The Wisdom of the Wilderness: Thoughts for Parashat Bemidbar

View PDF

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bemidbar
by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Kotzker Rebbe (1787-1859) was an insightful Hasidic master whose wisdom continues to impact on thinking Jews of our times. He made an important observation based on the fact that the Torah was originally given and taught in Midbar Sinai, the wilderness of Sinai.

He taught: the Divine Presence only rests on one who sees him/herself as being in the wilderness. No matter how much one has learned, he/she still remains in a place that is vast and untouched—i.e. there is so much more to know. And just as a wilderness remains empty and unproductive unless it is seriously cultivated, so a person remains empty and unproductive unless he/she expends tremendous energy and effort to attain wisdom. Only such a person can merit genuine knowledge of Torah and the blessing of being touched by the Divine Presence.

The Kotzker Rebbe had little patience for pseudo-scholars and pseudo-intellectuals. He was repelled by the phenomenon of self-contented, self-righteous and arrogant individuals whose vanity made them think they were great and important. He despised sham piety, pretentiousness, and inflated egotism.

I was recently reminiscing with a friend about our years at Yeshiva College during the 1960s. One of the teachers who made a lasting impact on me (and on so many others) was Professor Alexander Litman. Dr. Litman taught philosophy in a unique way. He took a topic from Plato and suddenly—he WAS Socrates. He asked us questions, probed all aspects of the issue, he challenged our assumptions. He made us think! Other professors of philosophy may have given academic discussions about philosophers: Dr. Litman was a philosopher.

I remember Dr. Litman’s slow and deliberate way of speaking, his cryptic smile, the sparkle in his eye when he made a particularly clever remark. He would end class with an announcement: “We will meet again on Thursday…if there is a Thursday.”

Dr. Litman knew a tremendous amount. But like Socrates, he saw himself as a searcher for truth. He understood that in spite of all that he had read and learned, he was still in a wilderness, far from achieving ultimate truth. He might well have identified with the words of Socrates: “And I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise;…he is only using my name by way of illustration as if he said: He, O men, is the wisest, who like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing.”

The Kotzker Rebbe probably never read Plato and Dr. Litman may not have been familiar with the teachings of the Kotzker. But both of these men, like all genuine teachers, understood the essential qualities required of those who strive for wisdom: humility, critical thinking, hard work. Both of these men, like all genuine teachers, taught their students to think, to reject glib and superficial people who pretend to be learned or wise.

One of the influential artists and teachers of art in early 20th century America was Robert Henri (1865-1929). In his book “The Art Spirit,” he observed: “There are two classes of people in the world: students and non-students. In each class there are elements of the other class so that it is possible to develop or to degenerate and thus effect a passage from one class to the other. The true character of the student is one of great mental and spiritual activity.” (p. 104)

Students are those whose minds are active, interested, searching. Non-students are those who are intellectually stagnant, vacuous, self-contented. Students always feel they are in a wilderness, with so much more to learn and so much territory that needs to be cultivated. Non-students feel they know a lot, that they have truth in their pocket, that they are smarter and cleverer than most everyone else.

If a man is a great rabbinic scholar, he is popularly called a “talmid hakham,” a student of the wise. Jewish folk tradition has understood that even the most learned of people is considered to be a student. Once a person forgets that he/she is a student, then he/she degenerates into the class of non-students.

We read Parashat Bemidbar prior to the festival of Shavuoth, the holiday that celebrates God’s revelation to the People of Israel at Mount Sinai. It is fitting that we remember the wilderness experience as we prepare to commemorate our receiving the Torah. Unless we understand the message of the wilderness as taught by the Kotzker Rebbe, we indeed will be living in a frightening wilderness of foolishness, ignorance, and spiritual complacency.

Angel for Shabbat