



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

KI TAVO

An Abandoned Desert

The title of this week's Torah portion, KI TAVO, means "when you come (into the Land)".

What a relief it must have been for the Israelites to have heard these words. In the wilderness for 40 years, and only now did they see an end to their wanderings.

A desert - a MIDBAR - is no picnic, and not all deserts are physical. In a natural desert one yearns for escape, in a national desert for liberation, in a spiritual desert for security, in an intellectual desert for enlightenment, and in a personal desert for peace.

Is there any MIDBAR which is a blessing? Only in Southern California, in the opinion of David Ben Gurion, who said on a Californian visit in 1951, "I envy you your deserts - you can afford to keep them deserts!"

With this possible exception Jewish thinking regards a desert as an enemy to be overcome, a challenge to be met, a task to be carried out.

Success comes when one wrestles against a desert and prevails, turning the desert, as the Bible puts it, into a Garden of Eden (Yishayahu 51:3).

Yet there is still a view in the Midrash that a desert can be a good thing. It says, "A person who does not make himself like an abandoned desert is unable to acquire wisdom and learning" (Bamidbar Rabba 1:7).

Whatever can it be telling us? That if you want to acquire knowledge, first you have to clear your mind from extraneous thoughts and ideas clogging up your system.

In this sense there is a great deal to be said for using the weeks before Rosh HaShana to clear our hearts and souls and get them ready for the month ahead.

Candles for the Land of Israel

The weekly portion derives its name from the opening words, V'HAYA KI TAVO EL HA'ARETZ - "And it shall be when you come into the land" (D'varim 26:1).

A well-known rabbinic view says that when a verse begins VAYHI - "and it was", it is a bad sign, but when it begins V'HAYA - "and it will be", it is a good sign.

Rabbi Eliyahu of Greiditz, one of the

early Chovevei Tziyon, used to say, "V'HAYA means joy; when a Jew comes to Israel it is a moment of joy before the Holy One, blessed be He."

This thought animated his life to such an extent that whenever he spoke of Eretz Yisra'el he asked his attendant to light candles, in order to fulfil the words of the Megila, "The Jews had light, joy, gladness and honour" (Esther 8:16).

Modern Jews, for whom access to Israel is so much simpler than in the days of the Chovevei Tziyon, seem to have lost that feeling of spiritual and emotional ecstasy.

For us, Israel is realpolitik. Collapsing coalitions, debates about the peace process, social divides, economic un wisdom - these are the daily reality, and hardly anyone would light a candle to celebrate them. But grim realities and partisan politicking are not the sum total of Israel.

Enter an Israeli yeshiva or university and discover the truth of the proverb, "The air of Israel makes you wise." Walk the streets, see the kaleidoscope of human types, and thank God for answering our prayer, "Gather our exiles from the four corners of the world."

Spend Shabbat in the Holy City and celebrate the fulfilment of the words, "Bring back Your Divine Presence to Zion."

Become acquainted with the deeds of love and compassion that bind Israelis, and echo the question, "Who is like Your people Israel, a unique people upon the earth?"

Discover the range of Israeli exports of products, ideas and techniques and find that Israel is truly "a light unto the nations".

See all that Israel has done for the Jewish people everywhere and rejoice that "there is hope for our latter end".

Rabbi Eliyahu's attendant would be lighting candles constantly! -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH