



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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The Secret of the Forty Years

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 In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
 who loved and supported Torah learning.

Bamidbar

The Secret of the Forty Years

In recent years, the Israeli military has been experiencing a severe manpower crisis—and in Israel in general there is an ongoing “brain drain” problem.

You see, the problem is that many international corporations offer Israeli professionals career opportunities that they don’t get in Israel—and even those who stay in Israel don’t stay on in the military but rather, serve for three years or so and then go on to the private sector.

A few years ago, a high-ranking Israel Air Force commander called a military chaplain and told him the following: “Until now, you would check mezuzos and inspect kosher standards on military bases. From now on, however, I have a different mission for you: Go to the best yeshivos and bring back the best and most brilliant young men to the ranks of the military technology sector.”

So the military rabbi asked him: “A lot of yeshivah students never even studied math and English? How exactly are they going to understand F-16 fighter-jet technology?” The Air Force commander answered: “True, they might not understand English—but they know how to learn new things. Anybody who’s sat and studied in yeshivah for years, studying Talmud for 14 hours a day, will successfully master any material in a crash course.”

So they reached out to married young men who needed to make livelihoods for their young families and offered them a trade. The military offered to provide them with a work environment most suitable to them, food at the highest level of kosher standard, prayer services three times a day and even a Talmud class for an hour every day.

On top of that, the military would teach them computer programming and so on, give them certification, and after two years of military service, the military would try to find them jobs in the country's market.

The project started three years ago. Today there are five hundred young married men who wear Israeli military uniforms during the week and the traditional shtreimel fur hats on Shabbos. As a matter of fact, the air force did a motivation study and was surprised to discover that the highest motivation among military members for tours of duty was among the religious.

Most recently, Prime Minister Netanyahu visited an Air Force base, and shared that when he saw the young religious men in side locks and tzitzis in the ranks of Israel Defense Forces, he had tears in his eyes.

And today, there is such a high demand from this religious sector to get drafted that the demand has far exceeded the supply—they don't have enough openings available for all those interested in joining the military.

Which brings us to this week's Torah portion.

This week, we start reading the Book of Bamidbar (Numbers), which tells us in great detail of the forty years of wandering of the Jews in the desert.

Now why indeed did Am Yisrael, the Jewish Nation, spend forty years in the desert?

The official reason for their detainment in the desert is because of the story of the Meraglim, the Spies. G-d had wanted to bring them into the Holy Land immediately, but they approached Moshe and suggested sending spies into the land to check out the situation. The Spies returned with a negative report and the conclusion that they would be unable to defeat the inhabitants of the land. So the entire community converged upon Moshe and Aharon, shouting that they didn't want to go into the land—and indeed, G-d swore that that generation would die in the desert and only the next generation would enter.

But here, we can ask the question: Since when did G-d set the Jewish Nation's agenda based on the complaints He gets from them? Suddenly G-d is so democratic! Since He got enough complaints, He postpones the idea of going into the Holy Land for a different time—for the next generation. But did He ask the Jewish Nation if and when they wanted to leave Egypt? And if the Jews had said to Moshe, "Let's put off the Exodus for six months—we still haven't finished all our work here in Egypt," would G-d have then changed His schedule?

G-d took the Jewish Nation on His time. He took them out at the exact moment he wanted—and then, "they were expelled from Egypt and they could not wait, and food was also not made for them," as the Torah tells us in Shmos 12:39. They didn't even have time to make sandwiches! As Rashi says on the verse "And it was in the middle of this day" (Shmos 12:41), "This tells us that since the time had arrived, G-d did not detain them for even the blink of an eye.

But here, with the Spies, G-d suddenly changes the entire schedule because Moshe got complaints!

Immediately after the Splitting of the Reed Sea, the Torah tells us (in Shmos 15:22), "And Moshe led Israel from the Reed Sea," on which Rashi comments, "He led them against their will because the Egyptians had adorned their horses with gold and silver ornaments... and the Jews were finding them in the surf... therefore he needed to lead them away against their will."

In other words, the Jews were busy collecting spoils from the sea, but still, Moshe didn't delay and didn't wait for anyone: "He led them against their will.

Indeed, all of Judaism is built upon this concept of not having free will. How so? As the Sages tell us in Pirkei Avos, Ethics of the Fathers, Chapter 2, Mishnah 3, "Against your will are you born and against your will do you die."

So to recap, the Jews had no choice about leaving Egypt. They had no choice about leaving the shore after the crossing and heading on their way with Moshe Rabbeinu. And we don't even get to choose when we are born or when we die! But suddenly, here in this week's Parshah, G-d defers to our preferences and changes His schedule?!

So along comes the Midrash Tanchuma at the beginning of the Torah portion of Beshalach and says something amazing: "G-d said, 'If I lead them on a simple path [to the Holy Land], each man will now build himself up in his field and vineyard and neglect the Torah. Rather, I will lead them through the desert, and they will eat the man and drink the well waters, and the Torah will settle into their bodies.' " The journey through the desert was only a part of the big plan: If the Jewish People were to enter the Holy Land immediately, they'd all be drafted into the military so as to conquer the land, and then they'd each get their own field and their own vineyard and they'd end up in the private-sector market and they'd never have any chance to study the Torah. So G-d purposely detained them in the desert, putting them through "yeshivah" for forty years so that they'd have the time to study Torah.

The Jewish People are called “the People of the Book” not because we have the greatest book of all times in a closet or drawer somewhere. In order to deserve the honorific “People of the Book” we truly need to study and know the book—and for that, we needed forty years in the desert. And as the Rebbe explains in many of his talks, the Jews had bread from heaven while in the desert—meaning that they simply didn’t need to worry about what they were going to eat. They also had water from Miriam’s Well. The Ananei HaKavod, the Clouds of Glory, protected them all, and the weather was excellent—they were able to sit in peace and study the Torah. And this is the simple meaning of the saying of the Sages, “The Torah was only given for those who ate the manna.” Why specifically them? Because the Jews in the desert, who had all the food, water and shelter they needed, had the time and opportunity to study Torah without any worries.

In addition to that, there was something special going on in the desert: Not only did the Jews not have to worry about food, but they didn’t have to worry about social status either. In the desert, they were all the same. It didn’t matter how much money you had—you got the same amount of manna as everyone else did. Nobody got more or less. In the desert, the Jews lived in a state that was free of jealousy and competition. Why? Because there was an abundance of good—there was nothing to fight over. Only in a spiritual state like that can people center their lives around the study of the Torah.

Now when a person hears this description, he may think to himself: True, the Generation of the Desert was really able to learn Torah—they had no livelihood worries. But I live in the year 2011! I spend my every day running after my livelihood from morning to night. How am I supposed to study Torah? Even G-d Himself admits that in order to succeed in studying the Torah, one needs spiritual and material security.

The answer to this question is that this is why G-d gave us Shabbos.

On Shabbos, your food has been prepared already since Friday. Work of any sort is strictly forbidden: We're not allowed to cook, wash, clean or do any other organizing. All your work is completed. On Shabbos, the Jew is "inside the cloud"—he doesn't have a single worry in the world.

Additionally, the differences between one who is rich and one who is poor are only expressed during the Six Days of Creation, meaning, the six days of the work week. On Sunday through Friday, one guy might make more and another guy might make less—and you have to compete so that the other guy doesn't "steal" your livelihood away.

But on Shabbos, when everyone is in shul, everyone is the same (at least in our shul). There are no places reserved for rich people only. Everyone prays together and sits together at Kiddush and studies the Torah together.

This is stressed in the Ten Commandments themselves, where it says, "Do not do any work: You, your son, your daughter, your servant, your maid, your ox, your donkey and all your animals, and your convert within your gates, *so that your servant and maid may rest like you*" (Devarim 5:14).

Shabbos is the great equalizer. On Shabbos, everyone is the same.

Shabbos is the day on which the Jew is like our ancestors who ate the manna. On this day, the Jew finds himself under the Clouds of Glory—the one day of the week on which he can taste a likeness of the World to Come.

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