

1. Today we begin reading the Book of BAMIDBAR - which means, "in the desert", for it was in the desert of Sinai that Torah was given to Israel and that all its precepts were elaborated. The Sinai desert is a tremendous arid stretch of wasteland, where from horizon to horizon, as far as the eye can see, there ~~stretch~~ extends the same monotonous scenery of drab emptiness, with low scraggy hills marking off the distant ends of the lines of vision. Only lonely caravans and solitary bedouins pass through this great desert, and nothing flourishes in it - neither vegetation nor animal life nor human civilization - to any great extent.
2. Yet it is in just this sort of place that Torah was given - in this desert, this empty wasteland. That the MIDBAR was chosen for this singularly greatest and most crucial event of human history is no accident. It had to be given in the MIDBAR, and no place else. Our Rabbis were so convinced of this fact that they said that TORAH can be compared, among other things, to the MIDBAR; it is identifiable with it.
3. And we have the right to ask why that was so. Would it not have been better to give it to the Jews whilst they were still in Egypt, so that along with this great moral and religious teaching, they could have developed the great technical skills of ancient Egypt? - ... or in Canaan, so that they could have developed a great art and appreciation of beauty, together with Torah? Should it not have been revealed to a settled people in a well-developed cultural atmosphere and civilization?
4. No, say our Rabbis, only in the MIDBAR. And why? - because the desert is HEFKER LAKOL, completely free and untamed, wholly without prior claims and ownership, with no precedents and no settled culture or patterns of life. That is why Torah was given to our people in the MIDBAR.
5. Had the Torah been given to our people while they were Egyptianized Jews, then their Egyptian habits and customs and mores would have been accepted as part and parcel of the Divine Teaching, and later generations would have not been able to distinguish between what belonged to Pharaoh and what belonged to G-d; and as a result, the Torah would not have been passed on to the generations which settled in other lands and lived amongst many widely divergent types of people and culture. What would Torah have been like if instead of the saying of Kaddish and the dedication to holiness, Jews would have insisted upon building "soul-boats" and pyramids, as the Egyptians did?

Had the Torah been given to Jewry of Spain, and there been assimilated in the majority culture, Jews would have come to believe that Torah must be tailor made to fit bull-fighting and carry on inquisitions. Could Judaism ever have survived if the Torah were given in that kind of atmosphere?

If, for that matter, Torah were given to us in any kind of settled condition, it would have been thought to be dependent on that culture, and would have lost its force long, long ago. It is precisely for that reason that it was given BA'MIDBAR, in the place which was HEFKER LAKOL, completely unclaimed, a cultural vacuum and void. It was meant to teach all succeeding generations of Jews that Torah is sufficient in and of itself, that it must never be declared the hand-maiden of other cultures, that it must never be made to kneel to local customs and habits, that it must never be approached with the irreverent and narrow minds of provincials who believe that their particular way of living is the most important in the world and its history and that Torah must be cut down to their size. The only way to teach that was to give Torah in the vast emptiness of the Sinai wilderness - so that Torah to us is eternally independent, and the essence of life in and by itself.

6. There is no better reason for stressing this superiority of and independence of Torah than the constant attacks on the fortress of Judaism made in the name of "Americanism" and "The American Way of Life". It is, alas, true what Will Herberg says: "The American Way of Life" has become more than a patriotic publicity blurb. It has

become a super-religion, over and above the historic faiths represented in this country. To be regarded as a "sinner" is no longer quite so terrible; it is even regarded as admirable adventure. But to be "un-American" - no greater crime is possible. Just look at what has happened to Judaism in America! Instead of intelligently thinking about what there is good and valuable and permanent in American culture, ~~we have~~ and absorbing that in Jewish life, we have done things the other way around: the test of what to keep and what to reject in Judaism is Americanism; if it fits the American frame, keep it, otherwise throw it away. And most, of course, is found not to fit. Like most other Americans, we Jews of America suffer from an overgrown collective ego; we think that nothing like "the American way of life" has ever hit this world. We export it, and judge other nations by how much of it they accept. It has never occurred to us that that easy-going quality, sportsmanship, good plumbing, baseball and the two-party system, and all else that goes by the name of "Americanism", may not be desired by other people, nor may it be the best possible of all things for Americans themselves. I shall never forget what happened to me the first month I came to Springfield. I was in the office of one of the distinguished leaders of our Jewish community on some personal business, and he involved me in a discussion of Day School. He pleaded with me than came near to commanding me to keep away from that school, because, as he put it, "it's against the American way of life." I was shocked not so much by the stupidity of the statement that Day School is subversive, but even more by the fact that this man regarded "The Am.Way of Life" as the ultimate, divinely revealed truth, something which must never be questioned. So what if something does not fit into this provincial frame of reference, "Americanism"? Does that mean that to believe in it you are disloyal? - or anti-progressive? Were Moses and Isaiah or, to cross into other fields, Aristotle and Pateur, believers in "the Am.Way of Life"? Isn't Winston Churchill un-American in his way of life? And wasn't Albert Einstein, despite his deep loyalty to America, just the opposite of the type who prides himself on leading this Am.way of life? Torah was given in the Midbar - just to let us know that it was able to flourish and ~~teach~~ men how to live with G-d and with each other even before Columbus was born.

7. Just think of it: if Judaism in the U.S. were ~~made~~ to conform to all the standards of Americanism, and English Jews accommodated Torah to Britainism, and S.African Jews to S.Africanism, and Indian Jews to the Indian Way of Life - then TORAH MAH T'HEI ALEHA - then what would happen to Torah? What would bind us to the Jews of other countries? Were would there be resemblance between us and the great Jews of the past? There would be no connection, of course. There is no place for this narrow-minded provincialism in Torah - and that is why it was given BA'MIDBAR.
8. It is a never-ending source of wonder to me how some of our most vocal Jewish publicists speak glibly of "American Judaism". "American Jews" or "Jewry" I can understand. But what, pray tell, is "American Judaism"? Does it mean a red-white-and-blue tallis? - or mass-produced tefillin? - or neon candle-lights? And just why should this Torah which has proven so valuable thru all history, now be made to adjust to "Americanism"? A left-wing Reform lay-leader, affiliated with the Am.Council for Judaism, recently wrote: "We will teach prophetic Judaism - a Judaism for Americans". So prophetic Judaism was meant for Americans! Isaiah was a Palestinian, Ezekiel a Babylonian, Moses an Egyptian and Daniel a Persian. What judge granted them citizenship papers? Thank G-d Torah was given in a desert!!!
9. The next time someone challenges you with the remark that Orthodoxy is not for Americans, that it is not compatible with "the Am.way of life", tell him what should be told to him. Tell him that it certainly is compatible with the finest expression of American culture, with the integrity that characterized the pioneers, with their sense of deep convictions and their willingness to self-sacrifice. Tell him too that it has no desire to accommodate itself to the narrow and vulgar aspects of the Am.way of life, to the cult of convenience and mediocrity, to the suspicion of any intellectual endeavor, to the inane desire to conform to the majority. Tell him that Torah was given to our people when they were surrounded only by the spirit of G-d in a great desert, and that G-dliness, we maintain without fear of being subversive, is far superior to this Americanism.



And then tell him that this matter of tailoring religious practice to fit the American environment is a peculiar manifestation of Jewish self-hate. Christians have had more self-respect. When the state of Oregon was at odds with the Catholic Church, some years back, over the matter of parochial schools, Catholics threatened to fill the jails of the state in defense of their principles. Protestants whose religious convictions forbade them to fight, went into conscientious objector camps rather than tailor their beliefs to the prevailing public opinion. And the sect called Jehova's Witnesses refused to salute the flag on principle. Incidentally, all three groups were upheld in their rights by the Supreme Court. That is the kind of attitude we want to develop. To teach us that, that Torah is not to be pressed into other molds, G-d gave the Torah BAMIDBAR SINAI.

10. All this is not meant to say, of course, that Judaism has no truck whatever with other cultures. We have adopted a lot from other peoples. We learned philosophy from the Greeks, grammar from the Arabs, Yiddish from the Germans. From Americans we learned the practical procedures of democracy - although we knew quite a bit about it before - decorum at services - though that, too, is a "DIN" in the SHULCHAN ARUCH, and the possibility of educating our young in both secular and religious studies in one school. They are valuable additions to the store of Jewish knowledge and life. But they are not the core. They are good, but not vital. We can survive without philosophy, without grammar, without Yiddish, without decorum. But we cannot survive without Torah, without ANOCHI HASHEM ELOKECHA, without Shabbos. That core, that Torah given in the desert, is what will remain in effect a thousand years from today when all our local customs and habits will have become ancient history.

11. What is that core called? It is called Torah, yes. But more specifically, it is known as HALAKHA - usually translated as Jewish Law, but really including all that is great and noble and holy and essential in Judaism. And it is this body of Jewish doctrine that is referred to as HALAKHA LEMOSHE MISINAI - It is the Torah taught to Moses in the great desert of Sinai.

12. MISINAI indeed. For only there, in that vast stretch of arid wilderness where the human mind with all its ingenuity can plant nothing that will flourish, there in that desert G-d revealed Himself to His people, teaching His people that HEIM CHAYEINU V'ORECH YAMEINU, in Torah we can find life, and in it we can find the length of days - for all time, to the end of days, that Torah is the sufficient source of all Jewish life.