

Bamidbar: Mirage and Reality

- Nisson Shulman. The Shavuoth holiday, when we accepted the Torah, gave us the wherewithal to discern between mirage and reality. But it took us 40 years in the desert to truly learn that lesson, and even till this day it is a lesson we desperately need to learn.

Bamidbar: Mirage and Reality (Also can be adapted for Shavuoth)

We know that a Jew is forbidden to practice magic. The Torah doesn't tell us whether there is any efficacy in magic or not, but even supposing there were such powers, a Jew is forbidden to use them because we must put our trust in God and in Him alone.

There are Rabbis who go beyond the letter of the law, and feel that Jews shouldn't even engage in innocent parlor tricks, in optical illusions. It might at first seem a little far-fetched. What is there to fear in a little innocent parlor magic? But upon closer consideration we are impressed with the attitude of our sages and our tradition that we must be totally honest and open to our fellow human beings, and that even the slightest possibility that a person will be fooled by us is to be avoided. *Midvar sheker tirhak*.

If we must be so careful not to deceive anyone else, how much more careful must we be not to fool ourselves!

Our Torah reading, Bamidbar, and in fact the entire book of Bamidbar, tells the story of our forty years' journey in the Sinai desert. Everyone knows about a mirage; the strange trick desert atmosphere plays on travelers. An oasis, water, appears where there is actually nothing. It is an appearance of reality, which vanishes upon closer scrutiny. Such a mirage is false, frustrating, and to the unsuspecting, weary, spent traveler who puts his faith in its reality, it is critically dangerous.

There are mirages, illusions of reality, in every area of human life and experience.

The theme of Bamidbar can be described as a many faceted lesson: teaching and training our people to discern the real from the unreal, truth from falsehood, fact from mirage.

What was the sin of the Golden Calf? Wasn't it that our fathers placed their faith in an illusion? They said, These are your gods, O Israel... They saw an image, thought it was real, and were led astray. The Golden Calf was a spiritual mirage.

Or the sin of Korach's rebellion: They saw people they thought were great men; elders, golden tongued, brilliant, frum, wearing talitot made entirely of techelet, "glat kosher talesim". They weren't only devout in attitude and word, but their deeds seemed to be more devout than the Torah requires. The Torah requires only one thread of blue, and they each wore a talit that was totally techelet. What could be "frumer" than that? It was all a mirage. They were false, their garb was false, their preaching, their frumkeit – all hypocrisy, a mirage, fooling the people till the ground opened and swallowed them up.... gone; the earth would know them no more.

Or the sin of the spies: What did those ten deceiving men see, after all? Great walled cities? Insurmountable barriers? Mighty warriors? Giants? Enough to melt the stoutest hearts and terrify them. It all looked so real! Real enough to make many want to scurry back to Egypt if they could! Enough to earn the punishment of forty years of desert wandering! Deaths in the desert till the next, clearer sighted generation grew, and arose ready to march into the Promised Land. Because what did happen when they finally entered the Promised Land, when – for instance – they reached Jericho? The miracle of the walls tumbling into rubble. That was reality, and all their fears, the walls, the great warriors, the fortresses, and the barriers, what were they? Illusion, unreality, mirage! No more!

In our own personal lives, we are constantly in danger from mirages. The most important things are often confused with the most immediate... What do we really want? – prestige? honor? recognition? Suppose we had to trade this for health, happiness, family, faith and life itself, which would we choose? Yet for which set of values do we strive more eagerly and avidly?

Or even more clearly: Isn't it only in times of emergency and personal crisis that we can begin to tell who are our real friends and who are only mirage?

Or in the new world of singles: Many young people have developed a whole culture about living in a single state. "Marriage isn't necessary", they say, "and it is OK to make a choice between children and a career". Thus, even observant people neglect the first mitzvah of the Torah, "Be fruitful and multiply", and think they can make such choices based on their own values, desires and emotions. They omit the word duty from their dictionary, but later, when it is all but too late, they wake up to realize they are missing the greatest joy, the greatest challenge and the greatest purpose for which we are placed here on earth. All this passes them by. Their lives, the things they really want most in life deep down, slip by, and the things for which they strive most, prove to be no more than a mirage. Reality eludes them, slides away from their grasp.

In our national life we have our share of mirages. Sometimes they take the form of leaders, when we trust the unworthy, like Korach in the desert. Sometimes we fear great dangers, giants in our way, political, military, and in the end they actually melt away, like our enemies after the various wars in Israel. While on the other hand, sometimes we don't recognize dangers before our eyes, and ignore them, when we should not. Obviously, everyone who turns a blind eye to assimilation and intermarriage is guilty of this sin.

We have had our share of false friends who, in a crisis, turned against us. For as you know, in the desert there are sometimes real water holes, but it might take God's miracle to turn bitter waters into sweet! Israel's United Nations delegation has had enough experience with bitter friends, to know that it sometimes takes a miracle to turn them sweet again. And recently, we have experienced just the opposite lesson. Israel's politicians and public, army and general staff, are more and more coming to the bitter realization that Arab professions of peace are a mirage, and the current Arab reality is hate, blood and war; and we badly need a miracle to change this reality.

There is hardly a way to avoid the danger of a mirage without an experienced guide to keep us on the right road. Our forefathers had a desert, and mirages, but they also had Sinai and the

Torah. We have our mirages, and we too have Sinai to guide us away from them.

The teachings of Sinai have kept us alive and brought us to this day. Because of them we have the Promised Land. If we are not to get lost, we must take Sinai as our guide. What compass is to a pilot, the Torah is to us. "Ner leragli devarecha, veor linesivasi." "Your word O Lord, lights my steps and my path (Tehilim 119:105)." The Shavuoth celebration this year above others, has added significance. Would that we could all learn, through kabbalat hatorah, to discern good from evil, right from wrong, friend from foe, mirage from reality.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)