

PARASHAS BEHA'ALOSCHA

Lemonade in the Desert

Packing up an entire family and moving to a new location is one of the great physical, mental and emotional ordeals in life. Relocation imposes great hardship and throws the normal rhythms and cadences of life into disarray. Those who have endured the experience are thankful that it normally needs to be done only once in a very long time.

The Jewish encampment in the desert, however, was not quite so fortunate. The people traveled by divine command numerous times, always with extremely short notice. The signal to encamp or decamp was delivered by the cloud pillars that hovered over the encampment. When the cloud pillars rose and edged away, the people scrambled to pack up and follow. And when the cloud pillars descended and came to a stop, the people knew this was the place to pitch their tents.

The travels were unpredictable. Sometimes, the cloud pillars would signal them to move within a very short time, and sometimes, they would remain in one spot for a very long time. Sometimes, the cloud pillars would bring them to a barren and desolate stretch of desert and stay there for a long time, and sometimes, they would guide the people to a lovely spot but uproot them in a matter of days.

What was the purpose of all this constant relocation? And why was it done in a manner so unpredictable and fraught with such difficulty? Why did God force them into such a trying nomadic existence?

The commentators explain that the forty-year sojourn of the Jewish people in the desert was meant to prepare them for the trials and vicissitudes of the life that lay ahead. There is no life that is not fraught with hardships and frustration, nor is there any important period in a person's life that passes without any adversity whatsoever.

So how do we deal with these difficulties? Many people just burrow down and try to get past it. They think, "When I will get to high school, then my problems will be over." Or: "When I get my driver's license, then life will be just perfect." Or: "When we get married and settle down in a place of our own, then life will be uninterrupted bliss." And what about their relationship with the Creator? "I know I have to improve," they say. "Just let me get past these hurdles, and then I will concentrate on it."

The travels of the Jewish people in the Desert taught us that we always have to deal with what life has handed us. As we travel through the various chapters of our lives, we need to rise above the

unpredictability and the hardship. We must not let ourselves become distracted from the ultimate purpose of our existence. We must deal with our situations as they arise and turn them to our advantage. If God served us lemons, we should use them to make lemonade.

A young man was traveling on a train with a great sage. The window was open, and the cold air was blowing in. The young man kept his holy books open on his lap, but he stared at them blankly.

“Why aren’t you studying?” asked the sage.

“Because it is so cold,” said the young man.

“Then close the window,” said the sage.

The young man closed the window but still was not studying.

“What now?” asked the sage.

“I am still disturbed by the memory of the cold.”

“My dear young man, if you had wanted to, you really could have studied in the cold. And if you don’t want to, you can find a reason under any circumstances.”

In our own lives, we are faced with the struggles of existence every day, whether they are financial, intellectual, social, emotional or medical by nature. There never comes a time when we can step back and say, “All right, I’ve set up my life just right. Everything is just perfect. Now the good times can begin.” No matter how difficult they may be, the good times are right now. These moments will never pass our way again. We must grasp them, elevate them, sanctify them and store them away forever.