

## **Wilderness Training: Preparation of His People**

No sooner do the Israelites cross over from the Sinai into Midian than basic training begins in earnest. Israel already acquainted with the fiery pillar and the ever-present cloud, the constant companions become training tools ruling their lives. (Exodus 13: 21-22).

During this first year the training methods devised by the Lord come to light. The tactics and strategies are intermixed with harsh conditioning. It is an example of how man perceives a curse when all along it's a blessing. The Lord hides blessings in adversity.

The Lord's basic training revealed in the first five books of the Old Testament now guides Israel. Military training, conditioning, discipline and tactics fill the pages of the Torah. The Lord and His servant Moses begins with an undisciplined, fearful, pathetic group and turns them into the most powerful army in that region. Training began the moment Israel left the Egyptian slave camps. It included the whole nation. Special training for all individuals 20 years or older was mandated.

The first decision after crossing the Red Sea reinforces the military nature of the people's future. Exodus 13:17 informs us that God led the people into the wilderness even though it was longer because the people were not prepared for battle.

I remember my first day in the military getting off the bus in the early morning hours. No provisions, a mixed group of new inductees who 'march' like a herd of cattle according to the drill instructor. So was this large unorganized group except they are fleeing for their lives.

Preparation for war is important. Getting just the right mix of training is critical to combat readiness. Today we admire the specialized training given to Special Operations warriors. Whether SEAL training, Ranger, Special Forces, or Para rescue training, intense hardship and tactical training is the hallmark of these forces.

However, their training hardly matches the training afforded the Israelites in the wilderness. Israel goes through 40 years of training (they were slow learners).

What was this training? The people prepare to move at any moment. They marched until the Lord stopped. Movement was at anytime of the day or night and it was through inhospitable territory hot in the day and cold at night. Israel did not know where they were going or when they would rest.

When encamped for lengths of time they practiced a variety of skills and trained in a multitude of task. Specialized training in warfare, weapons, and tactics occurred daily. Weapons devised and utilized. Different tribes taught individualized skills.

The tribes of Judah, Naphtali, and Zebulun specialized in the use of spear and shield common in phalanx training. Zebulun trained in the use of all weapons, and quick tactical movement.

The tribe of Gad used smaller shields and arms and were swift as mountain antelope. A greater number of men of the tribe of Benjamin are ambidextrous and thus train in both bow and sling.

The tribe of Issachar provided intelligence specialist performing behind the lines reconnaissance. These are just some of the task for which the people trained in the wilderness (I Chronicles 12:2ff) with organizational marching the daily drill.

The text says that the army went forth in martial array, and led by a cloud pillar during the day and a pillar of fire at night. This movement indicator was to remain the next 40 years. The only time the people knew they would not be moving was on the Sabbath.

15On the day that the tabernacle was raised up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, even the Tent of the Testimony: and at evening it was over the tabernacle as it were the appearance of fire, until morning. 16So it was continually. The cloud covered it, and the appearance of fire by night. 17Whenever the cloud was taken up from over the Tent, then after that the children of Israel traveled; and in the place where the cloud remained, there the children of Israel encamped. 18At the commandment of Yahweh, the children of Israel traveled, and at the commandment of Yahweh they encamped. As long as the cloud remained on the tabernacle they remained encamped. 19When the cloud stayed on the tabernacle many days, then the children of Israel kept Yahweh's command, and didn't travel. 20Sometimes the cloud was a few days on the tabernacle; then according to the commandment of Yahweh they remained encamped, and according to the commandment of Yahweh they traveled. 21Sometimes the cloud was from evening until morning; and when the cloud was taken up in the morning, they traveled: or by day and by night, when the cloud was taken up, they traveled. 22Whether it was two days, or a month, or a year that the cloud stayed on the tabernacle, remaining on it, the children of Israel remained encamped, and didn't travel; but when it was taken up, they traveled. 23At the commandment of Yahweh they encamped, and at the commandment of Yahweh they traveled. They kept Yahweh's command, at the commandment of Yahweh by Moses. (Numbers 9: 15-23).

The Lord used these two methods to guide the people and prepare them for battle.

Long marches and night marches both occur later in the book of Joshua. Later success in battle against the Canaanite can be traced to the Lord's training. Numerous times the Israelites would complain about the hardship of the journey. However, this pattern of marching, harden the warrior and makes Israel a mobile strike force.

Its value is seen in the battle at Gibeon where Joshua marches his army over night uphill some 1900 feet in mountainous territory and then proceeds directly into combat leading to a running 'gun battle' over twenty miles. Joshua even begs the Lord to extend

the day in order to destroy the enemy. Twenty-four hours without rest in fierce combat reveals the depth of preparation. The wilderness had prepared Israel well.

Moreover, Numbers 2 reveals a specific marching pattern. Each tribe, clan, and family is assigned a specific post to be covered. It is estimated that this army along with the civilians would have covered an area of 12 square miles.

This may seem a little matter to the unskilled in tactical maneuvers. However, armies train for years in proper troop movement in battle. The Roman Castra, known as the greatest logistic achievement of the Roman army, learned it from God's people. A pattern described in Numbers 2 developed by the Lords people some 1000 years before the birth of the Roman nation!

As part of the military structure Moses developed intelligence units. The first long range reconnaissance patrol composed of leaders among the 12 tribes. This was because each of the tribes would have an interest in which part of the territory they would receive. The team sets out from Kadesh-Barnea a desert oasis in the south. This was an extreme wilderness area from which Moses probably thought to launch his attack.

Going from Kadesh-Barnea in the south to the most northern point Rehob, the team traveled about 250 miles stopping at Hebron on the way up and on the way back. Altogether the recon team traveled about 500 miles in 40 days, or about twelve to thirteen miles per day. When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said,

Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, "Go up this way by the South, and go up into the hill country: and see the land, what it is; and the people who dwell therein, whether they are strong or weak, whether they are few or many; and what the land is that they dwell in, whether it is good or bad; and what cities they are that they dwell in, whether in camps, or in strongholds; and what the land is, whether it is fat or lean, whether there is wood therein, or not. Be courageous, and bring of the fruit of the land. Now the time was the time of the first-ripe grapes." (Numbers 13:17-20).

Emphasis focuses on the state of preparedness of the people, their war making capabilities, and special attention to fortifications. The reconnaissance patrol did exceptionally well in gathering the needed information. However, Moses mistakenly allows the patrol to report publicly their findings. Joshua, 40 years later, heeds that mistake and sends a reconnaissance team in secret.

Moreover, the team interprets their findings and that went beyond the scope of their instructions. Ten of the patrol members' emphasize to the general population the strength and appearance of the enemy without remembering the strength of their God.

The people rebel at the news and start anew their complaints. This time they intend to stone Moses. The Lord has enough and pronounces judgment on the people condemning them to forty years in the wilderness. Again the people rebel and against the advice of Moses chose to invade on their own. They lose a major battle.

A large chariot force meets Israel. Untrained in heavy phalanx formation strategy Israel meets a heavily armored, well experienced, Canaanite army. Israel is defeated on the battle field.

Knowledge of the Hittites battle tactics is available from the records of the battle of Kedesh. The Egyptians and Hittites, several years before, fight to a standstill in a battle the details of which are preserved in stone engravings. The lightly armored Israelites do not have a chance.

The information acquired from this loss is critical to the training given Israel during the next forty years. Israel is to utilize a strategy of lightly armed formation, in mountainous territory. This strategy marks every successful battle prior to the time of Solomon.

The battle also taught Moses that the attack could not come from the south rather it must come from the Trans-Jordan area. The strategy for war rests on the most effective manner to overcome the enemy with the easiest skills and lightest weapons.

The tactics deployed in each subsequent battle depended on the terrain, fearless men, warriors strengthened by physical, mental, and emotional hardship, and God's intervention. From this time on espionage becomes a regular part of the tactic Moses incorporates into the overall strategy to conquer the Promised Land.

Another major advancement in military tactics taught by the Lord is communication. The ordinances for communication are outlined in Numbers 10. The trumpets described here are made from hammered silver and they are composed of two trumpets used in tandem.

These types of trumpets would produce a sharp, clear, piercing note. They were in common use during this period in Egypt. If they are similar to those discovered in Tutankhamen's tomb they are about two feet long and tapered from about one-half inch at the mouthpiece to about three and one half inches at the bell end. <sup>1</sup>Unique signaling arrangements are utilized for direction and speed. These newly acquired signaling skills are to be seen in the first battle of Israel against the Amalekites Exodus 17.

Troop movement and formation discipline however was just one aspect of training. Every task assigned in the wilderness had relevance to the coming invasion of Canaan.

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<sup>1</sup>R.K. Harrison, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary Numbers, Moody Press, April 1990, p.167.

How does God lead us and what does God expect of us? God is aware that His people have varying levels of faith some quite shallow others deep. The Lord does not expect more than He has given. He does constantly pull us upward, but we are tested on what we have, not what another has.

At the shallow end of faith one finds “For God does speak—now one way, now another— though man may not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds, he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride, to preserve his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword. “(Job 33:14-17).

So at the least the person who believes in God can depend upon such warnings. Even the godless Nebuchadnezzar came to know of God’s existence by such a method. The Lord does not hold one responsible for more than He reveals, however man is responsible for all that God reveals.

What are those expectations? Man must obey to the extent that he believes. He must believe and obey to the extent that God reveals himself. It is here that the failure of Israel in the wilderness is apparent. Repeatedly God revealed His mighty works to them and they failed to live and obey according to what they beheld. One meets the same unbelief with Jesus’ enemies. They saw his many wonders, signs, and miracles. Each observation demanded that they believe and obey.

The other end of the spectrum one sees a person like Moses. He has personally talked with the Lord. Moses met Him at the burning bush, and in every miracle afterwards. Face to face his discourses with God ruled Moses’ life. Moses believes and obeys in every respect except one.

Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces: and the glory of Yahweh appeared to them. Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, "Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, you, and Aaron your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and you shall bring forth to them water out of the rock; so you shall give the congregation and their livestock drink."

Moses took the rod from before Yahweh, as he commanded him. Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels; shall we bring you water out of this rock for you?" Moses lifted up his hand, and struck the rock with his rod twice: and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock.

Yahweh said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you didn't believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them." (Numbers 20:6-12).

So why was Moses judged so harshly for just one little mistake, and yet God overlooked many disobediences of the Israelites? A person is judged based on the strength of his faith. Moses knew what he was doing, thus he had to pay the ultimate price for faithlessness.

As to how God speaks to us one may appear anywhere on the continuum from warnings in dreams to the promises spoken by Jesus.

"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you." (John 16:12-15).

Each one is responsible for what they hear.

Paul further discusses the manner of the Lords interaction with us. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all

comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” (II Corinthians 1:3-5).

Paul delineates two classes. The first group made up of those that have a personal relationship with God and receive comfort from God directly.

The second group is composed of those who are comforted by those who have been comforted by God. The Lord depending on the depth of faith and the comfort zone of the individual uses either method. Thus, the majority of the Israelites demanded that all communication go through Moses. Others like Joshua wanted the more intimate relationship. God meets us wherever we are but we are responsible for that communion.