



The Torah of the Desert
Parshas Bamidbar

A scent of cleanliness hung in the air, as Rachamim the *gabbai* (sexton) made sure everything was in order in the Beis Midrash. Chaim the cleaner was waiting by, ready to finish his job. My father, then fourteen years old, did not notice the goings on, as he was engrossed in his studies. From a very young age he was known for his diligence.

Rachamin noticed my father sitting. He asked him to please leave the room, explaining that they needed to finish the cleaning before Pesach. My father closed his book and searched for another location to study. He found a spot in a nearby *Shul*, and continued to study tractate Pesachim, on the laws of Pesach, which he hoped to conclude before the beginning of the holiday. After a short while the *gabbai* (sexton) from that asked him to leave for the same reason.

He left, looking again for another spot. On his way he passed the home of the *Rosh Yeshiva* of the famous Etz Chaim Yeshiva, Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer,¹ where he was a welcomed guest. My father decided to go there, and was immediately admitted, and sat with the rabbi to learn. A cup of coffee, some bread and vegetables were placed on the table as refreshments, but they did not stop for a break, for them the study was like oxygen and gave them strength.

In our weekly parsha we read: "The Lord spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert".² Our Sages learned from here that the Torah was given in three ways – through fire, water and in the desert. Why these three elements? They are all free and readily available; likewise the study of Torah. Furthermore, to truly acquire the Torah one must "abandon himself" like the desert.

This idea seems a bit odd, as one usually chooses a discipline of study that is compatible with his personality. If he is not suitable for study he will not succeed. However, this is not the case with the study of Torah. "Only he who studies Torah is truly a free man."³ When one abandons himself – then he gains control of the Torah and wisdom. The Torah is the word of G-d, and only he who comes with no prior conceptions can properly grasp the Torah. Only he who becomes vacant as a desert – who rids himself of ego, can obtain Torah and wisdom.

¹ Isser Zalman Meltzer, (1870 - 1953), was a famous Lithuanian Orthodox rabbi, *Rosh Yeshiva* and posek. He is also known as the "Even HaEzel" - the title of his commentary on Rambam's Mishneh Torah.

² Bamidbar 1, 1.

³ Pirkei Avot 6.

Therefore, during the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai the Torah says: "And they stood at the foot of the hill". Our Sages learn here that G-d placed the mountain over the Jewish People, like a pail. G-d told the Jewish People: "Receive the Torah, or this will be your burial place."⁴ Tosafos ask: "The Jews announced they would receive the Torah, why was there a necessity to coerce them?"

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk,⁵ in his commentary *Meshech Chochma*, explains the "coercion" was not meant to be taken in a literal sense, but rather G-d revealed to them his splendor and glory, to a state in which their ability to choose was annulled, and their comprehension of G-d was on an extremely high level – "You have been shown, in order to know that the Lord He is G-d; there is none else besides Him."⁶

This state relates to the one we are discussing – one can receive the Torah only by abandoning himself, like the desert. There was a need to check that the Israelites were on this level. When their freedom of choice was curtailed, and they attained an angelic state where just as the angels act on orders and have no personal aspirations – so too the Jews in proximity abandoned their egos, and became like angels prepared to accept any and all instructions. This was the sign that the Jews were indeed ready to receive the Torah.

They studied together for two hours. Rabbi Meltzer would seek wisdom from any source – even from a fourteen year old. In the afternoon the rabbi's wife returned from the market. She noticed the untouched refreshments. "Why have you not eaten anything?" she inquired. The elderly rabbi responded. "Do you not see the important guest? I could not stop".

She persisted: "What would happen if you would pause for a few minutes, the young man could certainly wait while you eat?" He did not understand her, replying: "What? Am I a doctor that people need to wait for me?" Rabbi Meltzer had no airs about him – he was truly "like a desert".

⁴ Talmud, tractate Shabbat 84a.

⁵ (1843–1926) was a rabbi and prominent leader of Orthodox Judaism in Eastern Europe in the early 20th century. He was a Cohen, and is therefore often referred to as Meir Simcha ha-Cohen. He is known for his writings on Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, which he titled Ohr Somayach, as well as his novellae on the Torah, titled Meshech Chochma.

⁶ Dvarim 4:35.