



MAKING THE DESERT BLOOM

AT FIRST SIGHT, THE BEGINNING OF THE SEDRA¹ seems to concern something which was only relevant in the ancient past. It describes the tasks of the Levites during the period of travelling in the desert. Before each journey the Sanctuary would be dismantled by the Levites and then they would transport its various sections: the curtains, beams of cedar wood, and so on, until they reached the next stopping place. Then they would again set up the Sanctuary, while the rest of the Jewish people pitched their camp around it.

It is interesting to think that for thousands of years we have been reading again and again the account of this journey in the wilderness. This helps us understand our own task in life.

The Sages tell us that the purpose of Creation is that G-d should be revealed and “dwell” in this physical world². What does this mean?

The idea that G-d is revealed in a higher, spiritual world, in Heaven, is not difficult. A spiritual realm is by definition transparent to G-dliness. It shines with G-d’s holy radiance. But the statement that G-d should be revealed in the physical world in which we live is quite strange. For a start, our world seems to be opaque to G-dliness. Many people live in the world and do not think about G-d at all. Unfortunate or tragic things often take place, and a person might wonder: why did this happen? All this means that in our world, G-d is usually *hidden*.

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The purpose of Creation is that instead of being hidden, G-d should be revealed: here in this physical world, a world not of angels but of human beings, with food, phones and computers.

Now, let us go a step further. In order for G-d to be revealed in our world, something has to happen first. The world has to be changed, somehow, so that instead of hiding G-d it will reveal Him.

Who has to achieve this change in existence? Yes, you have guessed right. We the Jewish people have to change the world. We have to prepare it so that it can be a “dwelling” for G-d.

The Sages tell us that this is the inner story of the Torah, all the way through. The Torah describes how we get into very difficult situations and then, by living through them in a Jewish way, we are actually having an effect on existence as a whole. This was the meaning of our slavery in Egypt, then the most impure place in the world. Although it was hard, we managed to maintain our identity as Jews. This had the effect of neutralising the negative force of Egypt, so that the Torah could be given, as celebrated on Shavuot. Later we embarked on a long journey through the desert. This too had the effect of purifying existence.

Travelling through the empty desert, and setting up the Sanctuary at every place where we stopped, was a way of preparing the world as a whole to receive the ultimate Sanctuary, the Temple in Jerusalem. Now, thousands of years later, our own journey through the world, during our long exile, setting up Jewish homes in Britain, the USA, Australia and Hong Kong and everywhere else where Jews might be, including Israel, is preparing the world so that not just Jerusalem but the *whole* world will be filled with the Glory of G-d.

How do we fulfil this task? By keeping the Mitzvot, including Torah study and prayer, wherever we might be. This includes that little Spanish village where we may soon be going on holiday!

Wherever we are, and at every moment, we achieve the transformation of the world so that G-dliness can be revealed in every aspect of life for everyone. Through this we help fulfil the purpose of Creation, making the world a dwelling for the Divine³.

1. Numbers 4:21-7:89. 2. See *Midrash Tanchuma* ‘Naso’ sec.16. 3. Based freely on Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi’s *Likkutei Torah*, Sedra Naso.

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SHAVUOT AND SEDRA NASO

THE PRIESTLY BLESSING

Avi Sheldon was walking along on the way to synagogue on the first day of Shavuot, with his parents and younger siblings Rafi and Shira. It was a warm morning, and the Sheldons were enjoying the pleasant stroll. When they arrived at the Synagogue, Mrs Sheldon took Shira upstairs to the women's gallery and Mr Sheldon took Avi and Rafi to their seats in the men's section.

Avi found his mind wandering during the service. He really loved the Shavuot festival. His cousins, Michael and Ronny Cohen, who went to the same Synagogue, were coming to their home for the Festival meal. Mrs Sheldon had prepared the most delicious milky foods. She had even let Avi have a small taste of most of her dishes, because Avi claimed to be the best professional taster! They had a good laugh, and Avi approved all the food his mother had prepared. Especially the cheesecake!

There was the reading of the Ten Commandments, when everyone stood up. That was fun. Some time later came the Rabbi's sermon. Avi tried to listen. Often, the Rabbi would crack some good jokes in his sermon. But not this time...

Never mind. Avi was really waiting for something special that was about to happen. It was the Priestly Blessing. Avi's cousins and their father would be taking part, as Kohanim (Priests). Avi and Rafi would be listening, under their father's Talit. Avi loved the beautiful tune of the Blessing, and would carefully follow the words.

When the time came, Avi's Uncle Alan and his sons all went up to the front of the Synagogue. There were some other Kohanim as well. Soon Avi got under his father's Talit with Rafi. He could hear the melody and the words of the Blessing. He found it very moving.

Later, on their way home from Synagogue, Avi mentioned this to his father.

"Do you know what's interesting?" Mr Sheldon commented. "The Priestly Blessing is actually mentioned in Sedra Naso, which we read on the Shabbat right after Shavuot."

"Yes, I learnt about it in class," Rafi piped up. "G-d told Moses to show Aaron and his sons how to say the blessing."

"Wow, Rafi, I'm impressed! You certainly are a very good listener!" Mr Sheldon exclaimed. Rafi beamed happily. "And G-d's name is mentioned in each part of the blessing" added Avi. "G-d told Moses that the Kohanim should use His Name in the Priestly Blessing and He will fulfil their blessings".

"Wow, boys I'm pleased to hear that you know all about the commandment of the Priestly Blessing. It's a very special thing to be a Kohen, you know that?"

"Like Uncle Alan, Michael and Ronnie," said Avi.

"Why are they Kohanim and not us?" asked Rafi.

"Because Auntie Miriam, Daddy's sister, married Uncle Alan who is a Kohen," said Shira.

Mr Sheldon laughed. "You're quite right!" he said. They were nearly home. "Come, let's all help Mummy get things ready", he said. "And remember, you don't have to be a Kohen to eat cheesecake!"

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