

# The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

*B'ha-alo-t'cha*

Something quite tragic occurs midway in our Parsha that signals the beginning of the end for that privileged generation that left Egypt. The People are setting forth toward that Land promised to them by HaShem. The excitement and great anticipation were palpable. As Rashi tells us (10:33), the journey of three days miraculously took just one, so anxious was HaShem to bring them into Israel. And then, something fateful took place, something unexpected with dire consequences. On that verse which begins, "They journeyed from the Mountain of HaShem...", the Talmud (Shabbat 116a) understands that "journey" as a movement away from Gd. The Midrash (Yalkut, Bamidbar 729) puts it more graphically: "When Gd told them to depart Mt. Sinai, they ran like children away from school." How are we to understand this seemingly juvenile behavior?

After the Splitting of the Sea, the Torah tells us (Sh'mot 15:22) that Gd had to forcibly move the People away from the water's shores. Apparently, they had lingered there too long to collect the washed-up spoils of the drowned Egyptian army. And now,

more than a year later, the People just couldn't wait to escape the spiritually oppressive atmosphere of Mount Sinai. Clearly, something was terribly amiss. But exactly what had occurred?

It is unlikely that the People wanted to throw off the burden of the commandments. They had committed to their observance and were surely not backing away from that pledge. Rather, much like the student who after graduation no longer feels any compulsion to study - after all, he practically has the skills he needs and knows all that is necessary to function in society - the People, after having been duly instructed in the details of the mitzvot, were anxious to move on and begin to live, to live without engaging in the Torah encounter.

Their mistake - and it was to be a costly one - was in viewing the Torah as having only instrumental value; that is, to assume that the only purpose in studying Torah was to acquire the requisite knowledge to fulfill the commandments. The Beit HaLevi (Mishpatim 24:7) explains otherwise. Of course, it is critical to study Torah in order to observe the mitzvot (see Kiddushin 40b). But this aspect of Torah study does not, by a long shot, exhaust the inestimable value of Torah study. There is

**intrinsic, absolute value in studying Torah for its own sake. Why?**

**In many places in the Tanach, Torah is equated with life itself. It is a "tree of life" (Mishlei 3:18); it is "your life and the length of your days" (D'varim 30:20). In our prayers, we speak of "Torat Chayim", a Torah that is life itself (see also Pirkei Avot 6:7). In other words, when a Jew studies Torah, he generates and cultivates a religious awareness that embraces his every activity. Regular engagement with Torah forms the very spiritual matrix into which all of his behaviors are embedded. It is the religious backdrop against which the Jew judges the rectitude of his deeds. It is the latent consciousness that ever so subtly guides and inspires a person to do what is "right and good in the eyes of Gd" (D'varim 6:18). No wonder, Rambam rules (Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:10) that one is not relieved of his obligation to study Torah until the day of his death.**

**When Torah ceases to be an all-encompassing passion that fills the whole of one's life's experiences then the entire structure of religious praxis begins to weaken. It slowly gives way when inconvenience, disappointment and failure intrude into one's life, when boredom, ennui**

**and dejection suck the very zest and optimism out of living. Without a broad Torah weltanschauung to provide perspective and meaning into the darkest corners of life, without a Torah hashkafa to fill the empty spaces of despair with vision and value, the dry halachic rules are soon sadly abandoned. Alien life-styles are adopted, assimilation soon follows and the destiny of the Jewish People suffers.**

**When the People of Israel fled the spiritually charged environs of that mountain of Gd's Revelation, they - perhaps unknowingly - were severing their connection with a vital dimension of Torah, the absence of which would eventually lead to the tragic sins that would ultimately prevent them from entering the Promised Land. Had they chosen instead to live a Gd-intoxicated existence, had their encounter with Torah been an emotional living experience, they would have succeeded in ushering in the Messianic era.**

**Where they fell short, we must not!** 🙌