

## Netvort : parshas Bamidbar 5762

### Fire and Rain

By Rabbi Joshua (moderately known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

*With praise and thanks to the Almighty, in honor of the 35th anniversary of the re-unification of Yerusholayim on the 28th of Iyar, 5727.*

The Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah (1:6), commenting on the first verse in parshas Bamidbar - "And God spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai, etc." - tells us that the Torah was given through three media - fire, water and the wilderness. Why did God do this, asks the midrash? To teach us that just as these three items are free for the entire world to use, so too is Torah free for anyone to learn. Actually, none of these three things is really completely free anymore, and, therefore, there must be a way to explain the midrash beyond its literal meaning. I would like to present two approaches to this midrash, both of which, in different ways, understand it in a figurative sense.

The late Rabbi Yehudah Gershuni (affectionately known as R. Yudel Grodner) in his commentary Sha'arei Zedek explains the midrash to be saying that the three items it enumerates symbolize the world of nature, of the simple, natural things that man was put on this world to work with and develop. The Torah, he explains, should serve as an example, and just as it is free, so should the things that man puts his efforts into be natural and free, rather than artificial. In this context he cites the commentary of the Abarbanel to parshas Noach, explaining the sin of the generation of dispersion, that built the Tower of Babel. Abarbanel says that this generation was not content with working the soil, but, rather, wanted to build tall buildings and develop civilization in its search for luxuries. God responded to their plans by dispersing them over the face of the earth. The lesson, says the Abarbanel, is that man should restrict his physical activities to simple, natural things, and place his main focus on the spiritual.

Abarbanel's explanation of the sin of the generation of dispersion, as cited by Rabbi Gershuni, is similar to his explanation of the sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden, and the misdirection of his son Cain, as well. Both of them tampered with nature, Adam by eating from the fruit of a tree that was restricted to him, and Cain by tilling the soil, thereby interfering with its natural state. Abel, on the other hand, simply tended to his flock, retaining its natural state, and thus enabling himself to look heavenwards. Nechama Leibovits, in her Studies on Bereishis, points out that the Abarbanel's approach to the development of civilization does not really follow from the Biblical texts, and is in opposition to the approach of the Ramban, who emphasizes the need for man to develop the natural world. The approach of the Ramban, we may add, is developed at great length by Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik in his classic work, the Lonely Man of Faith. Conquering the physical world, he writes, is a divine mandate, and adds to man's dignity. Nechama Leibovits, citing the historian Yitzchak Baer, speculates that the Abarbanel's attack on the development of civilization may have been influenced by the negative experiences he had as minister of finance in the Spanish government during the period leading to the expulsion of the Jews in 1492.

Another approach to the midrash is to understand fire, water and the wilderness as forces within man. Rabbi Shmuel Bornstein, for example, in his Shem MiShmuel, writes that fire refers to man's heart, the inner fire that aspires to reach God, water refers to his mind, which adds an element of patience

and reason in approaching the divine, and the wilderness refers to the renunciation of worldly pleasures which interfere with one's spiritual pursuits. All three elements, he writes, are necessary for the study of Torah.

Rabbi Avrohom Aharon Yudelevitch, in his Darash Av, follows a somewhat different approach. He writes that the three media mentioned in the midrash refer to character traits that are necessary, at different times, in studying Torah and fulfilling its mitzvos. Water, he says, represents humility, because it flows from high places to low places, and fire, which represents passion, refers to arrogance. Although a person should usually be humble, following the example of Moshe, there are times when it is necessary to apply one's passions, and act with a measure of arrogance. For example, according to Targum Yonasan, Moshe prayed for Yehoshua before sending him out with the other spies because he detected an extreme measure of humility within him, and feared that he would not be able to stand up against the evil intentions of the others when the time came. Rabbi Yudelevitch does not explain how the media of the wilderness fits into this system, but perhaps we can suggest that the wilderness represents the mediating factor between arrogance and humility. In order to know which approach to use in a given situation, one must surrender himself to the guidelines of the Torah.

If we transfer our expansion of Rabbi Yudelevitch's approach to the system that Rabbi Bornstein presented, we can say that the Torah mediates between following one's heart - or a more emotional approach - or one's mind - a more intellectual approach - in dealing with situations that confront us. Rav Ahron Soloveichik referred to these two different approaches as the logic of the heart and the logic of the mind. Why is it, he asked, that the spies sent by Moshe failed in their mission and told the people they would not be able to conquer the Holy Land from its inhabitants? Because they followed the intellectual approach, looking only at the cold, bare facts, rather than using their heart. When it comes to Eretz Yisroel, however one must follow the emotional approach, since it is referred to as 'eretz chemdah,' a desirable land (Yirmiyahu 3:19, Tehillim 106:24). The images of fire, water and wilderness, then, symbolize different forces within the human personality which are mediated by the guidelines provided by the Torah, which, having been given in the wilderness, must be followed through surrendering oneself to its dictates.

Please address all correspondence to the author (Rabbi Hoffman) at the following address - JoshHoff @ AOL.com.

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