfect servant of God. He may have appeared dead to us because we could relate to his sublimely simple life, but he was eternally alive to Heaven.

When the Jewish people responded to God's offer of Torah with the words, "*Na'aseh v'Nishma*—We will do and understand," they reached the level of the desert as well. The *yetzer hara* died within them, overwhelmed by the awesomeness of the moment. They had become completely objective, indicated by the fact that they camped "*k'ish echad b'leiv echad*," like a single person with a single objective. They had reached the level of Yitzchak Avinu.

They wouldn't have lost that level, and the immortality that accompanied it, had it not been for the *Erev Rav*, the Mixed Multitude among them. They would have maintained that level long enough to receive the first set of tablets, which would have eternalized their Messianic level and spread it to the world. The *yetzer hara* would have died completely and with it every last aspect of evil.

So, though a desert represents the exact opposite of what life ought to be like, or at least what we think is the opposite of what life should be like, it is not true. This does not mean that we should move to the desert. It means that we should carry some of the desert into the city with us, especially these days as materialism and all the jealousy and competition it breeds runs amok throughout Western society.

It's ironic that as we celebrate the giving of Torah that we tend to forget what Torah is meant to do for us. Once upon a time we learned Torah in poverty and literally survived on bread and salt like the Mishnah advises. Today we may still eat the bread and salt, but as an appetizer and seasoning. What follows is often a meal fit for royalty, comparatively speaking.

This is only part of the story. The clothing we have today and the technology we have available to make our lives easier is nothing short of remarkable. It can also hinder spiritual growth more than it helps it when it results in addiction. We become comfort-dependent, Torah-resistant, and spiritually superficial.

If it was a question of denying people material comforts then it would be a hopeless uphill battle for most. In the end it has to be about rising above such material needs, so that a person chooses to leave them behind, as matter of preference, not one of self-deprivation.

This is what the desert means to the Jewish people. It represents a level of spiritual simplicity and sensitivity that allows a person to live in a Messianic kind of way, even in the here and now of a very material world. This is what Torah, given in the in the desert, is supposed to do for us.

Text

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