



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, EMERITUS

“The Wilderness First”

My first exposure to the study of the Bible was in the Yiddish language. We spoke only English at home, but almost all the teachers we had in the *yeshiva* I attended were Holocaust survivors who had escaped to the safety of these shores only a few years prior.

I must admit that we learned to translate into Yiddish by rote and had little conception about what the words meant in English. Thus, we translated the very first verse of the Torah as “*In der anfang hatte der Oibeshter bashaffen*”, not having a clue that “*In der anfang*” meant “in the beginning,” that the “*Oibeshter*” was “the One Above,” and that “*bashaffen*” meant “created.”

When we reached the *Book of Numbers*, *Sefer Bamidbar*, we finally had a teacher who, although he continued to provide the Yiddish translation, told us, in his broken English, what the words meant in the language we understood. And he would even provide visual aids, photographs and drawings, which would help us truly grasp the meaning of what we were studying.

I’ll never forget his opening lesson. He told us that we were beginning a new book of the Torah, and a new weekly Torah portion, that both went by the name “*Bamidbar*”. “In Yiddish”, he said, “the word means ‘*in der veesternisht*.’ “ We were all about nine years old and the word “*veesternisht*” triggered a giggle which soon morphed into hilarious laughter.

There is something about the sound of the word that is comical to me to this very day.

He waited for our laughter to subside, and then said that “*veesternisht*” in English meant “a desert.” And he showed us a picture of the Saharan desert. “The Jewish people were wandering through such a desert,” he explained, “and the entire book that we are beginning to study took place there.”

He then asked us if we remembered coming across the word “*veesternisht*” earlier in our studies, in a slightly abbreviated form.

It was my dear friend Michael, who passed away some years ago now, who remembered that first verse in *Genesis*, which contains the phrase “*tohu va’vohu*”, which is generally translated as “unformed and void”. In Yiddish, the phrase is rendered as “*poost und veest*, empty and desolate.”

Bamidbar is the Torah portion which we read this week, and which is always read on the Shabbat before Shavuot. I researched about a dozen biblical translations, including some non-Jewish ones, and found that only a few translated “*Bamidbar*” as “in the desert”. The vast majority preferred the word “wilderness” to “desert,” so that the key phrase in the first verse of our *parsha* reads “...The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai ...”

Although the dictionaries I consulted did not distinguish sharply between “desert” and “wilderness,” it is the latter that rings

true as the English equivalent of the Yiddish “*veesternisht*.” An empty, confusing, and frightening wasteland.

It was in that wasteland that our ancestors wandered for forty years, and it is that wasteland where we received the Torah.

Why? Why was the Torah given in this wild and chaotic terrain?

Like most questions of this sort, numerous answers have been given over the ages. I would like to share with you an answer which makes great sense to me.

If one reads further than just the first verse of this week’s *parsha* (*Numbers* 1:1-4:20), he discovers that although the image we have of the wilderness is one of disorder and confusion, the narrative theme of these several opening chapters is one of order and systematic organization. The tribes are divided into 12 distinct units, each one is assigned its own unique flag or banner, and its place in the procession through the wilderness is precisely specified. The entire *parsha* can be summarized as “making order in the midst of chaos.”

It strikes me that the ability to organize one’s environment in a beneficial and orderly manner is a basic human skill that every society must first possess before it can proceed toward greater cultural achievement. Having said that, we can appreciate that before the Torah could be given to the Jewish people there was a necessary prerequisite: the establishment of a functional society in which people could get along with each other in a peaceful and productive manner. Only in such a context could the Torah be properly absorbed.

There is an ancient saying which states this idea unequivocally: “*Derech erez kadma leTorah*.” Literally translated as, “The way of

the world precedes Torah.” (*Midrash Vayikra Rabba*, 9:3). More generally, it means first one must have an ethical, just and humane society. Only then can one proceed to Torah.

We can classify this week’s Torah portion as the *parsha* of *derech erez*, because in it a nation successfully copes with the trials and tribulations of its environment. It tamed a wilderness by creating a civilization. It dealt with a wasteland by establishing a functioning and equitable society.

That is why it is precisely this *parsha* that precedes Shavuot. Shavuot is the anniversary of *Matan Torah*, of the Divine revelation, the giving of the Torah. The Almighty does not reveal Himself to a people who cannot get along with each other in an orderly and civilized manner. He does not express His will to individuals, communities, or nations who, in today’s jargon, “can’t get their act together.”

He does not give His Torah in a wilderness, in a wasteland, in a “*veesternisht*.” He expects us to first act toward each other with *derech erez*, respectfully and courteously. He demands that we first tame that wilderness and cultivate that wasteland. Only then are we deserving of His great gift.

Derech erez kadma leTorah. Humane behavior first, and only afterwards the Torah. That’s how it was that very first time in the wilderness of Sinai, and that’s how it must be this weekend, when the Shabbat of Bamidbar immediately precedes the festival of *Matan Torah*. ■

