

parashas
Bamidbar
P E R C E P T I O N S

God spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert...
(Bamidbar 1:1)

THE JEWISH PEOPLE became a nation in Egypt, primarily during intense slavery. Pharaoh tried to reduce our ranks through life-draining servitude, but we grew in great numbers instead. Then we spent 40 years in a desert wasteland, and completed the process of nationhood there.

That's not the way it is supposed to happen. Nations die in servitude. They certainly don't survive the scorching desert sun of the Sinai Desert with their elderly and children. We not only survived, we THRIVED.

Not on our own, of course. Had God not protected us and provided for our every need, we would have died out there, either in Egypt or in the desert. No wonder it was so easy to be convinced by the spies to remain in the desert, and not to go up to Eretz Yisroel. They weren't leaving the desert for paradise, they thought. To THEM it looked as if they were leaving paradise for a "desert."

It's a choice that most of us would have made also,

and would have felt justified doing so. The Generation of the Spies did not abandon God. How could they? He was right there, hovering above them, and part of everything they were, and all that they ate and drank. It was a completely miraculous existence, obvious to anyone who was a part of it (which the Erev Rav wasn't).

They certainly weren't rejecting Torah. On the contrary, it was one of the reasons why they chose the desert. They were already in "Kollel," and making aliyah meant going to war against the Canaanite nations. Even with spectacular miracles, it was still a hassle, and it would be a long time before they could return to an idyllic Torah lifestyle again—if at all.

So what WERE they rejecting?

The answer was in last week's parsha, except we may not have noticed it.

In Parashas Bechukosai, the Torah informed us of the trouble in store for us if we do not keep Torah. Sounds pretty drastic. Sounds like enough of a "putch" to put ANY reasonable person back on their spiritual track.

Apparently it wasn't. The Torah continues and says that if we deal with God's "nudging" back to the right path thoughtlessly—b'keri—then He too will act b'keri to us. He will ACT as if He doesn't see what we're going through, and leave us to our troubles. We've seen where THAT can lead on many occasions.

Who is the Torah talking to? Secular Jews who question the existence of God and validity of Torah? No, the Torah is warning Torah-abiding Jews, Jews who believe in God, live by Torah, and who, by all outward appearances, seem like committed Jews.

If that is the case, then how can THEY ever act b'keri?

They learn Gemora, review halachah, and probably even learn mussar. Shouldn't that guarantee that a person would NEVER ignore God on any level?

Also apparently not. We're just coming off the mourning period of Rebi Akiva's 24,000 students. They died during the Omer Period, all because they were not accustomed to showing the proper respect to one another. They believed in God, excelled at Torah, and died prematurely all because they could not muster sufficient respect for one another? Sounds rather harsh, no?

Yes. That is why there has to have been something else more profound that they did wrong. The lack of respect they showed for one another was a symptom, not a cause. It revealed another more fundamental problem, and it was for THAT they were struck down early in life by God.

I witnessed a little of this on a recent Shabbos. I was a guest at a shul where they usually have someone local give a short halachah shiur before Ma'ariv on Friday night. It is always a talmid chacham talking to talmidei chachamim.

Within moments of starting, the speaker said something that one person jumped all over, and then another. He explained himself, but they argued more. I could see the speaker was taken aback a bit, but handled himself well. But it happened at least two or three times, and once it appeared that he had lost control of the discussion as others debated among themselves. I myself was feeling uncomfortable.

"Milchemes Hashem," I have been told when I have questioned such cut-throatness, which I witnessed a number of times in a number of shuls. "These are the bat-

ties of Hashem,” they explained to me, “and therefore it is perfectly normal and okay.”

But I can't help think about Rebi Akiva's students who died because they too fought such “wars of God,” but apparently without sufficient respect for one another. They probably thought they weren't doing anything wrong, which is why they didn't bother to change themselves. Had they not died, we wouldn't have known otherwise either.

So I asked myself, “Could the same points have been made without humiliating the speaker?”

Yes.

“Could the seriousness of the questions be conveyed without the cost of another talmid chacham's honor?”

Yes, again.

Because it turns out that there are two “wars of God” that we fight, the one on the outside and the one on the inside. What I have witnessed in the past has been mostly the external wars. When they are fought with a sensitivity to truth but not with a sensitivity to another person, then the war is being lost on the inside, and therefore, on the outside as well.

Changing that is a matter of feeling more for others than we do for ourselves. Humility is the key to everything but especially to remaining true to the truth on the inside as well as on the outside. A zealot for God is only a zealot for God when he avenges God, and not himself in any way.

So we wandered the desert for 40 years. The Talmud speaks about the midbar, and how it is such a good representative of the trait of humility. It neutralizes all the selfishness of a person, and allows them to be selfless, the

prerequisite for receiving and properly living by Torah.

Without it, we can do even, but as if at “Express Checkout.” Without humility, we can learn Torah and become arrogant and insensitive to others. Without it, we can witness signs from God, and think little of them. Without humility, we seal our fate for disaster, as we have so many times before.

We can see this from the spies as well. After they arrogantly rejected Eretz Yisroel, God decreed their deaths in the desert. It was a humbling experience, so-much-so that the next day they ran like children to undo their wrong even at GREATER cost to their lives. If only they had had that kind of humility BEFORE they spied the land.

Before anyone complains about how insensitive God has been to their problems, they should realize that the insensitivity begins with us. If it ends with us, then we can bring God back into our lives, and enjoy far more miraculous Hashgochah Pratis.

A Little Perspective, #3

Erev Rav Today

“Erev Rav—Mixed Multitude” is a term we throw around too much sometimes, and sometimes not enough. The first “batch” was impossible NOT to miss. We knew EXACTLY who they were: Egyptian converts who gravitated to the Jewish people, and then spiritually stabbed us in the back several times throughout the 40 years in the desert.

Then we entered Eretz Canaan, and the Erev Rav wasn't heard from again, at least in Tanach. Not all of them died in the desert, so they must have entered the Land with the people. But where did they go from there?

It doesn't really matter. At this late stage of history, it's not about physical ancestors. It's about reincarnated souls that have hindered or damaged the Jewish people in the past, and have reincarnated to do so again:

Rebi Shimon HaChassid said: These are the 974 generations who pressed themselves forward to be created before the world was created, but were not created. The Holy One, Blessed is He, "planted" them in every generation, and they are the insolent of each generation. (Chagigah 13b)

The Leshem explains that the Erev Rav are spiritual descendants of the 974 generations, and therefore THEY are the most insolent people in each generation. They may champion one cause or another, or even think themselves heroic and people of truth. But since they're misguided, then so is their cause, their heroism, and their idea of truth.

When it comes to purchasing something, we know of the concept of "Let the buyer beware." The seller has an obligation to be truthful about his product, but it is the buyer's responsibility to make sure that he is actually getting what the seller seems to be selling. The purchaser has to do whatever research he can do, within reason, to verify the validity of his planned acquisition.

This does not apply only to commercial products. It also applies, and especially so, to any philosophy we buy

into. We have to be truth seekers, and as such, we have to make sure that the “truth” we buy into is, in fact, the truth. As the Rambam states, you must not only know there is God, but you also have to know how you know God exists.

Recently I started relearning “Chovos L’vovos—Duties of the Heart” with a chavrusa. We haven’t gotten very far yet, but I have to say, I’m more impressed now than I was the first time I “learned” the sefer. His arguments for the existence of God and His unity— written 1,000 years ago —are refreshingly bold and exact. After reading them, it just seems so silly, immature, and reckless NOT to believe in God and Torah.

Yet some of our “brightest” minds have, and do, disregard God and His Torah. Many of them do it in the name of a ‘truth’ that can’t be truth since it refuses to even entertain the possibility of levels of reality it can’t see, because they don’t WANT to.

How untruthful can you get?

How EREV RAV can you get?

It was the Vilna Gaon who predicted that the final, and WORST, battle of the Jewish people would be against the Erev Rav. He said that not fighting against the Erev Rav was tantamount to fighting for them. So, while we keep ourselves focused on Edom and Yishmael and fear THEIR attacks, the worst will come from WITHIN the Jewish people, from the Erev Rav among us, who are able to magically make it seem as if they are on OUR side.

Just a little perspective at this late moment in history. It’s a warning to be extra vigilant about our associations, because, unquestionably, some people will be shocked to

find out that they ended up on the wrong side of the line
when Moshiach comes.