

Hashem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai. (1:1)

The well-known *Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7)* states that the Torah was given to us through the vehicle of three media: fire, water and wilderness. Fire: “All of *Har Sinai* was smoking when Hashem descended upon it in the fire” (*Shemos 19:18*). Water: “The Heavens trickled; even the clouds dripped water” (*Shoftim 5:4*). *Midbar*, wilderness: “Hashem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai” (*Bamidbar 1:1*). *Chazal* spell out the lesson derived from those three: They are all free; so, too, is the Torah available for free. The commentators, each in his own inimitable manner, offer their own explanations of these three media.

K'sav Sofer suggests that fire is the symbol of light/illumination. Torah lights up the path of life for us. Water signifies humility. Water descends from a high place to a lower one; so, too, does Torah “gravitate” only to those students who do not arrogate themselves. Last, Torah was given in a wilderness to teach that in order to succeed in uncovering the Torah’s secrets, one must live a “wilderness” lifestyle, in which he does not seek luxuries, and simplicity prevails.

The *Shem MiShmuel* interprets the lesson of these three agencies as indicating the appropriate approach one should maintain in Torah study. Fire represents passion, a deep, burning desire to know and grow in Torah. Water is the symbol of a tempering, cooling agent, so that one understands that passion requires a balance. To understand Torah, one must be analytical, patient and calm. He must be passionate about learning, but not to the point of getting carried away. Last is wilderness, which teaches the importance of forgoing physical, material indulgences that would hinder one’s growth in Torah.

The idea that fire alludes to both heat and light can precipitate various interpretations. Water may also allude to humility and calm. Wilderness is ownerless and free to all, which characterizes Torah study. I would like to focus on water as a liquid; namely, the tears one should be prepared to expend in order to learn, to understand, to remember, to teach and to inspire. Not everyone is blessed with an acute mind that picks up the material easily and retains it just as effortlessly. Some are compelled to work hard and diligently to understand and then retain what they have learned. The journey for some is fraught with difficult challenges and insurmountable obstacles. If they persevere and shed tears, however, they will succeed. Indeed, for them, the sky is the limit!

Horav Baruch Mordechai Eizrachi, Shlita, related the following story (quoted in “Warmed by Their Fire,” by Rabbi Yisrael Besser). *Rav Eizrachi* was a *talmid*, student, of the famed *Chevron Yeshivah*. *Chevron* was a *yeshivah* whose student body consisted of many brilliant, erudite young men. One day, *Rav Eizrachi* was sitting on the porch of the *yeshivah* with a group of friends. It was their lunch break and a time to relax a bit. Suddenly, a young man walked up to them. From his manner of dress, he clearly demonstrated that he was not associated with *Chevron* or with any other *yeshivah*. He wore a cap, a ragged shirt and short pants. He asked them, “Is this the *Chevron Yeshivah*?” They replied in the affirmative. He then asked to be directed to the *Mashgiach*. The students smiled that he was asking for the *Mashgiach*, who was a world famous

Torah scholar. What business could he have with this young man? A few minutes passed, and their query was resolved when the *Mashgiach* introduced them to a “new student” in the *yeshivah*!

They were flabbergasted. Chevron was the most prestigious *yeshivah* in *Eretz Yisrael*. At the time, it was the apex of *yeshivos*. How could a *bachur* who was unacquainted with the basic rudiments of *Gemorah* make it? He was given a seat in the *bais hamedrash* and a *Gemorah*, which he carried upside down, as he walked proudly to take his place as a member of the Chevron student body.

Their disbelief ended when they heard his tragic story. He had lost his entire family in the European Holocaust. The inferno claimed everything that was dear to him, except his spirit. At a time when all boys should be spending their time in *cheder* learning Torah, he was running for his life or suffering indescribable affliction. He had been unable to learn Torah, but his desire to make up for lost time permeated every fiber of his body. While the other *bachurim* were arguing over a *Rashbam* or a *Rabbi Akiva Eiger*, he was struggling to read and understand the text of the *Gemorah*. The *bachurim* reached out to him, but held no hope for his success – until they watched him *daven*.

He stood in his place, his *siddur* in his hands, tears streaming down his face. He wept and wept for *Siyata diShmaya*, Heavenly assistance, so that he would one day know how to learn. At that point, *Rav* Baruch Mordechai commented to his friends, “He might just make it after all.” They looked at the new *bachur*’s *siddur* when he finished *davening*. Its pages were sopping wet with his tears. This is the water of Sinai – tears wept to learn and understand Torah.

The *bachur* did not become a *gadol*, Torah giant, overnight. It took time and incredible effort laced with tears until the new *bachur* became the top student in the Chevron Yeshivah. His name is *Horav Shaul Barzam, zl*. Indeed, the *Steipler Gaon* took him as a son-in-law.

As a youth, *Horav Chaim Kamil, zl*, *Rosh Yeshivah* of Ofakim did not manifest any strong Torah learning skills. He tried and was diligent, but it did not seem as if it would happen. Indeed, his family attempted to convince him to study a specific skill, so that he could become a tradesman and earn a living. Clearly, he would not climb the ladder of Torah knowledge. Why waste his time? He never gave up, studying diligently until all hours of the night just to master the most elementary passages in the *Gemorah*. He, too, made it because, at some point, Hashem intervened and opened his mind.

Horav Menachem Tzvi Berlin (*Rosh Yeshivah Rabbeinu Chaim Ozer*) once passed the *bais hamedrash* of a *yeshivah l'tzeirim* (high school), and he heard bitter weeping. He became worried: who could be crying so bitterly, and regarding what was he crying? He entered the *bais hamedrash* and saw *Rav Chaim Kamil* standing in front of the *Aron HaKodesh* crying out to Hashem, “Please, please, I beg of You to enlighten my eyes with Torah. I cannot understand the *Tosfos* that I learned. Please, illuminate my eyes, and open my mind to Your Torah!” This is how one becomes a *gadol baTorah*: with water!