

PARSHAS BAMIDBAR: UPS AND DOWNS

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

"B'shlosha devarim nitnah Torah - b'aish, bamayim, u'bmidbar" (Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah, 1:7)

This is the lashon (text) of an interesting Midrash in this week's parsha. It relates that there were three elements associated with the giving of the Torah to the B'nei Yisroel - fire, water, and [the sands of] the Desert.

Lightning and flashes of fire were in the air when Moshe received the Torah (Shemos 19), the clouds dripped water while the Jews were at Mount Sinai (Shoftim 5), and the parsha begins this week by describing the setting for Kabbolas HaTorah - in the Desert (Bamidbar 1:1).

Many commentaries attempt to explain the deeper meaning found in the cryptic Midrash that enumerates these three elements. What is the message to be extracted from the Midrash?

A POWERFUL INSIGHT

Rabbi Meir Shapiro z'tl., the Lubliner Rov, explains the Midrash and offers a powerful insight into our obligation to serve Hashem at all times. He maintains that the Torah is informing us that we must maintain our eternal commitment to the values and lessons of the Torah - regardless of the setting. Fire, like heat, always rises to a higher plane. Regardless of the direction in which a match is turned, the flame always rises. Water, on the other hand, is pulled downward by gravity and always flows to the lowest possible point.

The Lubliner Rov comments that these diametrically opposed elements, fire and water, represent the up-and-down phases in the human experience, while the desert represents the love that the B'nei Yisroel displayed to Hashem - following Him in the harsh, unforgiving desert with pure faith that our needs would be met.

UPS AND DOWNS

Sometimes we are on the rise, and everything we touch seems to turn to gold (similar to the flames of a fire which always rise). There are darker periods where we seem to be in a downward spiral (like water which flows unchecked in a downhill direction.). The Midrash is informing us that during these two diametrically opposed phases - success and failure - we must maintain our commitment to Hashem and His Holy Torah.

It is my strong belief that there are no blessings without challenges and no challenges without opportunities. When Hashem gives us material blessings, we have the opportunity to enjoy the

benefits associated with comfort and financial peace of mind. Along with success, however, come the temptations and challenges. Will we maintain our compassion as our quality of life improves? How will our success affect our dealings with those less fortunate ones among us? How will this impact our morals and value system?

Challenges and the difficulties we confront in life bring with them are certainly fraught with danger - but at the same time, rich with opportunity.

"ADVERSITY INTRODUCES A MAN TO HIMSELF"

This profound quote, "Adversity introduces a man to himself," is one of my favorites. It reinforces the notion that our challenges - and how we respond to them - are an integral component of our persona.

The inevitable bumps in our lives are very challenging - in so many ways. However, there are great opportunities for growth during these seemingly dark periods in our lives. Challenges help us find our inner strength, clarify our priorities, and force us to focus on what is truly important - 'What Matters Most' to us.

TORAH GIANTS

Think for a moment of the names of our greatest treasures - the leaders who illuminated our collective eyes to the beauty of Torah. Rashi. The Ba'alei Tosfos. The Rambam. The time period of 800-900 years ago was a phenomenal growth period for the qualitative and quantitative growth of Torah.

Looking at the monumental accomplishments of the Gedolim (sages) of that time, one would be led to thinking that they lived in a tranquil time. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the era in which these gedolim grew to towering spiritual heights was tumultuous and war-torn. The two crusades took place during those years, and the horrific plundering and murder of many tens of thousands by the crusaders affected the entire Jewish world. Rashi and the Ba'alei Tosfos lived in The Rambam was forced to flee from his home and wrote some of his chiddushei Torah (Torah thoughts) while escaping from danger on a ship in stormy seas, as he writes in one of his seforim.

Perhaps it was the stormy times that made these giants grow taller. They rose to - and above - the challenges of their environment and enriched all future generations of their talmidim with their Torah.

NO BETTER TIME THAN NOW

The Lubliner Rov explains that the Midrash informs and reminds us that there is no better time than the present to devote ourselves to learning Torah and to deriving the eternal values of its lessons.

"B'aish, Bamayim, U'bamidbar".

At all times, in all places, and in every type of environment - there are opportunities for greatness in Torah learning and spirituality.

Best wishes for a Gutten Shabbos

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