



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

BAMIDBAR

The World as a Wilderness

Our ancestors had no monopoly of life in the wilderness.

In a moral sense the whole human race has frequently faced wilderness conditions. Lost in a maze, mankind stumbled along one path after another, constantly torn by brambles and frightened by bears.

At times man thought he could see a way out, but more often than not he merely became more and more enmeshed.

A Chassidic tale speaks of two men who came across each other in the forest. One said, "Do you know how to get out of this forest?" The other said, "No, but I do know where I have come from, and I don't want to retrace my steps. Let's hold on to each other and combine our efforts to find a way out!"

The Chassidim are right. By supporting one another we ensure we do not lose heart. Thinking, talking and assessing the situation together helps to handle our problems rationally.

ally. But best of all is to a map from which we can work out where we have been, where we are, and where to find the way ahead.

From the moral point of view the best map is the Torah, with its clear directions about truth, honesty, justice, compassion and peace.

True, it is an ancient document and ours is a new problem. New problems seem to call for new solutions. But what if the new problems are simply the old problems in new clothes? In that case, what harm is there in trying the old verities?

Peace is Strength

The Israelite camp may have been a tent town, but there was town planning at work.

The twelve tribes all had their set place; surrounding the sanctuary on all four sides, they camped "each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house" (Bamidbar 2:2).

Each tribe had its banner; each banner had its emblem - altogether a magnificent sight.

The Midrash says the surrounding peoples thought the banners indicated a military camp bent on war.

The Israelites, however, indignantly replied that their camp had a peaceful purpose; the reason for their banners was to fulfil the command, "Your

camp shall be holy" (D'varim 23:15).

What made the camp holy was that since each tribe knew its own place, there would be no quarrels between them, no demarcation disputes. All were part of the same nation, but all had their own ways and ethos and made their own contribution to the common good.

Their strength was in their internal peace; as the verse says, "The Lord will give strength to His people: the Lord will bless His people with peace" (T'hilim 29:11).

With peace in your camp, you are strong. When there is inner conflict, the future is bleak. -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH