

A Muse: Shelach L'cha

“Your children will roam in the wilderness for forty years and bear your guilt, until the last of your carcasses in the wilderness. Like the number of days that you spied out the Land, forty days, a day for a year, a day for a year, shall you bear your iniquities-forty years- and you shall comprehend straying from me. I God have spoken-if I shall not do this to this entire evil assembly that gathers against me! In the wilderness they shall cease to be, and there shall they die.” (Numbers 14:33-35)

People, when reflecting back on their life can point to certain events, seminal events which impacted intensely on them and influenced some of the outcomes in their life. Sometimes, while reflecting on our lives we aren't even aware of the events which so profoundly directed us. At times, the impact is on a subconscious level, other times we can point to it. The same is true for the life of a nation.

The collective memory of a people while sharing some similarities with that of an individual is also very different. With an individual, it is the one person that is responding to a particular event or chain of events. With a nation, there are multiple numbers of people involved and while all of them are responding to any given event that has impacted the nation, each one will have a different response. This however, when woven together forms the nature and character of the collective memory of the nation.

It can be argued that the Dor Hamidbar, the generation of Hebrews destined to roam the desert for forty years impacted on the national psyche of its people and perhaps helped shape the character of the Jewish people. Our sacred texts and literature which evolved and influenced by national events such as the forty year trek in the wilderness characterized this period as a beautiful time, a spiritual, mystical era where the relationship between God and his people was ideal. The well known expression “chesed n'ureich”, the “affection of your youth”, characterizing the Dor Hamidbar comes from Jeremiah 2:2 “Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem saying: thus says the Lord: I remember for you the affection of your youth, the love of your espousals (bride) how you went after me in the desert in a land that was not sown”.

Jeremiah reflected on the days of our sojourn in the wilderness not as a test of the nation's will power or determination, but as a romanticized period, a love fest between Israel and God. Midrashim picked up on this theme, embellishing it as evidenced by the Mechilta. Later, Rashi (10th century) too makes use of the Jeremiah text and builds on the Mechilta. The Ramban (13th century) makes use of this theme when he explains a verse in Deuteronomy (33:3). The romanticized version of the forty year wilderness trek took on a life of its own as it trickled down over the centuries through our sacred texts and rabbinic literature.

Our rabbis built on this foundation a notion that comprehensive Torah study can only be accomplished by those who live in an ideal environment. That is to say that the study of Torah can't be optimally fulfilled unless the student lives in economic conditions favorable to study and where he will be free of worrying about a livelihood as the Hebrews were in the wilderness. Rabbi Yonatan Eibshitz (18th century) elaborates on the ideal wilderness environment where the Hebrews were absolutely worry free, food was guaranteed and all their needs were met by God. All they had to do was study Torah. (Sefer Yaarot D'vash, part 2, 16th drash)

Harav Hayim M'volozhin (18th – 19th century) followed in this tradition, but with a unique and remarkable twist. It wasn't the ideal conditions of the wilderness which created the environment by which the Hebrews could study, but the reverse; by virtue of their absolute giving of themselves to the study of Torah intensity and with total abnegation was the ideal conditions created. The study of Torah in the wilderness was their assurance of survival, without which their survival was in question. This theme as expressed in Nefesh Hachayim, and directed against Hassidut, became the last word in Lithuanian Yeshivot and became the holy grail of his yeshiva, Yeshivat Volozhin.

The "mitnagdim" proponents buttressed by the Lithuanian Yeshiva movement which has had an enormous impact on the quality of yeshiva students, their life styles and their politics in the twentieth and twenty first century was indirectly created as a result of the

collective memory of our people who understood the generation of Dor Hamidbar in terms of “chesed n’ureich”.

Interesting, how a painful and difficult forty year trek through the desert with inadequate food and water can be channeled into the national collective memory of its people as a magical and mystical time resulting from the twist of Jeremiah’s reading of history, giving credence to the Israseli song “hakol Biglal Masmer Katan.”