BS"D
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Friday is the 47th day of the Omer, Lag B'Omerr

Potomac Torah Study Center
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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his recent untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah.

While brooding over the thousands of rockets that the Arabs have been sending into Israel, primarily from Gaza (thanks to Iran), I recall the terror of June 1967, a previous attack on Israel, also shortly before Shavuot. (The Six Day War ended five days before Shavuot.) May the results of the 2021 invasion turn out as favorably for our people as the 1967 invasion did.

The Torah cycle always brings us to start Sefer Bemidbar as we approach Shavuot, in large part to avoid reading the Tochachah curses near the end of Vayikra immediately before Shavuot. As B'Nai Yisrael prepare to leave the base of Har Sinai to travel toward the land that Hashem promised us, the focus is always on the Mishkan and Hashem. The various tribes camp with the Mishkan in the middle, and when traveling, the camp always moves in sections to keep the Mishkan in the center. The most holy part of the Mishkan is the Holy of Holies, with the broken pieces of the first Luchot and the entire second Luchot in the Ark, over which Hashem places His presence. The Torah, which we received 3333 years ago this Shavuot, is Etz Chaim, the Tree of Life, which is as close as humans can ever return to Gan Eden.

God gave us the Torah in the Midbar, because a desert is Hefker (ownerless) – free and available to everyone. As Rabbi Marc Angel reminds us, God presented His words of Revelation simultaneously in 70 languages, because it contained a message for all the nations of the world. People from every nation can learn from the Torah, which contains messages for everyone at his or her own level.

Rabbi David Fohrman explains the significance of Shavuot as the culmination of the process of freedom from Egypt, tied to the significance of the Omer in removing the trauma of Egypt for B'Nai Yisrael. In Egypt, the slaves worked all the time. When the slaves complained, Paro responded by increasing the work load (such as making the Jews gather their own straw while keeping their quotas of bricks unchanged). The slave system taught the Jews to be greedy – take as much food as they could get, not share with others, and not look after widows, orphans, or strangers. To counter these evil habits, God manna, a bread from the sky (not from ovens), and for purely altruistic reasons. The manna was a perpetual gift as long as the Jews were in the Midbar. There was exactly one omer per person regardless of what he or she collected, except a double portion on Friday and none on Saturday. A weak person who could not collect much on his own would still end up with just as much as a greedy person who collected much more than his share. Any manna left over at the end of the day (except for Shabbat) would rot and be full of worms the next morning. The self enforcing laws of manna taught the Jews that God looked out for them without reservation, that being greedy accomplished nothing, and that God looked out especially for the disadvantaged members of society. Further, the manna taught the Jews that they had to rest one day each week (Shabbat) and devote the day to reflection and to cultivating quality time with family members and friends. Rabbi Fohrman called the rules of the manna "training wheels" for the big test of the 613 mitzvot coming at Har Sinai with the Revelation.

A Preview: Much to Study Over Shabbat and Shavuot

In an issue with many superb Devrei Torah, I included the transcript of a beautiful speech that Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, presented exploring the Book of Ruth and its importance for our people. As Rabbi Sacks explains, Ruth and

Tamar have similar roles. Both women were from the fringes of society (respectively Moabite and Canaanite, from the two most hated nations), and both ended up as childless widows tied to a levirate marriage that the designated husband would not or could not undertake. Both women used unconventional methods to become pregnant. Tamar's son Perez was a direct ancestor of Boaz (six generations later), who married Ruth. Boaz and Ruth's great-grandson was David, the greatest king of Israel. Rabbi Sacks beautifully discusses the traits that these women, both of whom had to work their ways into B'Nai Yisrael from hated nations, provided character traits that gave David his greatest strengths. With Rabbi Sacks' insights, we see why Ruth embodies the most important lessons of the Torah, lessons that Hillel could summarize while standing on one foot.

Chaya Mushka and Nechama Krimmer remind us that without Shavuot (Natan Torah), we Jews would not have any holidays to celebrate. Giving the Torah was an essential part of God's purpose in creating the world. Because Shavuot is the anniversary of our receiving the Torah, they conclude that there is no more important holiday than Shavuot.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, devoted Shavuot each year to honoring children in the congregation who attended Jewish day schools. These students would lead the various parts of the service, read the Torah, and present a Devar Torah. This custom beautifully honored the continuity of our religion from generation to generation. In Parashat Bemidbar, the Torah says, "These are the offspring of Aaron and Moshe. . ." The Torah then only mentions the sons of Aaron, neglecting those of Moshe (3:1-2). Chazal learn from here that one who teaches children Torah is like a father. Shavuot, with the tradition of studying Torah all night and davening Shacharit (and the Torah reading, including Aseret Dibrot) as early as Halacha permits, connects Etz Chaim, Bemidbar, Ruth, and completion of our path from Egypt to complete freedom. No wonder Shavuot is such an important holy day in our calendar.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Samaich,

Hannah & Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Menachem Mendel ben Chana, Eli ben Hanina, Yoram HaKohen ben Shoshana, Gedalya ben Sarah, Mordechai ben Chaya, Baruch Yitzhak ben Perl, David Leib HaKohen ben Sheina Reizel, Zev ben Sara Chaya, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, HaRav Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Amoz ben Tziviah, Reuven ben Masha, Moshe David ben Hannah, Meir ben Sara, Yitzhok Tzvi ben Yehudit Miriam, Yaakov Naphtali ben Michal Leah, Ramesh bat Heshmat, Rivka Chaya bat Leah, Zissel Bat Mazal, Chana Bracha bas Rochel Leah, Leah Fruma bat Musa Devorah, Hinda Behla bat Chaya Leah, Nechama bas Tikva Rachel, Miriam Chava bat Yachid, and Ruth bat Sarah, all of whom greatly need our prayers.

Hannah & Alan

War and Peace

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

War is ugly. It has been a scourge of humanity from time immemorial and it continues to plague humanity today. War entails fighting and killing enemies. It entails a vast commitment of resources to mobilize and arm one's forces and to

strengthen one's defenses. It involves heavy financial, social and psychological costs. It entails casualties and loss of life. War is surely a messy and ugly affair. Peace is so much nicer.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook taught: "We must see life in two dimensions, as it is, and as it should be. Absolute righteousness is always rooted in how things should be, but provisional righteousness which touches more on acting in the present, is built on how things actually are…The two are connected, like alternating horizons on a long journey." (Igrot Ha Reiyah, I94).

How things should be: peaceful, with love prevailing among humankind. How things are: warlike, with hatred and violence spreading like wildfire.

How are we to deal with this dichotomy? We are to maintain our commitment to absolute righteousness, peace, a world of love and harmony. At the same time, we must deal with harsh realities with strength and courage. Even while engaging in ugly warfare, our dreams need to be squarely focused on peace.

The Torah tells of a war between the Israelites and the Midianites. Moses calls upon the Israelites to gather men to go to battle. Rashi comments that the men to be chosen as warriors must be "tsadikkim," righteous people. At first glance, this is a strange comment. One would think that the men to be chosen as soldiers would be selected on the basis of their physical prowess, their courage, their skill with weaponry. What does righteousness have to do with warfare?

I think Rashi's comment precisely reflects the classic Jewish view of warfare. Those who go to battle must not only be capable warriors, but must be righteous. They must keep the ideals of peace, compassion, and morality always in mind. Each soldier needs to operate on two dimensions: how things should be, and how things actually are.

As I write these lines, Israel is engaged in an ugly war. Hamas terrorists have fired many hundreds of missiles at Israeli cities and towns. Their hatred of Israel knows no bounds; they intentionally aim at Israeli civilians; they place their own civilians as "human shields" in the face of Israeli retaliatory strikes. The Israeli Defense Forces have targeted Hamas arms caches, missile launch pads, terrorist leaders. Israel seeks to destroy Hamas's capacity to fire missiles into Israel. Israel tries to avoid civilian casualties but casualties are inevitable.

Some world "leaders" and media figures are quick to attack Israel for its attacks which are not "proportional." One wonders what a "proportional" response ought to be when two-thirds of the population of one's country is under constant threat of missile attacks. Would any other country tolerate an onslaught of missiles aimed at their civilian centers of population? Wouldn't every responsible nation attempt to crush the capabilities of the enemy? Indeed, wouldn't it be highly irresponsible and immoral of a nation not to defend its citizens who are being barraged by enemy missiles?

The greatness of Israel and its Defense Forces is not only in their incredible courage, power, intelligence and resilience. The greatness of Israel and its Defense Forces is precisely in striving to be "tsadikkim" even during warfare.

Anyone who knows anything at all about Israel, knows that this is a country that wants peace, that strives for peace, that has sacrificed incredibly to attain peace. But in spite of Israel's desire for peace, its enemies preach hatred, violence, terrorism, and the most vicious anti-Israel, anti-Jewish propaganda.

War is surely a messy and ugly affair. Peace is so much nicer. But we must view life in two dimensions: as it is, and as it should be. As it is: we must fight in order to maintain ourselves and our nation. As it should be: we are fighting for a righteous, loving and peaceful world.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. *https://www.jewishideas.org/war-and-peace*

Drasha: Shavuos: Raising Sinai

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 1997

[Please remember Mordechai ben Chaya for a Mishebarach!]

The words resounded like the battle cry of our destiny, “we shall do and we shall listen!” (Exodus 19:8). They were words that characterized a superhuman commitment to observance of G-d’s Torah. After all, most people listen, ponder, and then accept to execute. The Jews, however, when asked if they want the Torah, used a terminology that is only expressed by angelic beings – first we shall do, then we shall listen. That being the case, the Tosfos (French medieval commentators) in Tractate Shabbos question a Talmudic interpretation of a difficult verse.

The Torah, in painting the scene at Sinai, places the Jews in a very strange location in relation to Mt. Sinai. “And the Jews stood under the mountain” (Exodus 19:17). The wording is strange. The Torah should have written that the Jews stood at the foot of the mountain or at the bottom of the mountain. The wording “under the mountain” seems to be unsuitable.

The Talmud in Tractate Shabbos explains this verse in a literal sense. Hashem, the Talmud explains, literally placed the Jews under the mountain by lifting the mountain above them like a giant pot! And in that state, the Talmud continues, Hashem decreed, “If you will accept the Torah, fine. However, if you do not accept the Torah, this will become your final resting place.”

On any level this Talmudic interpretation is difficult to understand, but in the light of the Jewish nation’s unwavering acceptance of Torah – we shall do and we shall listen — it is almost incomprehensible. Thus Tosfos asks a powerful question: “why did Hashem force the Torah upon a nation that had already accepted it, lovingly and willingly in superhuman terms?”

When Queen Victoria (1819-1901) of England was about to marry Prince Albert, she wanted to have him bestowed with the title King Consort through an act of the British Parliament.

Prime Minister William Melbourne, knew the strong opposition he would face in making such an unprecedented move, especially since Albert was of German descent. He strongly advised the Queen against such a move. “Your Majesty,” the Prime Minister explained, “we can’t have any of that.” After all, if the English people get into the habit of making kings, they will get them into the habit of unmaking them as well!”

The Torah, the Maharal of Prague (1526-1609) explains, is a vital necessity for worldly existence. It is more than the blueprint of creation, it is the raison d’etre of the entire universe. And its presentation had to personify such. Though there was unmitigated love and wholehearted enthusiasm in the Jewish nation’s acceptance of the Torah, Hashem had to make a point that would be as eternally powerful as Torah itself. He presented the Torah with unmitigated force — a manner that characterized its essence — a vital necessity for mortal and universal existence. Torah’s acceptance could not be left to the fortunate goodwill of a very spiritual and wanting nation. It was wonderful that the Jews accepted the Torah as such, and their acceptance merited endless reward. But it was time to show what the Torah truly meant to the creation at large. Otherwise, for generations, the emergence and observance of Torah would be an outcome of mortal benevolence — and that is not the case.

The Torah is plains above the mortality of its observers, and its transmission and acceptance must represent that immortality — even if it takes raising Sinai!

Chag Samech

Living with God in Our Midst

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2021

What does it mean to live with God in our midst? God commanded the Israelites in the wilderness to build the Tabernacle, “And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell amongst them” (Exodus 25:8). Interestingly, the verse does not state that God shall dwell within “it,” the Tabernacle, but rather “amongst them,” the people. This notion is reinforced in Parshat

Bamidbar, where we learn that the Tabernacle is at the center of the Israelite encampment, surrounded by the people. God dwells amongst the people.

The theophany at Mt. Sinai was an unparalleled experience. It was the moment when the entire people "witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the shofar and the mountain smoking" (Exodus 20:15). The people came into contact with God. How were the Israelites to move on from such a powerful encounter? One approach would be to continue with their pedestrian lives as before. They could focus on the needs of their encampment, erecting and dismantling their tents, and determining the most efficient way to organize themselves for travel, all according to their own needs.

The Torah, however, offers a different path. They are to move forward with God amongst them. Ramban teaches that the Tabernacle is a portable Mt. Sinai. The Tabernacle shall be within their midst. God was in their midst. No matter what they were doing, whether engaging in grand spiritual endeavors, or the humdrum tasks of everyday life, they were oriented toward the Tabernacle. It framed their lives, and God was at their center.
So often today we compartmentalize our lives. We go to work, we socialize, we attend synagogue, we learn Torah. Some activities we see as holy, and others as mundane. God is in the synagogue but not in our workplace or at our softball game. The Torah instructs that we must always live with God in our midst. When we are at work, with friends, or simply running errands, we are to orient ourselves towards God and God's Torah.

This is a key message for Shavuot. The rabbis teach that because we received the Torah on Shavuot, we must spend part of the day enjoying ourselves and engaging in pleasurable pursuits. Not only do we commemorate the events of Mt. Sinai, we bring Mt. Sinai with us wherever we go. We realize that whatever we are doing, the Torah and God is in the center of our lives, and everything we do is oriented towards the center.

Shabbat Shalom, and Chag Sameach.

https://library.yctorah.org/2021/05/living-with-god-in-our-midst/

Shavuot: A Time of New Beginnings

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2021

Dear Friends,

Shavuot is a time of renewal. During the era of the Temple, this period marked the time when the community would offer two loaves of wheat to signify the ripening of the wheat throughout the land, and the individual would bring his own first fruit to the Temple. On a historical and religious level, Shavuot commemorates the Giving of the Torah, when we became a holy People, chosen by God to live an elevated life, committed to and shaped by the Torah and the mitzvot.

This year on Shavuot, as a light at the end of the tunnel is appearing in this pandemic, we find new beginnings all around us. What are we to do with this opportunity for a clean slate? One key answer is: Don't take it for granted. Note it, reflect on it, own it, and actualize its potential.

On Shavuot, when we would appear before the Kohen and offer our first fruit to God, we would recite a brief passage, one that serves as the base text for the Passover Haggadah. This passage starts with an appreciation of how we got to where we are. Our flourishing in the Land of Israel was not always the way things were: it was only because, many centuries ago, God saved us from slavery and brought us to the land. But it does not end with appreciation and gratitude. The next passages show us that once we recognize that everything we have is from God, it becomes our responsibility to share what we have with others.

How can we apply this wisdom as we tentatively re-enter a world that many of us left during the outbreak of the COVID pandemic? Which lessons will we take into this new reality from these times of isolation, fear, and loss? Will we have more appreciation for our own frailty, for our indebtedness to our health care providers, to our need for social contact and community? Will we have a deeper realization of societal inequities in health care and living conditions? And if we take time to reflect on the past, will we allow it to shape the present and guide how we live our lives going forward?

There is scarcely a better time to ask these questions than Shavuot, as we reflect on the Giving of the Torah, a moment that formed all of us into a people consecrated to God. At the Giving of the Torah, we were given a Divine mandate: "You

shall become to me a… holy people." The verb is future-oriented – we must work to become holy; we are not innately so. Taking on this challenge means more than committing oneself to a life of mitzvah-observance. It means owning this mandate personally and bringing the fullness of one's individual personality to its translation and actualization. We now will be entering a world that is more malleable than the one we left just one year ago. Will we seize the opportunities that are now being presented to us? Will we answer the call to become a holy nation, to make the world a more Divine, more moral place?

Throughout this pandemic, our YCT rabbis in the field have never stopped sanctifying the world by finding creative and innovative ways to serve their communities despite the challenges. Now as we turn to a post-vaccine world, these rabbis will be uniquely positioned to reflect on the past and look toward the future for expanding the definition of what it means to serve. As we once again engage with our religious and social networks, we can find inspiration from the YCT rabbis who have served at the front lines of this pandemic all along.

Like our YCT rabbis have done throughout the pandemic, we now must re-engage with the goal of sanctifying the world with our presence. As we enter Shavuot, let us take time to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of a new world. And, when faced with the task of sanctifying the world with our presence, let us all strive to answer: "We will do and we will listen!"

Chag sameach.

https://library.yctorah.org/2021/05/a-time-of-new-beginnings/

When the Desert Will Bloom

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine* © 2021 Teach 613

One of the great traditions associated with the holiday of Shavuos is that at the time Torah was given, the desert bloomed. It is regarding the miraculous growth of grass and flowers at Mount Sinai that the verse states, "The cattle shall not be allowed to graze" at the mountain. In commemoration of this miracle, many have the custom to associate Shavuos with flowers, with which they adorn homes and shuls. It is certainly beautiful for the Torah to be given in a lush setting of vegetation. But what is the deeper significance of this foliage that warranted the amazing miracle that the otherwise parched and desolate desert should come to life with vegetation?

Taking a step back, we wonder: Why, in fact, did Hashem choose to give the Torah in a desert? The Medrash explains the message: Just as a desert is free to access, so too Torah is free. In fact, remarkably, both the desert and Torah are undervalued because at first glance they look desolate and devoid of blessing.

The Medrash tells of the nephew of a certain Roman Ceasar who converted to Judaism. He explained his decision to his uncle by saying, "The great rule of business is to buy when something is undervalued so that you are in possession of it when the price goes up. Similarly," the nephew continued, "Torah is undervalued, but later on its value will be appreciated." This is the unique symbolism of the desert that blooms. The first impression is that Torah is constraining and would withhold blessing. But once things get practical the desert blooms, and Torah likewise is recognized as a blessing in so many ways.

A simple example of this is Shabbos. At first glance one might think that Shabbos is constraining. It limits the amount one can work to make money, and it limits one's leisure activities. Yet, once we engage in Shabbos, we realize that it holds blessings of magnitude that no money can buy. Exploring the meaning of life, experiencing treasured time with family and friends, are examples of profound blessing that can be symbolized by the blossoming of the desert.

As one person explained, "I was reluctant to observe Shabbos, given all the laws and restrictions. But when I saw what it did for observant families, I wanted to learn more. I saw the richness in their family life, and the wonderful quality of life even in difficult times and old age. I realized that this was a richness, undervalued by the world, and I knew I had to try."

In fact, in Perek Shira, the author associates the desert with a verse that describes the desert bloom. "The desert will rejoice; it will blossom like a lily." (Yeshaya 35:1) The start of Torah is that it is free and undervalued, "like a barren desert." But its future is seen in the prophetic destiny of the desert, to bloom and provide bountiful blessing.

This concept applies, not just to the generality of Torah, but also to specific applications that we encounter throughout life. Marriage and relationships, for example, involve accepting another person into our lives. It may, at first, appear to be an onerous commitment, one that will be burdensome in the extreme. But what develops after we overcome the original "free and undervalued" impression, is that commitment and relationships blossom with blessing.

Similarly, any time we take on an initiative we might see it at first as a burden. We can easily understand why there is little competition, and the task is free for the taking. Once we proceed in a good deed, we are awarded a partnership with Hashem, and the blessing becomes apparent.

Shavuos is a time when the Jews accepted the Torah with faith and devotion. We relive its energy each year as we too step forward in our own way to be the best we can be. Sometimes the future looks bleak and undervalued, like a desert. But in our hearts, we hold dear the lesson of Shavuos, the lesson of Mount Sinai, and the lesson of the desert that miraculously bloomed.

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos!

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I and Thou: Thoughts for Parashat Bemidbar

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Religion has two faces. One face is that of saintliness, idealism, holiness and selflessness. But the other face is one of hatred, cruelty, selfishness and egotism. Within the world of religion, one can find the most exemplary human beings; but one can also find inquisitors and terrorists. In his play, "The Father," August Strindberg has one of his characters state: "It is strange that as soon as you begin to talk about God and love, your voice becomes hard and your eyes full of hate."

This week's Torah portion begins: "And God spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai." According to a rabbinic homily, this special mountain was chosen for God's revelation because it is a low, humble mountain. God wanted the recipients of Torah to appreciate the value of humility and to avoid the vice of arrogance. A Talmudic passage (Shabbat 89a-b) links the word Sinai with the word Sinah—hatred. Those who emulate the ideals of Sinai are those who reflect the beautiful face of religion. Those who breach those ideals fall into the trap of Sinah, becoming hateful and jealous.

There is a fine line between Sinai and Sinah. Sinai brings out the best in us; Sinah evokes the worst in us. Sinai symbolizes positive, responsible thought and action. Sinah represents negative, destructive energy.

Whereas Sinai gives people the benefit of the doubt, Sinah accuses and finds fault. Whereas Sinai calls on us to first obtain facts before lodging complaints, Sinah prods us to complain even when we do not have the facts or when we do not know all sides of the story.

Some years ago, the New York Times published an article by Professor Adam Grant, "Raising a Moral Child." This article sheds light on the Sinai/Sinah dichotomy.

Professor Grant notes that when disciplining a child, a parent should be careful to criticize the child's actions, not the child him/herself. For example, one should not say: you are a bad boy/girl. Rather one should say: you behaved badly. One should not say: you are foolish; but rather, one should say: you acted foolishly. What is the difference?

When a parent says that a child is bad/foolish/stubborn etc., a child internalizes that indeed he/she is in essence bad, foolish, or stubborn. When a parent says that the child's behavior was unacceptable, then the lesson is: you are good, but your actions need correction. The child's self-respect is maintained, and he/she knows that he/she can improve. The child is not stigmatized by a negative self-image of being bad, foolish or stubborn by nature.

A Sinai approach is to criticize faulty behavior, in the hope of generating better behavior from the child in the future. A Sinah approach tears down the child's ego. This lesson applies not only to children. When criticizing others—including adults—one should not call names or give negative labels. Rather, one should address the problematic action or idea without casting aspersion on the basic goodness of the person being criticized.

Here is another distinction between Sinai and Sinah. Sinai, although humble and lowly, is still a mountain. It has weight and strength. Sinah is a bodiless emotion, not rooted, not permanent. Sinai teaches humility, but also the principle of holding fast to righteousness, of standing like a mountain against the forces of negativity. Sinah is the antithesis of calm, reasonable, moral courage. Sinah seeks to stir negative energy, creating dissension and confusion.

Sinai and Sinah represent two faces of religion, two approaches to life. How much happier we would be and how much better the world would be if everyone chose Sinai and repudiated Sinah.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, https://www.jewishideas.org/article/i-and-thou-thoughts-parashat-bemidbar **The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website jewishideas.org or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Instutite for Jewish Ideas and Ideals at this time**.

The Revelation's Ongoing Messages: Thoughts for Shavuoth

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The Revelation at Mount Sinai was a national experience for all the people of Israel—but it also was very personal. Each Israelite heard the same words—but in different ways!

The Midrash teaches (Shemot Rabba 29:1) that God spoke "bekoho shel kol ehad ve-ehad," according to the individual abilities of each listener. The universal message of Torah was made direct and personal. The miracle at Mount Sinai was not only the Revelation of God to the nation of Israel, but the individualized Revelation to each and every Israelite man, woman and child.

The message of this rabbinic teaching goes further. It does not merely refer to the receptivity and ability of Israelites at the moment of Revelation at Mount Sinai. It also recognizes that each individual's koah—strength of understanding—is not stagnant. As we grow, deepen our knowledge, expand our sensitivities and open our minds and hearts—our koah evolves. In a sense, we receive the Revelation anew at each stage in life—actually, every day and every moment of life. This is the wonder and glory of Torah: it speaks to us directly and personally throughout our lives.

The foundational experience of the Revelation has an ongoing impact on how we confront life. Among the lessons is the importance of interiority, of being strong within ourselves.

The Me'am Lo'ez, the classic Ladino biblical commentary (Turkey, 18th century), notes that the original Revelation on Mount Sinai was a highly dramatic episode. Moses ascended the mountain as the people of Israel gathered below with great anticipation. The scene was marked by thunder and lightning and the sound of the shofar. The voice of God was heard by all. Yet, shortly afterward, the Israelites were dancing around a golden calf! When Moses came down the mountain and witnessed this idolatrous behavior, he threw down and shattered the tablets of the law.

Later, Moses ascended the mountain again. This time, there was no public fanfare, no miraculous sounds and lights. God told Moses that he himself would have to carve out the stone on which the Ten Commandments would be inscribed. The second set of the tablets of the law--received by Moses alone and through his own hard labor--was preserved.

The first tablets of the Ten Commandments, given with so much drama, were destroyed. The second tablets, given privately and quietly, survived and became the spiritual foundation of the people of Israel.

The Me'am Lo'ez points to the moral of this story: the really important and lasting things in life are often done by individuals in privacy, through their own exertions. Things done with much publicity may not be as permanent. We ought

not judge the value of a person or an event based on external glitter and fame. Rather, we ought to realize that greatness and permanent value are often found in obscurity, in seemingly small and unnoticed acts of kindness or spiritual insight.

External fame, power, and popularity do not necessarily correlate to internal worth. What is truly important is what we do through the sweat of our own brow, quietly, without seeking publicity or glory. What is valuable and lasting in us are those things which are authentic, honest and good in the eyes of God, and which bring goodness and kindness to our fellow human beings.

Another lesson of the Revelation is that the Torah provides a grand and universal religious vision. A famous Midrash teaches that the Revelation at Sinai was split into 70 languages i.e. contained a message for the 70 nations of the world (understood to refer to all humanity). The Torah is not to be understood or limited as being a narrow message intended for a small sect. The Torah is not to be limited to a reclusive people living in self-contained ghettoes; rather, it is to provide spiritual insight to all humanity. The great 19th century Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh stressed Israel's role as the most universal of religions, a religion that provides the moral framework for civilization a whole.

The Revelation accounts in the Torah also provide guidance on how to live as full, real people, with a healthy and wholesome sense of self. The Talmud reports (Berakhot 8b) that the holy ark in the Tabernacle contained the two sets of the Tablets of the law: the broken pieces of the first set, and the complete tablets of the second set. "Luhot veshivrei luhot munahot ba-aron."

A lesson from this is: we each have "complete" and "broken" tablets within ourselves. We have our greatest strengths and achievements; and we also have our failures and shortcomings. If we only focus on the "complete" aspects of our lives, we may tend to become arrogant and egotistical. If we focus on the "broken" aspects of our lives, we may become demoralized and crushed. To be whole and strong human beings, we need to value both sets of tablets within us. We need to draw on our strengths and learn from our failings. We need to balance self-confidence with honest awareness of our limitations and weaknesses.

On Shavuoth, as we celebrate the anniversary of the Revelation at Mount Sinai, we should direct our thoughts to that special moment in the history of Israel and to the ongoing lessons it provides to us in our own lives.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. https://www.jewishideas.org/article/revelations-ongoing-messages-thoughts-shavuoth

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Bamidbar – Separated for Unity

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer *

The Medrash Yalkut Shimoni, discussing the flags of the tribes in the desert, quotes a verse from Tehillim, "We will sing joyously of your salvation and in the name of our G-d we will raise a banner." (Tehillim 20:6) The Medrash interprets this verse to be highlighting two different ways in which G-d gave us honor and glory. The first is that he placed His own name within ours. G-d changed Jacob's name to Israel. The end of Israel, E-L, is one of G-d's names. We are called the children of Israel, in order that this distinction should be passed on to us. The second honor which G-d gave us is the camp set with flags as we traveled in the desert. The arrangement of the tribes around the Tabernacle, and the flags by each camp, mirrored that arrangement of the angels in Heaven around G-d's Heavenly Throne.

The Medrash continues and says that in this way, we would be recognizable as tribes, the sons of Revuen to themselves and the sons of Shimon to themselves. The Medrash explains this with a parable of an individual who had a cellar filled with wine. He went in to check the cellar and found that it had all gone sour. As he prepared to leave the cellar he found one barrel that was still wine. He said, "This barrel alone remains to me from the whole cellar." So, too, G-d created a world filled with seventy nations. Yet He did not find favor from the other nations, but only from Israel.

The parable in this Medrash does not seem to address the discussion of each tribe being individually recognizable. On the contrary, the parable is comparing G-d's love for our nation to a single barrel of wine. How does this explain why G-d showed us love by distinguishing among the tribes and separating us?

Perhaps the meaning of this parable lies in the comparison to a cellar filled with wine. A vintner must engage in much work and effort to fill his wine cellar. Throughout it all, his focus is on the end result of having the wine to drink. When the vintner returns to his winery, he is seeking to use that wine to achieve his goals. Applying this parable to the world, G-d created nations, for them to achieve His end goal and purpose for the world as a whole. The other nations were offered the Torah and the opportunity to live up to the lofty role of elevating G-d's world according to His will. Yet, they rejected it. It was only our ancestors who accepted that role of serving G-d and elevating His world. This is the essence of G-d's special love for us.

Yet, in order to achieve that goal, there are many different areas which require attention. Just as the angels in Heaven have many different missions in carrying out G-d's will for the world, so too, we as a nation have many different missions in carrying out G-d's will. To succeed in those missions, we must each do our own part. If a teacher chooses to spend the day as a mechanic, and the mechanic spends his day as a plumber, society cannot function. So, too, our national spiritual health requires that each one have his own distinct role.

This is what the Medrash is telling us. G-d loves us, because our nation is a beautiful orchestra with each member in their own designated place, playing their own role in a way that will best blend with the whole and create the perfect spiritual symphony.
This message is of particular significance as we prepare for the holiday of Shavuos. Torah is G-d's wisdom, and it is beyond any single human being to fully understand Torah properly. Each individual Jew has their own unique perspective, based on their own identity, personality and experiences. The full picture of Torah can only be understood when each person's perspective is developed, heard and considered. When we celebrate Shavuos, it is a personal celebration, as it is a national celebration. Our nation can only be a Torah nation, once each of us individually is a Torah individual. Only then, can we join together to be the nation G-d intended. Only then can we bring G-d's will to fruition.

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

Bemidbar/Shavuot

by Rabbi Moshe Rube*

[Rabbi Rube has been busy preparing material for Shavuot, including night study, and his Dvar Torah for this Shabbat/Yom Tov was not ready in time for my deadline. Watch for his insights in the future.]

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Rav Kook Torah
Shavuot (Yitro): The Lesson of Mount Sinai

What does the name Sinai mean? The Talmudic interpretation is surprising — and somewhat shocking:

> *"What is Mount Sinai? The mountain that brought enmity (sin'ah) upon the nations of the world."*
> (Shabbat 89b)

What is the nature of this animosity? What does it have to do with Mount Sinai?

Why Sinai?

Where would one expect that God would reveal His Torah to the Jewish people? The logical place would be on the holiest mountain in the world — Jerusalem's Mount Moriah, the site of the Binding of Isaac, Jacob's holy "gate to heaven" (Gen 28:17), the spot where both Temples stood. Why did the revelation of the Torah take place outside of the Land of Israel, in the middle of the desert?

The fact that the Torah was not given to the Jewish people in their own land, but rather in a desert, in no-man's land, is very significant. This indicates that the inner content of the Torah is relevant to all peoples. If receiving the Torah required

the special holiness of the Jewish people, then the Torah should have been given in a place that reflects this holiness. Revelation on Mount Sinai attests to the Torah's universal nature.

This idea is corroborated by the Talmudic tradition that "God offered the Torah to every nation and every tongue, but none accepted it, until He came to Israel, who received it" (Avodah Zarah 2b). This Midrash is well known, but it contains an implication that is often overlooked. How could God offer the nations something that is beyond their spiritual level? It is only because the Torah is relevant to all peoples that their refusal to accept it reflects so harshly on them.

The Torah's revelation on Mount Sinai, as a neutral location belonging to none and thus belonging to all, emphasizes the disappointment and estrangement from God that the nations brought upon themselves by rejecting the Torah and its ethical teachings. It is for this reason Mount Sinai "brought enmity upon the nations of the world."

In the future, however, the nations will recognize this mistake and correct it:

> *"In those days, it shall come to pass that ten men from all the languages of the nations will take hold of every Jew by a corner of his cloak and say, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'"* (Zachariah 8:23)

(Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 133-134. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. IV, pp. 219-220.)
http://www.ravkooktorah.org/YITRO_65.htm

A Tale of Two Women – A Shavuot Shiur by Rabbi Sacks (June 8, 2016)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

[ed: This is the longest piece, by far, that I have ever included in my packet – but it may also be the most remarkable. It is easy to understand and profound. Read it to the end!]

During the launch of the new Koren-Sacks Shavuot machzor, Rabbi Sacks delivered a keynote shiur on 7th June 2016 to a packed room in Finchley United Synagogue in London. Co-hosted by Koren Publishers, the Living and Learning Department of the United Synagogue, and the London School of Jewish Studies, Rabbi Sacks talked about the similarities between Ruth and Tamar, and what we can learn from their experiences about our identity as a Jewish people.

Wow. I think I should retire more often. Friends, it is such a privilege to be with you. Rabbi Lawrence, Dayan Binstock, Rabbi Laitner, Rabbi Dr. Rafi Zarum, Rebbeitzen Epstein. It is an enormous privilege and boost to my self-image that even briefly, I shared shelf space with Jeffrey Archer. You've fulfilled a lifetime ambition, Rebbeitzen Epstein, and really, it's been a privilege and it is doubly so, to be able to launch this, the last of the machzorim. All five have now been completed.

To launch it here in the Finchley community, where I began my journey here in cheder. And if any of you feel a little Jewishly challenged, please take comfort from the fact that my brothers all did better than me at cheder, but you just keep trying and eventually you climb the ladder.

But I have such warm memories of this community, it's where my journey began. And of course, fond memories of now chief Rabbi Mirvis and all that he has done for this community. And it's great to be with you, but doubly so, a privilege to be able to collaborate with two remarkable people, Linda and Michael Weinstein. We thank you for sponsoring this machzor, especially for choosing to do so in honour and memory of your late parents, beloved Stella and Ernest Weinstein, and Nelly and Solo Greenberg of blessed memory.

You were wonderful children to them and you've cherished their memory. And I pray may all the davening that is done using this machzor bring nachat ruach to their souls in heaven. And we hope they are smiling at this way, that you are keeping their spirit and their memory alive. Thank you so much.

Personal thanks to the man who has been my Rav for 20 years, where are you Dayan Binstock? I've lost you – there you are – who has single handedly saved Minhag Anglia. You have no idea how important this is. First of all, Minhag Anglia is our cherished treasure, and we felt we were losing it at a certain point in time, about 10 years ago.

And we said we must bring it back, and it has been Dayan Binstock's incredible erudition that has saved Minhag Anglia for posterity. And I have to tell you that in most cases, Minhag Anglia is just a beautiful Minhag, it really is. It's clear, it doesn't have you reading endless reams of things that you don't understand.

It is very halachically pure, and Dayan Binstock, we salute you for your leadership, for your scholarship and please let us hear a round of applause for Dayan Binstock.

To Matthew Miller and all the team at Koren. You have absolutely, through Koren, through Maggid, revolutionised Jewish publishing in a remarkably short time and with great and vast scope. And Matthew, you have really become the revolutionary behind what in America, they call Modern Orthodoxy. We don't call it Modern Orthodoxy. We call it Inclusive Orthodoxy, which I hold by because having gone around the world, I still believe that is nothing as beautiful as the United Synagogue ideal, which is also incidentally the Sephardi ideal of including everyone in the community. And that makes our communities, frankly more generous, more open and even more spiritual.

So thank you, Matthew, for all you've done for publishing – special thanks! I know it's invidious to mention anyone, but since I've retired and you can't really get at me, you will forgive me if I single out our niece, Jessica Sacks, who has done the most beautiful translations you will ever find of all the Megillah and there is poetry there, which Jessica has brought. And we thank her in absentia as she's living in Yerushalayim and just become a mother. And we thank Jessica for that.

There's so much to talk about on Shavuot, forgive me if I don't do up my jacket, but I'm carrying three microphones! I wonder why exactly, just to make sure that everything I say is non-deniable, I suspect, but I thought I'd just focus for one moment on a single strand of Shavuot which I think is really important. And that is the Megillah we read, the book of Ruth. And it's fascinating that if you look at, if you were ordering the books of the Bible, where would you put Ruth?

I don't know if you've ever had a look at a non-Jewish Bible. I said the Hebrew Bible Tanach and the old Testament just happened to be two completely different books that just happened to contain the same words, but they are different because their order is different. In Judaism, we order the books of Tanach depending on the degree of holiness, the quality of inspiration. So Torah, direct word, the word of God to man. Nevi'im, the Prophets, the word of God through man and Ketubim, the words of human beings to God. And that's why the book of Ruth appears in Ketubim. But if you were just ordering them chronologically, where would you place the book?

It comes after Shoftim. And before Sefer Shmuel, the end of the Book of Judges, the beginning of the book, the four books of Kings, Samuel I and II Kings I and II, because it begins by vayehi bimai hashoftim. It came to pass in the days when the judges judge, and it ends with the birth of Israel's greatest King, David Hamelech. Now, if I were to ask you in terms of its subject matter, which other book of the Bible does it most remind you of, because it's not about dramatic political events or grand miracles, like Shemot or Bamidbar, it is not a work of prophecy. Where would, what's the book that's most like it? Yeah. Bereishit, because it's the tale of ordinary human beings demonstrating extraordinary gifts and strength of character, and it is like Bereishit. And the interesting thing is that the same question was asked of both books. Do you remember what Rashi said? The first Rashi on the torah? Anyone remember that one? Somebody remember it, because I need a drink of water – the only chance you get for Rabbinical silence. Either you're drinking water or you've just poured it on your hands!

You remember? What is the first Rashi? Oh, come on. You have to help me here. The first Rashi, 'Amar Rabbi Yitzchaki', Rabbi Yitzchaki said: the Bible shouldn't have begun with "Bereishit bara Elokim", with God creating the universe.

The Torah means Torah, a book of laws. What was the first law given to Israel? Rosh Chodesh, Exodus chapter 12. So that is where the book should have begun. So the question is asked of Bereishit – why was it written?

And Chazal asked the same question on the book of Ruth? This is what they ask. They say "Amar Rabbi Zeira", (Rabbi Zeira said), "Megillah Zu", (this scroll), "ein ba lo tumah, velo taharah, velo issur, velo heter." (It contains no laws of any consequence. Not pure, impure, permitted, forbidden.) "Velamar nichtavah?" (Why was it written?) "Lelamedechah kamah s'char tov legomli chassidim" (To tell you of the reward of those people who perform acts of kindness.) (Rut Rabbah 2:14)

Now, if you think about that, here are two books very similar in tone, very similar in subject matter – two books about which Rabbis asked, why should they have been included at all?

And let me read to you a little passage from the book of Ruth and ask you, what does it remind you of? It says "Vaya'an Boaz," (this is the first time Boaz and Ruth meet, and Boaz says to Ruth,) "hoogaid hoogad li kol asher asseet et-chamotaich acharei mot ishaich", it's been told to me all you did for your mother-in-law after your husband died, "vatta'azvi avich v'imaich" and you left your father and your mother, "v'eretz moladetaich" and the land of your birth, "vattailchi" and you travelled to a people that you didn't know before. (Ruth 2:11) What passage does that remind you of? Avraham! Exactly! 'Leave,' – lech lecha ma'artzecha memoladeticha mibeit avicha. (Gen. 12:1) Avraham leaves all that is familiar to him, environmentally and humanly and sets out on a journey. Ruth does exactly the same thing. She leaves her family and her land and sets out on an unknown journey. Ruth is a kind of female counterpart of Avraham Avinu.

And I think, we now understand why the book of Ruth is there and how it relates to Bereishit. Bereishit is a prelude to the birth of the Jewish people Bereishit is a book about family throughout. It's the family of Avraham and Sarah – it's a family book. It is the prelude to the birth of the nation. Ruth is a prelude to the birth of the kingdom. Until Ruth, Israel has been…I don't know how many y's there are in Scrabble, but here's a good word that you might use in a crossword puzzle a,m,p,h,i,c,t,y,o,n,y, and amphictyony is a federation of tribes. Okay? You never knew that word, did you? It's a good word. You know, if you've got all those y's, it gets rid of them. So Ruth is a prelude from a tribal society which is not a unified nation to the birth of Israel as a memshalah, as a kingdom, as a united body of politics. So we have these two preludes. And they are telling us something terribly, terribly important – that even though the rest of the Torah is about the birth of Israel as a nation, and even though the books of Shmuel and Malachim are about the birth of Israel as a kingdom, intensely political books. Nonetheless, the fact that the book of Bereishit is there and the book of Ruth is there, is telling us of the primacy of the personal over the political.

Don't believe you can just run politics by politics alone. A society depends on acts of kindness and generosity and moral strength because without those human values told in simple stories of families and their travails and the strength that gets you through those travails, they are the things that matter. And that is why Bereishit is so important, why Ruth is so important, because when all the politics are finished, though Jewish politics are never finished, nonetheless it is human moral values that count most of all. Don't try and build a political system without a moral underpinning of love and kindness, within and beyond the family. That's a very, very profound thing. So that is a setting of the book of Ruth as a whole.

But what is really interesting is this: We go through the whole story of Ruth, and I'm not going to tell you the story, because I don't want to be, what do they call it on IMDB, "a spoiler." I'm not going to tell you whodunnit. We'll leave that to Jeffrey Archer and the Megillah. But here we are. We come towards the end and everyone is comforting Naomi, because, you know, she went full, she came back empty, "Don't call me Naomi, I'm bitter" and all this thing, and at the end, she has a grandchild. And the people say to her, "Vayomru kol ha'am" – all the people bless her and so on and so forth. And they say to her, "May this woman who came to your house be like Rachel and Leah who built the house of Israel and did great things in Efrata." "Viyehi veytecha k'veit Peretz asher yaldah Tamar liYehudah." (Ruth 4:11)

All of a sudden, out of nowhere, at the end of the book, they bless her by saying, "May this child be like Peretz who is born to Tamar and Yehudah."

What on earth are Tamar and Yehudah doing in this story? Right at the end, they played no part. Peretz!? What's this got [to do with anything]…? And all of a sudden we realise that the Megillah is saving its biggest surprise to the end, because we now go back to the story of Tamar. What is that story? You remember, it's told in Bereishit 38, in the middle of the Joseph story. And it begins by saying "Vayehi ba'eit hahee vayered Yehudah may'eit echayv..." "At that time, Judah went down from his brothers, and he planted his tent by…" "ish adulai ushmo Chirah, "[a man], whose name was Chirah. And he married a Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua," and he took her as his wife.(Bereishit 38:1-2)

And you remember what happens? He has three children, Er, Onan and Shaylah, Er marries a local woman [Tama], presumably Canaanite, (although there are Midrashim, but the plain sense of the word is Canaanite). Er dies, Onan marries Tamar as a form of yibbum, as a form of levirate marriage but clearly does not want her to have a child who will be seen as the child of his dead elder brother. And he does what he does, and dies. And having lost two of his children this way, Judah refuses to let Tamar marry his youngest child, Shaylah, because he doesn't want… The result is he leaves Tamar as an agunah – somebody who is bound to marry Shaylah, and has not been released, but, at the same time, Shaylah is not willing to marry her, or Judah is not willing to let him marry her. And the result is she is left an agunah,

a chained woman and so on. And eventually as you know, she dresses up as a prostitute, stations herself at a particular juncture of the way when Yehudah is coming back from the sheep shearing, he takes her to be a prostitute. He lies with her. She takes his staff and his seal as pledges against payment. Eventually he comes back the next day to pay the sum, but she's not there and no one's ever heard of a prostitute in this district. And later it is discovered that Tamar has become pregnant. Judah assumes by some strange person who was not part of the family. Since she's bound to Shaylah by the laws of levirate marriage, this must be an adulterous union. And he has her brought out and sentenced to death.

And with great tact Tamar, without saying a word, just brings out the staff and the seal and says "I'm pregnant to the one to whom these belong". And Judah realises in a moment, everything that she has done. He realises, "I am the father," and at that moment, the future of the family is secured.

Now, do you see any connections between the story of Tamar and the story of Ruth? How do they begin, both stories? By somebody moving away from the rest of the Jewish family. Elimelech and his two sons go to Moav, they leave their people. Judah leaves his brothers. So they begin by a story of moral and physical decline. "Vayered Yehuda," Judah goes down. Here, as it were, both books begin with the 'senior male' as it were, Judah and Elimelech, leaving their people.

Secondly, who are the real movers and shakers in both stories? They're women. Exactly. They are the ones who make everything happen. Thirdly, of course, they begin with the same narrative. Two sons die. Judah's two sons, Er and Onan, Elimelech's two sons, Machlon and Chilion. Then fourthly, the woman is left in both cases as a childless widow, and both of them are unable to undergo the standard form of levirate marriage. In the case of Tamar, because Judah won't let his third son marry Tamar. And in the case of Ruth, what does Naomi say to Ruth and Orpah? 'Go back to your family because I'm too old to have any other children. I know that technically, if I were to have another child, you would be bound to marry that child, or he would be bound to marry you, but I'm too old to have children. So go back.'

So they're about childless widows who are unable somehow to ameliorate their situation in any conventional way. Both Tamar and Ruth are left as widows, they are left as childless. And in both cases, the story turns on a kind of levirate marriage that is non-normative. Are you with me? Because in levirate marriage, yibbum, you marry your brother-in-law. But in the case of Tamar, who does she become pregnant by? Her father-in-law. And as Rambam and the other Rishonim point out, this was the form of levirate marriage before the giving of the Torah. That it wasn't restricted to brother-in-law but a male within the family. So this was a non-normative form of yibbum and the case of Ruth – again, she's marrying Boaz. Boaz picks this law up, we don't know quite where it came from, but if you're going to buy the field, you've got to marry the woman. No one quite knows where this law is, this is common law rather than biblical law, but one way or another both turn on unconventional forms of levirate marriage, because Boaz is not the closest relative, and so on.

In both stories, who was the closest relative? In the case of Tamar, it was Judah's son number three, Shaylah. In the case of Ruth, who was the closest relative? Polony Almony, Mr. Anonymous. So, in both cases, the person nearest to performing the duty is somehow not going to perform that duty. In both cases, why does Tamar, and why does Ruth, want to have a child?

(Audience member calls out: "She knew the situation.")

Yeah, what's it called? "lechakim shem ha'meit" – to make sure the name of the dead husband is perpetuated by having a child who will carry his lineage forward. And both Tamar and Ruth are determined to do this. As Boaz says to Ruth himself, it has been told to me your kindness to the living and to the dead. So in both cases, it is the women who are mindful of the moral duty to perpetuate the names of the dead. And of course both have to do rather daring acts. I don't know whether this would pass, I mean, this is… what do they call it now? I haven't been to cinema for a very long time, but it's an adult rating here. I mean, here we have Tamar dressing up as a prostitute. Here we have Ruth coming to Boaz at night and saying, "Spread your cloak over me" and et cetera, et cetera. These are daring acts, not the kind of things you're taught to do at school in any shape or form. And here we have two women who are the ultimate, ultimate outsiders, because number one, to be a widow… Well, sorry. Let me be blunt. Number one, to be a woman was not exactly, you know, didn't exactly, immediately get you to the portals of greatness and power. The Torah is telling us here, it's the women who really matter. It's they who have the moral courage, but note who these women are.

Number one, they're widows, and don't forget the vulnerability of a widow. At every festival you had to include the ger, the yatom and the almanah, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow [the most vulnerable in the community].

Number two, they were childless widows, which is doubly vulnerable because nobody's bound to look after them and provide for them. Number three, as we said, the people who might've taken them in, the candidates for levirate marriage, are both stopped from doing so, but number four, because these are women from the least favoured nation. You don't get worse in the Torah than being a Canaanite, or being a Moabite, that's it. I mean, you understand how the Sages had to really strive to understand why it was that Ruth who came to Moab (and the Torah says, "a Moabite shall not enter the congregation of the Lord to the tenth generation") How were we to understand that? And as we know, it was attributed to Shmuel Hanavi, that Moavi velo Moavi'a, (a Moabite man not a Moabite woman), but one way or another, there was no love lost between the Israelites and the Canaanites. There was no love lost between the Israelites and the Moabites. And here we are, two women, at the very, very margins of society, who nonetheless emerge as the heroines. They are the people who allow the Jewish story to continue, and I find that absolutely extraordinary. And of course, right at the end, the book of Ruth has a little surprise in store for us. And it lists the genealogy, the family tree of David HaMelech, which begins with Perez.

Did you ever do the count of how many generations? There are ten generations from Adam to Noah? There are ten generations from Noah to Avraham. There are ten generations from Perez to David HaMelech. Who is there at number one, the parents of Perez, were Judah and Tamar. Who is number seven at the key spot? Ruth and Boaz. Now the Torah is telling us something really extraordinary. There was a… There was a narrative, it was told by one of Sigmund Freud's pupils called "The Birth of a Hero." You come across this idea that there's a standard narrative, "The Birth of a Hero." It's told of Sargon; it's told of the founder of Christianity; it's told of Oedipus and Laius and so on.

You know the story that, always a child is about to be born, a king sees that child as a threat to his kingship. He arranges for the child to be killed. Somehow or other, the child isn't killed, is found and adopted by very ordinary, simple people. And eventually everything that is foretold actually happens. The child grows up, does defeat or kill the king, and is subsequently discovered to have royal blood. He was royal after all. And that is the story told about Oedipus and Laius. It is the story he told about Sargon. It is the story he told in early Christianity about King Herod and the birth of the founder of Christianity and so on and so forth. It's this standard story, the birth of the hero. So in every standard story of the birth of the hero, the hero turns out to have royal blood.

Now, Judaism doesn't tell a story, because, who is the genealogy that the Torah wants us to understand for David HaMelech? Are you with me? The Torah only tells us two major narratives about King David's background, his family background. And who does it tell us were his key figures in the narrative? Tamar and Ruth. It is from these ultimately marginalised figures that become the character, the strength that marks David as Israel's greatest king. It's an extraordinary statement. There is incidentally, a similar story told about Moshe Rabbeinu. I call it Freud's greatest Freudian error because Freud was convinced that Moses was an Egyptian. And that the same story told about Oedipus was true about Moses, that he was an Egyptian who was a threat to Pharaoh, so Pharoah says, "kill all the male children" and et cetera, et cetera.

He believes that the same story is told of Moses as is told of all the other great mythical figures. What Freud didn't understand is that the Moses story takes that story and turns it upside down. Moses actually was adopted by a royal family, but actually he's totally ordinary. He could come like we did from the lower East side. And in fact, this is hinted at in the Torah itself. I once pointed out that the Torah contains little hints here and there that make us go back and read the text a second time, and show us something we never saw before. Who gave Moses the name Moses?

Pharaoh's daughter, right? And the Torah says she called him Moses ki min hamayim meshibihu – because I drew him from the water. That works fine in Hebrew, but did Pharaoh's daughter speak Hebrew?

I mean, if she's going to name her adopted child, she is probably going to give him an Egyptian name, which she does. She calls him Moses and Moses is an Egyptian word! As you see in bat Moses, and you see in Ramses, right? "Amses," the "amses of Ramses is the "amses" of Moses. There are only two letters difference between these two people. R A, what does R A stand for? No, not the Royal Academy. Ra is the Egyptian sun God. And now you see the story that the Torah is telling us that here we have Ramses and Moses, this one whom everyone thinks is the child of the sun God, semi-divine, and who was on the other side? Just a child. Because your dignity, your strength and your character doesn't depend on who you were born to. Every child is special. And that is what the Torah telling us. In place of all the conventional narratives that the hero turns out to have been predestined, it's in his DNA. He is the child of royalty. It's turned upside-down in the case of Moses, it's turned upside-down in the case of David HaMelech.

In fact, the whole story of David HaMelech is telling us that he's the one person who no-one thought of as King. You remember when God tells Samuel that He is displeased with Saul, and He's going to take the Kingship away from him, "Go to the house of Yishai… one of his sons is going to be the King." You remember this story? He goes to Yishai and Yishai brings out his number one son, Eliav, who looks every inch the King. He says, "This must be the guy." And Hashem says to Shmuel, 'think again.' God doesn't look at outward appearances, God looks to the heart. And he goes through the seven children of Yishai, you remember? And none of them is right. And he says, "Have you got anyone else?" Yishai says, "Oh, hang on, I forgot about David, the little kid, he's out there looking after the sheep." And God says, "That's the man."

Everything that we take as conventional in the story of a hero is turned upside-down in Judaism, because Judaism is telling us that heroes are not born, they are made. And they are sometimes made by the women who gave birth to the family tree, and their strengths of character. Because what Tamar and Ruth share in common is very simple. Number one, they show loyalty, they show kindness and that is what God wants. He doesn't want military heroes. He doesn't want miracle workers. He doesn't want a High Priest who has no contact with the people. He wants somebody with loyalty to his people, somebody who's willing to make personal sacrifices and take risks for the sake of the people, for the sake of the continuity of the people. And that, the Torah is hinting, Tanach is hinting, David got from these two remarkable women at the beginning of the ten generation sequence and at stage number seven, from Tamar and from Ruth.

Number two, it is their moral courage that allows David HaMelech to become the really courageous King that he was, and at the same time, the infinitely vulnerable human being that he was. Here is a man who united Israel, who made Jerusalem, I mean, we just had Yom Yerushalayim, David HaMelech made Jerusalem, the capital of Israel. He united Israel. He conceived the plan to build the Temple, but he was also the man who wrote the Psalms, the most intimate insight into the vulnerability of the human soul that's ever been written. And this he got from these two women. It is telling us, don't stereotype whole nations. You may think, who are the Canaanites, who are the Moabites, but God has so distributed the gifts of human character, that they can appear where you least expect them. So never write anyone off, just because of who they are, what their name is, what their ethnic origin is. The people you least expect it from may surprise you the most.

And here then, is the story of David. I think…[we should discuss] something else. You see, there is a little device that is very rare, which I mention, called a contronym. Have you ever come across this word, a contronym? Do you know what that is? It's a word that means one thing and its opposite.

These are very, very rare words. To cleave means to split in two or to join as one. Fast, as in rush hour. Fast means moving rapidly, or if something is stuck fast, it means it's immovable. Are you with me now? There are not that many contronyms, because it's very rare indeed.

But there is one contronym that appears only in two places, in Bereishit and in the book of Ruth, and it is the verb hakeh, to recognise. Right? And in another form of the verb, lehitnakeya means to act as a stranger, to act as somebody you don't recognise and who doesn't recognise you. That appears in the story of Joseph. Do you remember when the brothers come to buy grain, vayika he recognised them, vayitnakeah but he acted like a stranger too. It's a stunning verse. And it appears in the Ruth story as well. The first time Ruth and Boaz meet, Ruth says, lama hakiraynu? Why have you recognised me?

Ani nochria. Given that I am a stranger, a foreigner. That word is absolutely key. The second time we hear that word hakeh, we realise that it first appears even before the meeting of Joseph and his brothers. Do you remember where it appears? It appears in the story of Tamar and in immediately, in the previous story of Joseph going out to see his brothers. Do you remember? And they sell him as a slave. And they take his cloak and they dip it in the blood of the goat or sheep. And they bring it back to Jacob and they say, hakeh nah? Please recognise, is this your son's cloak, or not? And Jacob recognises it and begins mourning. Judah has used an act of recognition to deceive his father. When Tamar in the next chapter, is accused by Judah of illicit sex, she hands over the staff and the seal and says, hakeh nah. Please recognise to whom these belong is the father of this child.

Judah has used the idea of recognition to get his father to recognise a story that wasn't true. Tamar uses the same device, the same word, to get Judah to recognise the real truth. And that turns out to be the key moment in Judah. Because, you remember, if you read Bereishit on the surface, who do you think is the hero of the last third of the book? It's all about Joseph. But who actually became the father of Israel's Kings? Judah. And why is it that Judah overtakes Joseph? And my theory is because of Tamar. Because Tamar by forcing Judah to recognise the truth, Judah becomes

the first person in history to say “I was wrong, she was right”. Every Jewish husband has to learn those two lines. But Judah was the first person to say it. And when you say that you’ve begun… You have become the first ba’al teshuvah in history.

And we always say, the Gemara says in Brachah, daf lamed gimmel, the place where ba’alei teshuvah stand, even the perfectly righteous cannot stand. Now, what do we call Joseph? Yosef ha’tzaddik. But Judah was a ba’al teshuvah. What was the rank Joseph got to? Mishei Melech – second to the King. Judah reached even higher. He became the ancestor of Israel’s Kings. And the interesting thing is, do you know why Judah was called Judah?

It was Leah’s fourth child. And she says hapa’am ayda et hashem. This time I will thank God. And she called him Yehudah. But without knowing it, the same root, yada in a different conjugation of the verb, becomes lehitvadot, or what we call, when we say asahamnu bagadnu or al chayt shechatanu. We call that vidui. It’s the same word in Hebrew, to thank and to confess. In both cases, it means “to admit”. When you thank, you admit your debt to somebody else. When you confess, you admit your sins to God. Judah becomes the first person to confess. “I got it wrong.” He becomes the first ba’al teshuvah. And he becomes the hero of Jewish history.

Why are we called Jews? Because we are children of Yehudah. Even though in biblical times, we were called Yisrael, because we lost ten tribes. And all that remained was the Southern kingdom of Yehudah and we’re all descendants. So, we are called Yehudim. And the question is, did this have an impact ten generations later on King David? I don’t know if you ever noticed this, but Israel’s first two Kings, Saul and David, both committed a sin. Saul failed to execute vengeance against King Agag, the Amalekite King. And David hamelech with Bathsheba. They both committed a sin. Both of them were reprimanded by a Prophet. Saul reprimanded by Samuel. David reprimanded by Natan HaNavi, the Prophet, Nathan. Both said, “Chattati” – “I have sinned”. And yet Saul’s kingdom was taken away from him, whereas David’s kingdom was confirmed for all time. What was the difference between these two confessions?

Saul tried bluster. You remember? “It wasn’t me, it was the people, and it wasn’t that important”. He tries to defend himself and when Shmuel is completely unpersuaded, he says, “chattati.” As they used to say about Chief Rabbi J H Hertz, he never despaired of a peaceful solution to any problem once every other alternative had been exhausted. So Saul tries every other alternative. When they’re all exhausted, he finally says “chattati,” “I sinned.” But when Nathan tells King David, the story of the rich man and the poor man and the sheep. And David gets all morally indignant about the rich man. And Nathan turns to him and says, “ata ha’ish.” “you are that man.” David, without a second’s hesitation says, “chattati.” Doesn’t try and justify, excuse or minimise. David has his throne confirmed because he learned to confess.

He got that from his antecedent, ten generations back, called Yehudah. And who taught Yehudah to confess? Tamar. So you see how a single story, extended over ten generations, comes down to this strange contronym of lachakir and lehitnake’a. Of recognising and strangers. It’s what… Whoever it was, I’ve forgotten who it was. Tennessee Williams called the “kindness of strangers.” That is what this story is about. The kindness of two women. Both of them outsiders in Israeli society, who nonetheless adopted Judaism and its values, even more than the people you would expect to be the key protagonists.

And it is their concern for Jewish values, for loyalty, the kindness of strangers that made David HaMelech Israel’s greatest King. So I hope we’ve seen here a little story that is extended over vast tract of time, but an incredibly powerful one. That actually it was strong women who made David the strong King. And that we should never write anyone off, for their rank, for their ethnicity, because sometimes the most beautiful deeds are done from the people we hardly notice. And it is they who are the heroes or, in this case, the heroines of the Jewish story. Let us be inspired by Tamar and by Ruth, to show loyalty and kindness to strangers. And we will be living the great tradition hopefully, this Shavuot, and for many Shavuots to come.

Thank you very much indeed.

* Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar. *See* https://rabbisacks.org/tale-of-two-women/

The Giving of the Torah: Imbuing the Physical world with Spirituality

By Chaya Mushka and Nechama Krimmer *

Unlike holidays in the Jewish calendar, such as Rosh Hashanah, Chanukah, and Passover that are celebrated with gusto by Jews far and wide, the holiday of Shavuos is sometimes pushed aside as a minor holiday.

Yes, the Torah is read on Shavuos in reverence in the synagogue, and if you're lucky, you have cheesecake and ice cream to look forward to, but unlike other holidays, there are no special mitzvos associated with the holiday. No shofars to be blown, no Menorahs to be lit, no Seders to attend with family and friends. No matzah and maror to be eaten.

In other words, unlike other holidays where physical objects – shofars, Menorahs, and matzah, for example – are used to connect with Hashem, Shavuos, it seems, is a purely spiritual occasion.

The irony of Shavuos being looked on as a minor holiday, however, is that without Shavuos, when Hashem gave the Torah to the Jewish people, we would have no holidays to celebrate! Yom Kippur may be the holiest day of the year, but Shavuos MADE Yom Kippur the holiest day of the year through the giving of the Torah, where Hashem gave us the instruction manual on how to manifest this holiness. [emphasis added]

Shavuos not only changed the reason d'etre of the Jewish people but it changed the nature of the physical world itself, as we will explain. Shavuos is no small holiday!

Prior to the giving of the Torah, there was a separation, if you will, between the spiritual and physical worlds. Through the giving of the Torah, however, Hashem imbued the Jewish people with the ability to turn physicality into spirituality through the performance of mitzvos.

The giving of the Torah was integral to the very purpose of creation. When Hashem created the world, He had a desire to create a Dwelling-Place for the Divine here in this physical world, as elucidated by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Laidy in his seminal work, the Tanya.

There were two driving factors for the creation of the world, hinted at by the first letter of the Torah, Beis, numerically the number two, representing the two reasons for creation: the Jewish People and the Torah. Even prior to the six days of creation, Hashem had planned the unfathomable revelation that occurred on Shavuos, when the soul of every Jew in every generation, including future converts, would receive the Torah.

The Torah was given after the Exodus of Egypt, after the liberation from the harsh decrees and backbreaking work commanded by Pharaoh and the cruelty and idol worship of the Egyptian people. This act of liberation taught us that, with Hashem's help, we can, collectively and individually, break through any boundary or barrier we face, anything that tries to hold us back. This was a catalyst to the giving of the Torah, the awesome time when Hashem, Himself, broke the barriers separating the physical and spiritual worlds!

Shavuos is sometimes compared to a wedding between Hashem and the Jewish Hashem, with the Ketubah, the marriage contract, being the Torah. When we, as Hashem's bride, internalize the true blessings of the Torah – and its tremendous responsibilities -- it will, without a doubt, inspire and motivate us to follow its commands with enthusiasm and joy, imbuing this world with spiritual light through each and every mitzvah we perform, be it small or large.

May we all be granted success in the receiving of the Torah in a way which permeates and inspires us and may we merit the penultimate purpose of creation, the Messianic Era, where as the Torah says, "the knowledge of G d will cover the earth like the waters cover the sea."

*** compliments of Chabad of Dayton, OH**

Knowledge and Power: Teaching the Awesomeness

By Yossi Ives* © Chabad 2021

After discussing the counting of the Tribes of Israel, the Torah turns to the Tribe of Levi, which was not included in the count.

The chapter about the Levites begins:

> *"These are the descendants of Aaron and Moses on the day that the L rd spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai."1*

Yet, in reality, only Aaron's children are mentioned in the subsequent verses. Nothing at all is said about Moses' children (of which we know he had two).

Rashi, as one would expect, addresses this problem.

Citing the words from the first half of the verse, "These are the descendants of Moses and Aaron," Rashi comments:

> *"Yet only the sons of Aaron are mentioned [and not those of Moses]?! However, [the children of Aaron] are considered as if they were descendants of Moses because he taught them Torah. This teaches us that whoever teaches Torah to the son of his fellow man, Scripture regards it as if he had begotten him."*

This means that the sons of Aaron mentioned in the following verse are also regarded as belonging to Moses, because in the eyes of the Torah Moses was their "spiritual parent."

Rashi then cites the second half of the aforementioned verse, "on the day that the L rd spoke to Moses," and comments:

> *"They became his descendants, because he taught them what he had learned from the Almighty [literally, "from the mouth of the Mighty One]."*

The obvious question arises: Isn't Rashi's second comment simply a repetition of his first?

Not only does Rashi seem to repeat himself, but his two comments seem to display a significant discrepancy. In the first comment, we are told that the sons of Aaron are "considered as if they were descendants of Moses," whereas the second response tells us, "they became his descendants."

Now, saying that something is "considered as if" suggests that the thing in question is not really that way, but we are willing to treat it as such. On the other hand, saying it "became" something, implies that it is actually so. Which is it here: only "as if" or it actually "became"?

There is a second striking difference between Rashi's two comments. In the first, he uses clearer language to explain why Aaron's sons were described as Moses' descendants: "because he taught them Torah." Could not be clearer.

In the second comment, however, Rashi instead adopts an elongated and euphemistic phrase: "because he taught them what he had learned from the Almighty." We may presume this refers to the Torah, for what else did Moses learn from the Almighty? If it was fine to use the word Torah in the first comment, why not stick with that word throughout?

It seems that the second comment is twice as long, yet half as clear.

Characteristically, the Rebbe widens our viewfinder to see the broader context. In doing so, not only do we arrive at a satisfying understanding of the verse and Rashi's comments, but we also develop a far deeper understanding of the subject matter.

The key here, the Rebbe explains, is in the second half of the verse, “These are the descendants of Aaron and Moses on the day that the L-rd spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai.” What do those words even mean? Why are we being told who Aaron’s children were on one particular day?

Rashi’s second comment is intended to address this question. The Torah mentions “on the day that the L rd spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai” to add an important detail, explains Rashi.

The first half simply allows us to consider Aaron’s sons as if they were also the children of Moses. The second half, however, makes it clear that in the view of the Torah, they indeed “became his descendants.”

How could this happen? Rashi resolves that by stating that Moses “taught them what he had learned from the Almighty.”

Moses was unique in all of history in that he communed with G d on Sinai for 40 days and nights, during which time he not only received the laws and teachings of the Torah, but also acquired its holiness and sacred spiritual content.

Teaching someone by imparting knowledge is a form of parenting. Rashi returns to this theme several times. For example, in the Shema we are enjoined, “You shall teach it to your children.”2 To this, Rashi comments, “‘These’ [your children] refers to students. We find in all places that students are called children.”

The first half of our verse, says Rashi, is following this widespread notion that a teacher is a kind of parent, because the teacher provides vital spiritual sustenance. Moses taught Aaron’s sons all the Torah they knew and was rightly given the honorific title of parent.

The second half of the verse, however, goes much further. It recognizes that beyond the Torah knowledge Moses shared, he was the only person who could also impart “what he had learned from the Almighty.”

Hence, Rashi uses the title “Almighty,” denoting that Moses conveyed to Aaron’s sons something of the awesomeness and spiritual power that he had experienced. From Moses they received much more than information and knowledge; they became the recipients of a first-hand account of the inner dynamics of Divine revelation.

Being taught this extraordinary insight by Moses himself led them to be truly reborn. Hence, Rashi says, from the Torah learning (addressed in the first comment) it was as if he was their parent, but due to the transformative effect of sharing what he learned “that the L rd spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai” Moses actually became their parent.
There is a powerful lesson here for all of us. When we teach people words of Torah, we are giving them spiritual sustenance of such importance that the Torah considers us to have parented them. If we reveal to others the inner sacredness of Judaism such that they are transformed by it, the Torah credits us with their actual rebirth. The first Torah commandment to “be fruitful and multiply”3 refers also to the rejuvenating impact we can have through spiritual renewal.

Adapted from Likkutei Sichot, vol. 23, Parshat Bamidbar II.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Numbers 3:1.

2. Deuteronomy 6:7.

3. Genesis 1:28.

* Rabbi, Cong. Ahavas Yisrael of Pomona, N.Y. Founder and Chief Executive of Tag International Development, a charitable organization that focuses on sharing Israeli expertise with developing countries.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5124671/jewish/Knowledge-and-Power-Teaching-the-Awesomeness.htm

Bemidbar: The Jewish Army

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky

Numbers, the fourth book of the Torah, describes the journey of the Jewish people from the foot of Mount Sinai to the threshold of the Land of Israel. The first section begins as G-d tells Moses to take a census of the adult Jewish males in the desert (Bemidbar, in Hebrew). The purpose of the census is to form the adult males into an army, should it be necessary to fight the non-Jewish occupants of the Land of Israel. (Numbers 1:1 - 4:20)

Love and Family

G-d told Moses, "take a census of all the congregation of the Israelites by families:" (Numbers 1:2)

The Torah records only the total number of men, and not the number of families, in each tribe. Nevertheless, G-d had the families counted, in order to stress the centrality of the family in Judaism.

Our individual and national goals are certainly important, but the Torah also demands of us the selflessness necessary to forge the family unit.

A husband and wife are two separate people, with their own natures, desires, and even missions in life; yet each must work for and work with the other, completing and complementing each other and merging into one harmonious, loving unit.

The strife and breakdown of communication from which the world suffers stem from selfishness — i.e., viewing others merely as means to be exploited for personal ends. In contrast, the Torah commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves. The primary setting in which this commandment is fulfilled is that of our families. Inasmuch as loving our fellow Jew is an expression of our love of G-d, loving our fellow Jew enhances our love of G-d. Love of G-d, in turn, brings us to love His Torah and study it — not merely out of our obligation to do so, but out of love. This threefold love of our fellow Jew, of G-d, and of the Torah ripples outward from the family setting and affects the entire world for the better.

– From *Daily Wisdom* #1

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Likutei *Divrei* Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah via the Internet

Volume 27, Issue 30 **Shabbat Parashat Bemidbar [Shavuot Issue Attached]** **5781 B"H**

Covenant and Conversation
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Leading a Nation of Individuals

The book of Bamidbar begins with a census of the Israelites. That is why this book is known in English as Numbers. This raises a number of questions: what is the significance of this act of counting? And why here at the beginning of the book? Besides which, there have already been two previous censuses of the people and this is the third within the space of a single year. Surely one would have been sufficient. Additionally, does counting have anything to do with leadership?

The place to begin is to note what appears to be a contradiction. On the one hand, Rashi says that the acts of counting in the Torah are gestures of love on the part of God:

Because they (the Children of Israel) are dear to Him, God counts them often. He counted them when they were about to leave Egypt. He counted them after the Golden Calf to establish how many were left. And now that He was about to cause His Presence to rest on them (with the inauguration of the Sanctuary), He counted them again. (Rashi to Bamidbar 1:1)

When God initiates a census of the Israelites, it is to show that He loves them.

On the other hand, the Torah is explicit in saying that taking a census of the nation is fraught with risk:

Then God said to Moses, "When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each must give to God a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them." (Ex. 30:11-12).

When, centuries later, King David counted the people, there was Divine anger and seventy thousand people died.[1] How can this be, if counting is an expression of love?

The answer lies in the phrase the Torah uses to describe the act of counting: se'u et rosh, literally, "lift the head."(Num. 1:2) This is a strange, circumlocutory expression. Biblical Hebrew contains many verbs meaning "to count": limnot, lifkod, lispor, lachshov. Why does the Torah not use these simple words for the census, choosing instead the roundabout expression, "lift the heads" of the people?

The short answer is this: In any census, count or roll-call there is a tendency to focus on the total – the crowd, the multitude, the mass. Here is a nation of sixty million people, or a company with one hundred thousand employees, or a sports crowd of sixty thousand. Any total tends to value the group or nation as a whole. The larger the total, the stronger the army, the more popular the team, and the more successful the company.

Counting devalues the individual and tends to make him or her replaceable. If one soldier dies in battle, another will take their place. If one person leaves the organisation, someone else can be hired to do their job.

Notoriously, too, crowds have the effect of tending to make the individual lose their independent judgment and follow what others are doing. We call this "herd behaviour," and it sometimes leads to collective madness. In 1841 Charles Mackay published his classic study, Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds, which tells of the South Sea Bubble that cost thousands of people their money in the 1720s, and the tulip mania in Holland when entire fortunes were spent on single tulip bulbs. The Great Crashes of 1929 and 2008 had the same crowd psychology.

Another great work, Gustav Le Bon's The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind (1895) showed how crowds exercise a "magnetic influence" that transmutes the behaviour of individuals into a collective "group mind." As he put it, "An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will." People in a crowd become anonymous. Their conscience is silenced. They lose a sense of personal responsibility.

Crowds are peculiarly prone to regressive behaviour, primitive reactions and instinctual behaviour. They are easily led by figures who are demagogues, playing on people's fears and their sense of victimhood. Such leaders, Le Bon noted, are "especially recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous excitable half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness,"[2] a remarkable anticipation of Hitler. It is no accident that Le Bon's work was published in France at a time of rising antisemitism and the Dreyfus trial.

Hence the significance of one remarkable feature of Judaism: its principled insistence – like no other civilisation before – on the dignity and integrity of the individual. We believe that every human being was created in the image and likeness of God. The Sages said that every life is like an entire universe.[3] Maimonides wrote that each of us should see ourselves as if our next act could change the fate of the world.[4] Every dissenting view is carefully recorded in the Mishnah, even if the law is otherwise. Every verse of the Torah is capable, said the Sages, of seventy interpretations. No voice, no view, is silenced. Judaism never allows us to lose our individuality in the mass.

There is a wonderful blessing mentioned in the Talmud to be said on seeing six hundred thousand Israelites together in one place. It is: "Blessed are You, Lord… who discerns secrets."[5] The Talmud explains that every person is different. We each have different attributes. We all think our own thoughts. Only God can enter the minds of each of us and know what we are thinking, and this is what the blessing refers to. In other words, even in a massive crowd where, to human eyes, faces blur into a mass, God still relates to us as individuals, not as members of a crowd.

That is the meaning of the phrase, "lift the head," used in the context of a census. God tells Moses that there is a danger, when counting a nation, that each individual will feel insignificant. "What am I? What difference can I make? I am only one of millions, a mere wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the sea-shore, dust on the surface of infinity."

Against that, God tells Moses to lift people's heads by showing that they each count; they matter as individuals. Indeed in Jewish law a davar she-be-minyan, something that is counted, sold individually rather than by weight, is never nullified even in a mixture of a thousand or a million others.[6] In Judaism, taking a census must always be done in such a way as to signal that we are valued as individuals. We each have unique gifts. There is a contribution only I can bring. To lift someone's head means to show them favour, to recognise them. It is a gesture of love.

There is, however, all the difference in the world between individuality and individualism. Individuality means that I am a unique and valued member of a team. Individualism means that I am not a team player at all. I am interested in myself alone,

not the group. Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam gave this a famous name, noting that more people than ever in the United States are going ten-pin bowling, but fewer than ever are joining bowling teams. He called this phenomenon "Bowling alone."[7] MIT professor Sherry Turkle calls our age of Twitter, Facebook, and electronic rather than face-to-face friendships, "Alone together."[8] Judaism values individuality, not individualism. As Hillel said, "If I am only for myself, what am I?"[9]

All this has implications for Jewish leadership. We are not in the business of counting numbers. The Jewish people always was small and yet achieved great things. Judaism has a profound mistrust of demagogic leaders who manipulate the emotions of crowds. Moses at the Burning Bush spoke of his inability to be eloquent. "I am not a man of words" (Ex. 4:10). He thought this was a deficiency in a leader. In fact, it was the opposite. Moses did not sway people by his oratory. Rather, he lifted them by his teaching.

A Jewish leader has to respect individuals. They must "lift their heads." If you seek to lead, however small or large the group you lead, you must always communicate the value you place on everyone, including those others exclude: the widow, the orphan and the stranger. You must never attempt to sway a crowd by appealing to the primitive emotions of fear or hate. You must never ride roughshod over the opinions of others.

It is hard to lead a nation of individuals, but this is the most challenging, empowering, inspiring leadership of all.

[1] 2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21.
[2] Gustav Le Bon, The Crowd, London, Fisher Unwin 1896, 134.
[3] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:4.
[4] Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4.
[5] Brachot 58a.
[6] Beitsah 3b.
[7] Robert Putnam, Bowling Alone, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000.
[8] Sherry Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other, New York, Basic Books, 2011.
[9] Mishnah Avot 1:14.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"…by their families, by their parents' houses." (Numbers 1:2) Early in the book of Numbers the Torah records the first census in the history of the Jewish people: "Count the heads of the entire witness community of the children of Israel, by their families, by their parents' houses" (Numbers 1:2). Certainly a census is a momentous event – not only as a profile of a nation's most important natural resource – its people – but also as a means of enhancing each national with a sense of pride in his newly acquired significance as a member of an important nation.

At the end of the day, when all the counts of the various tribes were added up, the total number of those twenty years and above was 603,550 (Numbers 1:46). The census tells us – in more ways than one – that each person counts. Again and again we encounter the phrase in connection with the census: "by their families [lemishpeḥotam], by their parents' houses [leveit avotam]."

This particular term is repeated with each of the tribes and families, except for two instances wherein the phrase is inverted – in the case of the Levites, as well as the sons of Gershon. In these two instances, instead of the order of being "by their families" and "by their parents' houses" we find "by their parents house and by their families" (Numbers 3:15).

In contrast, Levi's other sons, Kehat (Numbers 4:2) and Merari (Numbers 4:27) are presented in the book of Numbers in a manner similar to the presentation of the rest of the tribes – first by their "families" and only afterwards by their "fathers' houses." Why should there be such a reversal in phraseology in the case of Levi and the children of Gershon?

In our last commentary, we rendered the phrase "lemishpeḥotam" to mean "by the family of their tribal forebears," and "leveit avotam" to mean "by their immediate parental names," in accordance with the interpretation of Rashi (1040–1105). However, the earlier Aramaic translation of these phrases, Targum Onkelos, which is generally placed alongside of the biblical text as a demonstration of its authoritative position, render "lemishpeḥotam" as "lezarayaton" – "by their seed, by their children."

Thus the usual formulation, found no less than seventeen times in our passage, is rendered to mean that each individual is numbered by their children and by their parents' house. The message of the Targum is clear: an individual is to be counted first by whom he or she has produced – by his or her children – and only afterwards and secondarily do we pay attention to his or her forebears, to the yiḥus which comes from one's parents and the parental forebears; perhaps Targum would include the tribal background as well in "leveit avotam."

From the perspective of this definition, we can also readily understand the reversal of the phrase regarding the tribe of Levi. Ordinarily individuals are defined first by whom and what they have produced – their children first. However, a kohen (priest) or Levite serves in the Temple and performs special ritual duties not by virtue of merit but only by virtue of ancestry: I am a kohen only because my father was a kohen. Hence in accordance with this reality, the Bible insists that their census is "by their parents' house and by their children" – the parents coming first!

And in addition to special ritual functions, the care and maintenance of the Sanctuary (during the years of wandering in the desert) was divided among the three scions of the house of Levi. The duty of Gershon, as described in the previous portion, focused on the curtains, the hangings, the various coverings inside the Tabernacle. According to the midrash, this was the easiest job in the Sanctuary. It is therefore assumed that the children of Gershon were satisfied to rest on their laurels; they remained in essence Levites, dependent on their "parent's house" for their status and function.

In contrast, the children of Kehat were in charge of the much heavier items, such as the Menora and the Ark. In Bamidbar Rabba (5:1), we read the following description: "When the Jews were traveling, two sparks of flame came out from the two poles of the Ark of the Tablets of Law." The Kehatites volunteered to put their lives on the line and risk the fire in order to bear the Holy Ark. And their brothers the Merarites learned from their example, volunteering to transport the heaviest wood and metals. These children of Levi were anxious to be their own people, to establish their own yiḥus. As a result, the Torah counts them in accord with "their children and their parents' house" – themselves and their children coming first!

What we've gathered from the overview is that a seemingly slight difference in word order may reveal a world of attitude and psychology. When each of us is counted and assessed when the Almighty conducts His census, the most important criterion in our judgment will not be who our parents were, but who and what we and our children have developed into. All too often, the descendant has descended too far down! And when we ponder the question of "Who is a Jew?" as we so often do within the context of necessity for conversion and the "right of return," it is important to note that at least from a sociological (rather than a halakhic) perspective, a Jew is defined more by his children than by his parents; indeed, I would argue that sociologically speaking, a Jew is he or she who has Jewish grandchildren!

Postscript - The Maggid of Mezritch (eighteenth century, Ukraine) was a great disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov, and heir to his leadership of the Hasidic movement. It is told that when the Maggid was still a child, a fire broke out in his family home. Although the family was rescued from the flames, his mother was weeping hysterically. When he asked her why she was so upset at the loss of mere physical objects, the mother explained that she was crying for the loss – not of the home or its furniture – but of the record of their family pedigree, which had been destroyed in the flames. This record had traced back their familial roots to King David himself! "You don't have to cry over that," said the young Maggid, comforting his mother. "I will begin a new record of our family pedigree; from me will begin a new yiḥus.

Subsequent generations will trace their lineage back to me."

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Transitions and Destinations
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

I've been thinking a lot lately about transitions and destinations. Perhaps this is because of my childhood memories. Back then, at precisely this time of year, my friends and I relished the approach of the end of the school year and the beginning of summer vacation. For us, school was merely a seemingly endless passage toward our longed-for destination, the " lazy, hazy" days of summer.

Or, there might be a much more recent basis to my current preoccupation with transitions and destinations. Since this past Pesach, when we celebrated our freedom from slavery, we have counted the days until Matan Torah, the "giving of the Torah," on Shavuot. Counting aloud each day, day by day and week by week, instilled in me a sense of going through a transition, a passage of seven weeks, leading to an ultimate destination.

That transitions and destinations are part of life is obvious. What is less obvious, but more fascinating, is that one person's destination is often another person's transition, and vice versa. How well do I remember my first days of employment after my years of graduate school. I experienced those years of toil as a necessary transition to the beginning of my career as a psychologist. My first day at work was the beginning of my destination.

It was on that day that I met a gentleman who was to become a close colleague over the ensuing several years. His name was George Jones, and while I was to be in charge of a small group of school psychologists, he headed a similarly small group of school social workers.

Soon after we first met, we discovered that we had much in common and so no longer confined our conversations to our professional tasks. We discussed our different religions, our family backgrounds, and our hopes and dreams.

We learned much from each other during those conversations. But most of all, we learned just how different our hopes and dreams were. For me, at that time in my life, my role as a trained mental health professional was my destination. It was what I had worked for and what I then anticipated would be my life's work.

For George, on the other hand, his profession was but a transitional role towards his ultimate destination. Although both of us were exactly 30 years old at the time, his dream was retirement. Yes, he knew that his destination was 20 or 25 years away, but he spoke about it almost daily, describing the property he bought on the Chesapeake Bay and the boat he would soon be able to afford. The job that was my destination was, for him, but a passage to a different destination entirely.

With this week's Torah portion, Parshat Bamidbar (Numbers 1:1-4:20), we begin a new Chumash, the fourth volume of the Pentateuch. Each of the five volumes of the Chumash is unique. My contention is that this fourth volume is unique in the following manner: It begins as a description of a transition, a passage, from the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai through a desert wilderness but towards the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey. But it soon becomes apparent that this desert wilderness will become a destination and, for many, a tragically final destination.

This book, which begins as a parade, a joyous and relatively brief journey to the Promised Land, is soon transformed into a book portraying an era of strife, rebellion, war, betrayal, and disillusionment, enduring for nearly forty years!

Transition, or destination? Was it Yogi Berra who said that it is hard to make predictions, especially about the future? Truth to tell, and we must face the truth, it is difficult to think of a moment in history at which there was greater uncertainty than at this moment.

In a certain sense, the distinction between transitions and destinations is an existential one. That is, the question can be asked, "Is our life in this world our final destination, or is it a transition, a prelude, into another world, another mode of existence?"

The answer to this question was proclaimed long ago by the Rabbis of the Mishnah: "Rabbi Jacob said: this world is like an antechamber before the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the antechamber so that you may enter the banquet hall." (Pirkei Avot, 4:21)

Our very lives, according to Rabbi Jacob, are but transitions into another destination, the World to Come. A very sobering teaching, indeed!

But our Rabbis inform us of something even more shocking. Even the World to Come is not a final destination. Even for the righteous, that celestial world is but a passage to a loftier destination.

"Said Rabbi Chiya bar Ashi in the name of Rav: Talmidei Chachamim [pious wise men] have no rest, neither in this world nor in the World to Come, as it is written, 'They will go from strength to strength, and appear before the Almighty in Zion (Psalms 84:80).'" (Berakhot 64a).

One is tempted to assume that it is only the righteous who progress ever upward and know no final destination. But surely the wicked, whose destination is Gehenna, have reached "the end of the line."

The Rabbis are quick to assure us, however, that even Gehenna is not the end of the line: "The sentence of the wicked to Gehenna is for but 12 months." (Eduyot 2:10)

Even Gehenna itself is but a transition, hopefully to a higher and nobler destination.

In conclusion, permit me to turn my attention to a happier topic. With this Person in the Parasha column, I celebrated the first publication of this weekly series of columns, for Parashat Bamidbar. At that time, I had just concluded my tenure as Executive Vice President of the Orthodox Union, which, until then, had been my "destination."

I began a new transition in my life which has thankfully continued until now. I already have some tentative notions as to the theme of "transitions and destinations" as it is to be found in this fascinating new book of the Chumash that I hope to share with you, with the help of the Almighty, in the weeks to come.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Why So Few Leviim?

The Torah records that after Moshe counted Bnei Yisrael, he counted the Tribe of Levi separately. The Leviim were counted from the age of one month and above, and they numbered 22,000. The Ramban asks a basic demographic question: The male population of the Tribe of Levi, which was counted from thirty days and up, numbered less than half of the next smallest Tribe, despite the fact that all the rest of the tribes were counted only from the age of twenty years and above! The Ramban asks: Why were there so few Leviim?

The Ramban suggests an answer to this question. He says this corroborates Chazal's teaching on the pasuk "As they (the Egyptians) persecuted them (the Jews), so did they multiply and so did they expand…" [Shemos 1:12]. The more the Egyptians tried to minimize us through their bondage and persecution, the more Hashem blessed us and allowed the Jewish women to have multiple births, creating a population explosion amongst the Children of Israel. Chazal teach that the Tribe of Levi was not subjected to the bondage of slavery. They were free from the work and the persecution suffered by the other tribes. Therefore, since they were not part of the persecution, they also were not part of the blessing of the population explosion, and consequently their total population at the end of the period of Egyptian slavery was much smaller than that of the other tribes.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh quotes this Ramban and is not happy with his suggestion. He offers his own unique—and in a sense, startling—answer: The Gemara says that Amram divorced his wife (after having only two children—Miriam and Aharon). His

rationale for doing so was that given the grim situation of the Jews in Egypt (Jewish male children being thrown at birth into the Nile, at that time), he did not want to bring any more children into the world. Amram was the gadol ha'dor (the leader of the generation). He was also the head of the Tribe of Levi. When the rest of his tribesmen saw that Amram divorced his wife, they all got up and divorced their wives as well. Even though the Gemara says that Amram had second thoughts about the matter and remarried his wife Yocheved, the Ohr HaChaim suggests (this is speculation on his part) that the other Levites did not follow his lead in that action, and they remained separated from their wives.

The Ohr HaChaim supplies a rationale for their motivation: The Tribe of Levi had it relatively good in Egypt. They were not subject to the same horrors and unspeakable suffering that the rest of the Jews had to bear. Consequently, they appreciated the lives they led and they appreciated life in general. They simply could not bear the thought of bringing children into the world only to have them thrown into the Nile to be drowned or abandoned (as was the case with Amram's third child, Moshe).

Ironically, because the other Jews suffered so much, they appreciated life less and they somehow came to terms with the thought that their children may be taken away from them. Their lives were so oppressed and they were so depressed that they felt that life was almost worthless. Consequently, the thought of having their children taken away from them seemed almost "par for the course " and therefore it did not stop them from bringing more Jewish souls into the world! They valued life so little, that they did not recoil in horror from the thought of what might happen to their to-be-born children as did the Leviim.

The only analogy I can think of is that in some countries in the world, life is not as valuable as it is in the United States. In America (and all the more so this is true in Eretz Yisrael), much of the general perception of the populace is that every life is of infinite value. The Leviim did not want to bring children into this world. We should father children who will suffer? We should bear children who will be murdered? We are not going to have such children!

The rest of the Israelites, who themselves lived unbearable lives, were not as frightened by the idea of bringing children into the world, who themselves would have a miserable lot in life. This is a startling idea, but if we think about it, I believe we can understand it.

As a result of this phenomenon, the Ohr HaChaim writes, the Tribe of Levi had significantly fewer children than the enslaved tribes.

A Cryptic Comment of the Baal HaTurim Explained by the Bach

The Talmud [Sotah 12a] sheds further light on the above-mentioned incident. When Amram divorced his wife (not wishing to bring more Jewish children into the world under such dire circumstances), his young daughter Miriam told him, "Father, your decree is worse than Pharoah's decree. Pharoah's decree only affects the boys; your decree affects both male and female children!" The Talmud states that Amram accepted his daughter's critique, and this is the background to the pasuk "A man went (va'yelech ish) from the House of Levi and married the daughter of Levi" [Shemos 2:1] The Rabbis ask, "From where did he go?" And they answer, "He went from the counsel of his daughter (to remarry Yocheved)."

The Baal HaTurim points out that there are only two places in all of Tanach where we find the expression "va'yelech ish". One is the aforementioned pasuk "va'yelech ish m'Beis Levi va'yikach es bas Levi," and the other is in the Book of Rus; "va'yelech ish m'Beis Lechem Yehudah…" (And a man went from Bethlehem in Judea to dwell in the fields of Moab) [Rus 1:1].

The Baal HaTurim (who did not have a computer) is certainly not merely sharing an interesting word anomaly. He means something when he provides these insights. Unfortunately, the Baal HaTurim does not do us the favor of explaining the significance of the linkage between these two pesukim. But in a sense, he did do us a favor, because this gives all darshanim in every generation the opportunity to suggest their own insights explaining the connection between "va'yelech ish m'Beis Levi..." (which was a pious action —Amram took back his wife and wanted to bring children into the world) and " va'yelech ish m'Beis Lechem Yehudah..." (where Elimelech, the leader of his generation, abandoned his people by leaving Eretz Yisrael in a time of famine and fled to Moav, which apparently was a sinful action).

The Bach (Rav Yoel Sirkis [1561-1640]), in a sefer called Meishiv Nefesh, shares an interesting idea. He says that Elimelech did not perform a wicked act in the Book of Rus. He did not abandon his people. He acted for the Sake of Heaven (l'Shem Shamayim). Elimelech knew prophetically (B'Ruach HaKodesh) that the Moshiach must trace his lineage back to the daughters of Moav. Since he was aware, however, that there was a halacha that "Neither an Ammonite nor a Moabite shall enter into the Congregation of Hashem…" [Devorim 23:4] (and at this point it was not known that this halacha only restricted male Moavites from marrying into Jewish families) and people therefore distanced themselves from any potential marriage with someone of Moavite lineage, Elimelech was perturbed that the Moshiach would never come into existence. Therefore, he took it upon himself to go with his family to the fields of Moav, because he sensed that over there, somehow, he would wind up with a woman in his family who would become the matriarch of the Messianic King.

This is the similarity the Baal HaTurim is pointing out between these two pesukim. "Va'yelech ish m'Beis Levi va'yikach es bas Levi" produced Moshe Rabbeinu, the Redeemer from Egypt, the first redeemer in Jewish history. And "va'yelech ish m'Beis Lechem Yehudah…" ultimately produced the final redeemer. Just as Amram's intent was to bring forth women (as Miriam pointed out to him, Pharoah only decreed death on the Jewish males, but Amram's separation from his wife ruled out the possibility of women coming into the world as well), so too, Elimelech's intent in going to the fields of Moav was to bring forth women (i.e., Rus, the matriarch of the Davidic monarchy)

All Is Well That Ends Well

The last pasuk in Parshas Bamidbar is, "But they shall not come and look as the holy is inserted, lest they die." [Bamidbar 4:20] When the Leviim were carrying the Aron HaKodesh, they needed to make sure it was covered, so as not to see it while it was uncovered. It was not an easy job being a Levi. It was a dangerous profession. If they looked at the Aron uncovered, they would die!

The problem is that we have a principle learned from a pasuk in Koheles [8:3] "…Lo sa'amod al davar rah…" (literally –"Do not stand on a bad thing"), which teaches that it is inappropriate to end a parsha (or even an Aliyah) on a bad note. Baal Korehs and Gabbaim know that when you need to insert an additional aliyah ("hosafa") in the leining, there are certain places where it is forbidden to stop. One of the rules is that you cannot stop on a pasuk with a "bad message."

And yet, Parshas Bamidbar ends with "V'lo Yiroo k'valah es haKodesh, va'meisu." And this is not the only occurrence of this phenomenon. Parshas Kedoshim ends with the pasuk "…they shall be put to death; they shall pelt them with stones, their blood shall be within them (d'meihem bam)." [Vayikra 20:27]. This is a "beautiful ending?" "Their blood shall be within them!" How do we explain this? Koheles says not to pause on a "davar rah". So how do we end on such frightening and somber notes as those at the end of Parshas Bamidbar and Parshas Kedoshim?

Rav Isaac Bernstein shared an interesting idea from the Teshuvas Rav Pe'alim. In Talmudic times, every person who received an aliyah did not make two brachos (one prior to his aliyah and one following it) as is the custom today. Rather, the first olah recited the beginning bracha (asher bachar banu…) and the final (usually the seventh) olah made the final bracha (asher nasan lanu Toras emes…). The Rav Pe'alim says that the result of this is that

the last thing the congregation hears is not the final words of the last pasuk, but rather the last words of the final bracha "Who gave us the True Torah and Eternal Life He has implanted in our midst, Blessed Art Thou Who Gives Us the Torah!" That is not a bad note. We are not stopping at the words "They will die" or "their blood is within them." We are stopping at "Who Gives Us the Torah."

Now, in truth, this is the case, not only in Talmudic times, but in our day as well. So, I believe that the Rav Pe'alim is saying that the rule of not stopping on a "bad note" (davar rah) only applies to the intermediate aliyahs—namely all the section endings except the final one—which are not followed by the ending bracha. However, the rule of not ending on a "bad note" does not apply to the very end of a Parsha, because the last aliyah never ended with the Torah pasuk itself, but with the final Torah blessing.

What a better way could there be to end my final shiur before Shavuos than with the words "Baruch Ata Hashem, Nosen HaTorah".

Dvar Torah
Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Will people be proud to be connected to you? This Shabbat, we commence the reading of the book of Bamidbar. Right at the beginning of the book the Torah provides us with details of the heads of tribes, it says אִישׁ רֹאשׁ לְבֵית־אֲבֹתָיו הוּא – 'each one of them was the head of a household'. Rav Moshe Chefetz tells us in his book Melechet Machshevet that there is a message here for each and every one of us. That's because every one of us is an 'איש' – a person, and we should likewise strive to be רֹאשׁ לְבֵית־אֲבֹתָיו – 'the head of a household'. This means, he explains, that people will be proud to be connected to us and in future generations, people will be proud to be descended from us.

The Maggid of Mezerich, Rav Dov Ber ben Avraham, was the primary disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov, one of the great founders of Chassidism. When he was five years old he came home to find his mother distraught. There had been a fire in their home, it had caused damage but they had managed to put it out. So he said "Mummy, all of us are okay! Nobody died, isn't that what's important?" She replied, "that's not why I'm crying. You see, we had a document, a piece of paper that was our family tree and we can show everyone how we are descended directly from King David. That document has now gone up in flames." So the little Dov Ber said to his mother 'don't worry Mummy, I will always try to be a good person and please God one day, people will be proud to be descended from me". That is the message of אִישׁ רֹאשׁ לְבֵית־אֲבֹתָיו – that we should strive to be outstanding role models, whom people are proud to be connected to.

I believe that this is always a lesson of importance but particularly right now during The COVID-19 pandemic. Ever since 1945, we have been living in the post-war era, from 2020, we'll be living in the post virus era. People will be looking to us, the people who endured this very trying and challenging period. We have an opportunity now to set an example, a tone, to show how despite great difficulty, we are acting responsibly, for ourselves and our societies, so that in the future, people will look back and be proud of the role models we have been.

אִישׁ רֹאשׁ לְבֵית־אֲבֹתָיו – this is the time for us to be the heads of households, to be responsible for ourselves, our families and our communities and indeed for the entire world.

OTS Dvar Torah
"Take the Levites"
Rabbi Yoni Rosensweig

Why does the Torah go to such lengths to keep the Levites completely separate from the rest of the Israelites? Why did it order a separate census of the Levites?

Parashat Bamidbar contains technical lists of the numbers of Israelites, and each census was done a bit differently. In the first chapter, we find the head counts of the Israelites, tribe by tribe, with the exception of the Levites who, as the Torah emphasizes, were not counted in the general census of the Israelites. The second chapter presents the census "by standards". Here, the Israelites were grouped and arranged in a particular way, which conformed with how they camped and travelled. Here, too, the text underscores the Levites' unique position, and the fact that they are not counted among the Israelites.

One question comes to mind: Why does the Torah go to such lengths to keep the Levites completely separate from the rest of the Israelites? Why did Hashem refuse to count the Levites along with the rest of the Israelites, only to later command that they be counted separately? Biblical commentators have tried to explain the significance of the different censuses and their details. We would also like to propose a way to appreciate the significance of the amount of text the Torah uses in this regard. Studying these fine details can reveal the secret buried within the text.

Let's begin by recapping the head counts of all of the tribes:
Reuben – 46500, Simeon – 59300, Gad – 45650, Judah – 74600, Issachar – 54400, Zebulon – 57400, Efraim – 40500, Menashe – 32200, Benjamin – 35400, Dan – 62700, Asher – 41500, and Naftali – 53400.

With regard to the standards, the tribes were grouped into four camps, as follows:

The camp of Judah – Judah, Issachar and Zebulon (74600+54400+57400= 186400).
This group camped in the east, and it formed the vanguard for the rest of the Israelites when they travelled.

The camp of Reuben: Reuben, Simeon and Gad (46500 + 59300 + 45650 = 151450).

This group camped in the south, and it formed the right flank of the Israelite camp (when viewed from the rear).

The camp of Efraim: Efraim, Menashe and Benjamin (40500+32200+35400= 108100). This group camped in the west, and it formed the rearguard when the Israelites travelled.

The camp of Dan: Dan, Asher and Naftali (62700 + 41500 + 53400 = 157600).

This group camped in the north, and it formed the left flank of the Israelite camp (when viewed from the rear).

If we revisit this camping formation, we'll realize that Hashem created an order reminiscent of a grand military parade, a formation that made sense military, as well: the numerically superior group would form the vanguard, groups with similar numbers made up the two flanks, and finally, the weakest of the four groups would make up the rearguard. Furthermore, since all of these camps were supposed to be under the orders of the commander of the camp, the groups were arranged in a way that allowed each of the tribes making up those groups to get along while accepting the authority of their superiors. Judah, Issachar and Zebulon were all descended from Leah, and it goes without saying that they accepted Judah's authority. Reuben, Simeon and Gad were also Leah's sons, or, in the case of Gad, the son of Leah's maidservant, so they would certainly have accepted Reuben's authority. Efraim, Menashe and Benjamin are all descended from Rachel, Efraim was clearly given preference over Menashe in leadership, and finally, the Dan camp included Asher and Naftali – all descended from maidservants.

The Levites are mentioned twice in this formation. The first mention is in chapter 1, when the Torah sets them apart, stating that all of the tribes camped beside their standards, but the Levites set up camp outside the Tabernacle. The are kept separate and distinct from the other tribes and they maintain a separate identity. At this point, the Torah hasn't given us any further details, and it proceeds to describe the "census of the standards".

The following important description occurs in the middle of the explanation of the standard formation, in verse 17: "Then, midway between the divisions, the Tent of Meeting, the division of the Levites, shall move. As they camp, so they shall march, each in position, by their standards." The Tribe of Levi camped among the people – right in the middle. This contrasts with the text in the previous chapter:

on the one hand, the Torah emphasizes the Levite's detachment from the rest of the Israelites, while on the other hand, if stresses that the Levites are an inseparable and key component of the entire nation. The nation is gathered around the Levites. The Levites are at the center of the Jewish people, since they camp by the Mishkan.

Unlike the other tribes, the tribe of Levi was split into family groups. Even the expression "by the clans of its ancestral houses", often used in reference to the tribal censuses, is reversed in the case of the Levites; the Torah states that the Levites must be counted "by their ancestral house and by their clans."

One way to explain this is that the Levites were divided into clans because the Holy One, Blessed Be He divided them based on their roles, not based on their tribal affiliation, and in essence, the tribe of Levi no longer maintained an independent identity, as it now became the staff of the servants of Hashem. This is the tribe of those who served Hashem, and as such, it is connected to the entire Jewish people.

Today, those who serve the nation spiritually are our rabbis and educators. For them, too, tribalism must be done away with. Educators, teachers and rabbis are all dedicated to serving the entire Jewish people, regardless of whether they are secular, religious, ultra-orthodox or otherwise. They must take charge of ignoring the small portion of Israeli society in which they were raised, and dedicate themselves to the holy work of creating connections with the entire Jewish people.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Daniel Stein

There is Nothing More Beautiful Than Serving Hashem Be'Tznius

At the outset of their relationship, Hashem communicated with Moshe outdoors and in public, first at the burning bush and then later in Mitzrayim. However, the pasuk states that subsequently, "Hashem spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai from within the Ohel Moed" (Bamidbar 1:1). The Medrash Rabba (Bamidbar 1:3) comments that following the construction of the Mishkan, Hashem only spoke to Moshe from within the Ohel Moed, for Hashem typically prefers to operate discreetly and indoors as it says, "walk modestly with your God" (Micha 6:8), and it is for this reason that Hashem is described in general as a "God who conceals Himself," (Yeshaya 45:15). A similar transition occurred in connection with the giving of the Torah. The Medrash Tanchuma (Ki Sisa 31) claims that the first set of luchos were broken precisely because they arrived amidst great attention and fanfare which leads the Medrash to conclude that "there is nothing more beautiful than tznius." In order to protect the second set of luchos from a similar fate, Moshe was instructed to fashion them while alone and in private as the pasuk says, "carve for yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones" (Shemos 34:1).

The value of being removed from the public eye is further supported by the Gemara (Bava Metzia 42a) which comments that, "blessings can only exist regarding objects that are concealed." Moreover, the Gemara (Sukkah 49b and Moed Katan 16a) asserts, that even those events which are generally held in public, such as a wedding, funeral, or even teaching Torah, should nonetheless be conducted with the greatest degree of discretion possible. The expansive range and scope of these comments indicates that the imperative to conduct ourselves privately and with tznius is not limited to our wardrobe choices or modes of attire, but rather encompasses all of our interactions and indeed defines our very way of life.[1] This is underscored by the manner in which Balak praises the Jewish People, "How good are your tents, Yaakov" (Bamidbar 24:5), referring to the arrangement of their tents which opened in opposite directions in order to prevent one from peering into the home of another.

The central message of tznius is illuminated by the Maharal (Nesivos Olam) who writes that the meaning and significance of an object or event which is open to the public and exposed in plain sight is limited to that which can be observed and is on display. Conversely, an item which is hidden and concealed suggests that it possesses greater depth and therefore should not be judged superficially. This is comparable to the tip of an iceberg whose spire protrudes above the water but at the same time hints that its true girth and might resides beneath the surface. For this reason, while the Mishkan was in transit, Bnei Yisrael were commanded to cover the furniture and utensils, "so that they not go inside and witness the dismantling of the Sanctuary lest they die" (Bamidbar 4:20). Rav Sternbuch (Taam V'daas) explains that the pieces of the Mishkan were wrapped and concealed deliberately in order to convey to any potential spectators that the ultimate purpose of the Mishkan and its utensils were beyond their grasp and all human understanding.

Given the general emphasis on tznius and privacy it is not surprising, that the holiest items and places within the Mishkan were guarded by numerous coverings and layers designed to protect its contents and restrict access. This notion is punctuated by the avodah of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur which was performed entirely in solitude, as the pasuk states, "nobody else shall be in the Ohel Moed until he comes out" (Vayikra 16:17). Additionally, Moshe was commanded at Har Sinai to ascend the mountain by himself and to instruct the rest of the nation to remain behind for "nobody else shall come up with you, and nobody else shall be seen anywhere on the mountain" (Shemos 34:3). The Degel Machaneh Efraim (Matos) derives from these instances that intense spiritual experiences can only materialize while one is secluded, removed from all societal limitations and expectations. Perhaps, the Mishnah (Avos 2:5) which states, "in the place where there is no man strive to be a man," can also be interpreted creatively, "strive to be a man who serves Hashem like he is in a place where there are no other men." Therefore, Rav Tzadok Hakohen (Tzidkos Hatzaddik) writes that even when davening together with the rest of the community, one should attempt to imagine as if he is conversing privately with Hashem.

However, if the quiet and understated nature which accompanied the second set of luchos is ideal, why were the first set of luchos introduced with such pomp and circumstance in the first place? The Sfas Emes (Ki Sisa) deduces that public performances are occasionally necessary in order to initially infuse an endeavor with a certain measure of excitement and enthusiasm which can only be generated by a large and impressive gathering. For this reason, we occasionally applaud the accomplishments of young children in public and celebrate their milestones together with the community. However, as a child matures and develops it is critical that we instill within them the belief that "there is nothing more beautiful than tznius." They must be taught that their lives and actions are inherently consequential in the eyes of Hashem even if it is not "commented" upon by others or "liked" by someone else. We have to convince them, that from the perspective of Yiddishkeit, the more something is concealed the more valuable it is, and the more an activity or accomplishment is publicized the less special it becomes, not the reverse.

Similarly, the Maharshal (Yam Shel Shlomo, Kesubos 1:17) claims that the glass which is broken at a wedding by the chosson is an allusion to the shevrias haluchos. Rav Soloveitchik (cited in Divrei Harav pg. 229) suggests that this symbol serves as a reminder to the chosson and kallah that the public nature of their relationship at the time of their wedding is not sustainable, just like the first set of luchos. Over time, as their relationship deepens and matures their home should evolve from a chuppah where the entire community is invited to watch, into a sealed domain whose entrance is obscured from its neighbors. The coronavirus pandemic which has confined us to our houses has also refocused our attention on the concept of tznius and the importance of cultivating a private relationship with Hashem. Whenever we emerge from this predicament and are able to reconvene as a community, (it should hopefully be soon and in good health), we should travel forth with this same orientation and mindset, to continue to walk modestly with Hashem at all times, for there is nothing more beautiful and beneficial than tznius.

[1] See Rav Hershel Schachter, Eretz Hatzvi (pg. 96) and Can Women Be Rabbis?.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah
by Rabbi Label Lam

A Real King

Dovid HaMelelch finds himself at the center of the Yom Tov of Shavuos for many reasons. The Midrash tells us that not only was he born on the day that we celebrate the reception of the Torah but he passed away on Shavuos 70 years later. Therefore, in preparation for that special occasion it might prove worthy to take some time to reflect on the extraordinary life and the sublime gift of "King David"

The Ramchal writes in Derech Etz Chaim, " This is the biggest and most powerful medicine that one can find against the Yetzer. It is easy and its effects are great. Its fruit is many, in that a man should stand each day for at least an hour, free from all other thoughts, and to think only on this matter that I've said. And he should seek in his heart: "What did the early ones, the fathers of the world do, that G-d desired in them? What did Moshe Rabbeinu do? What did David, the Moshiach (chosen of) HASHEM do? And all the Gedolim (great men) who lived before us?"

What did Dovid do? I have no specific answer for now, however we have have the clearest window into the mind and the heart of Dovid HaMelech in the form of the readily accessible and ubiquitous Sefer Tehillim. Dovid tells us everything. He reveals all we need to know.

Now just to add an electric charge of appreciation and to help affirm that Tehillim is a prophetically inspired we might cogitate on this discovery of the Vilna Gaon. There are five books within Sefer Tehillim corresponding to the Five Books of the Torah. If one counts the number of letters in the first book of Tehillim and then begins to count that number of letters starting the first books of Torah, Bereishis, one comes to a letter TOF. Do the same with the second book of Tehillim and the second book of Torah, Shemos, and one comes to the HEY. Follow the same procedure for the next three books and one finds the letters LAMED and then YUD and then MEM, spelling out TEHILLIM. A huge statistical anomaly!

Tehillim is unique and distinct from other books of prophecy. It is not the record of G-d speaking to man but rather it's record of the highest expression of mankind speaking to G-d! Every page of Tehillim is saturated with the many Good and Holy Names of HASHEM. Dovid was a G-d intoxicated person, as he says, "I place HASHEM before always!"

We know Dovid merited to become the King of Israel. What is the quality of a Jewish King? In Hebrew the word "Melech" for King does not connote a brutish authority. Just the opposite. The Hebrew word "Nimlach" means to take counsel. The Jewish Kings feels the pulse of the people. He not only needs to represent all that is noble and just to the people but he is the ultimate spokesperson for the people.

The sages tell us that the king is the heart of the nation. The heart is connected to and distributes precious life blood to all the organs and extremities of the body. A Jewish King like Dovid does not tell people what to think but he tells them what they are really thinking and feeling deep in their hearts. He speaks to us and for us for all time. He lets us know that we are a G-d intoxicated people.

Dovid HaMelech was not just a warrior, or a statesman, or a politician, or a sage, or a singer, or a poet, or a musician, even though he was all of those things too. He shows us his heart and he reveals to us our heart in Sefer Tehillim. He was and still is the teacher of our heart.

The summary of all our devotions and good deeds and learning Torah and performing Mitzvos is to effectively reach and cure the heart. The Talmud says it straight, "The Merciful One wants the heart."Let us not make a mistake. Actions are required because they prove the sincerity of and directly inspire the heart. The heart cannot be conquered with passive thought alone. Dovid HaMelech was and is the most ideal teacher in both word and deed of that deepest lesson. In Dovid HaMelech each of us and all of us can find the wisdom and courage to straighten and strengthen our hearts and that's the portrait of a real king.

Likutei *Divrei* Torah

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Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

The Scroll of Ruth contains one of the most idyllic stories in the Bible, a tale of "autumnal love" between a widow (Ruth) and a widower (Boaz), within the backdrop of diaspora inter-marriage, conversion to Judaism, and the agricultural life in ancient Israel. The Rabbinic Sages ordained that we read this Scroll on Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, the anniversary of the Torah Revelation at Sinai and the celebration of the first fruits brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. And since Shavuot is the climatic zenith of Passover, the development of a newly-freed group of slaves in the Sinai desert into a Torah-imbued nation firmly ensconced in their own homeland of Israel, the reasons for this special reading are many: Boaz and Ruth are the great – grandparents of David, the Psalm-singing military hero who united the tribes of Israel and first envisioned the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, Ruth the Moabite is Jew-by-choice whose commitment to Torah Judaism makes her worthy of being the great grand-mother of the prototype of the eventual Messiah-King, and the last three chapters of the story takes place between the beginning of the barley harvest (just before Passover) and the very end of the wheat harvest (not long after Shavuot). I would wish to ask three questions on the Scroll of Ruth, the answer to which I believe will provide an extra dimension of our understanding as to why we read this particular Scroll on Shavuot, the festival which serves as harbinger to redemption.

Firstly, from a narrative perspective: the first chapter spans the ten years the family of Naomi is in Moab, and the last three chapters describe the happenings of the three month period between the barley and wheat harvests. Why did the author give so much text space to such a small span of times?

Secondly, the midrash (Ruth Rabbah) tells us that Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem at the precise time of the funeral of Boaz's wife, and that Boaz died immediately after he impregnated Ruth; that is how the Rabbinic Sages account for the fact that Boaz is not mentioned in the last verses of the Scroll (Ruth 4:14-22), which specifically deal with the birth of Oved, son to Boaz and Ruth as well as father to Jesse. Why do the Sages see fit to sandwich these joyous verses recounting such a significant love story between two seemingly tragic deaths – without the text itself mentioning those deaths explicitly or even hinting at a mournful mood? And finally, can we possibly glean from between the lines of the Scroll what precisely occurred between Boaz and Ruth during the night they spent together on the threshing floor. What did her mother-in-law Naomi suggest that she do – and what did she do in actuality?

If Shavuot is truly the Festival of Redemption – and redemption links humanity to the Eternal G-d of all eternity – the period which is eternally Sabbath – then the Scroll of Ruth must deal with the eternal rather that the temporal. Israel is the eternal homeland of the Jewish people – and any diaspora experience can only be temporal at best and destructive at worst. The first chapter opens with a famine in Israel, and an important personage (Elimelekh) who leaves Bethlehem (literally the house of bread) with his wife and sons to seek "greener pastures" in the idolatrous Moab. As happened with Father Abraham, Diaspora proved far more dangerous (Genesis 12:10-20), the two sons, Mahlon (lit. sickness) and Kilion (lit. destruction) marry Hittite wives – and since the children follow the religion of the mother, the Israelite line of Elimelekh and Naomi – seems to have ended! The father and his sons all die in Moab – their earlier spiritual demise expressing itself physically; fortunately one daughter-in-law clings to her mother-in-law Naomi, converts to Judaism ("Where you will go" – to Israel – "there shall I go, where you will lodge, there shall I lodge," – maintaining the same sexual purity as you – "Your people shall be my people, your God my God" – Ruth 1:16), and returns to Bethlehem. Only now – in Israel – can eternal history begin, and so the next three chapters, and the next three months, are far more significant than the previous ten years, which had almost destroyed the family line.

The midrash tells us that Boaz's wife has died just as Naomi and Ruth return – and that Boaz will die three months later. But death in itself is not tragic for Judaism: after all, every individual must die sooner or later. The only relevant question is to what extent the individual, when alive, participates in Jewish eternity. Naomi sends Ruth to glean the forgotten grain and harvest the produce in the corner of the field – agricultural provision which the Torah provides for the poor Israelites. Divine Providence sent Ruth to Boaz's field – and Boaz was a Kinsman of Elimelekh. Boaz seems to be attracted to this comely proselyte –stranger and gives her his protection. Naomi understands that participation in Jewish eternity means having a child with Jewish parentage in Israel; she therefore instructs Ruth to wash and annoint herself, dress in special finery, visit the place on the threshing floor where Boaz will be spending the night at the height of the harvest season, and lie down at his feet. She also warns Ruth not to reveal who she is (Ruth 3:3,4). In effect, she is suggesting that Ruth tempt Boaz as Tamar had tempted Boaz's forbear Judah generations earlier – and at least enter Jewish history by bearing his child (see Genesis, chapter 38).

Ruth senses that Boaz loves her – and so she holds out for higher stakes than a mere "one night stand." She tells him exactly who she is, and she asks that he "redeem" her by marriage and by restoring to her Elimelekh's previously sold homestead in Israel. Ruth understands that true eternity means bearing a child on your own piece of land in Israel – not in the sly, but as a respected wife and householder. Boaz complies, and Oved, the grandfather of King David, is born. Ruth's commitment to Torah – the land of Torah, the laws of Torah, the loving-kindness of Torah, the modesty of Torah – catapults this convert into the center stage of Jewish eternity.

And this for a very important reason. According to the Midrash of R. Yishmael, the reason the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai – a desert galut – and not on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem, is because had the Torah been given in Israel the Jews may have thought that the Gentiles have no place in Torah. The truth is the very opposite: Rav Shimon ben Elazar maintains that in the future (Days of the Messiah) the Gentiles will all convert, and Maimonides, at the very conclusion of his Mishneh Torah, rules that at the End of the Days "everyone will return to the true religion", which for him was certainly Judaism. The truth is that to a partial extent the issue is in dispute between two Prophets, Isaiah (chapter 2) maintaining that all the nations will rush to our Jerusalem Temple, declaring "Let us learn from the Jewish ways, let us walk in the Jewish paths, for from Zion will go forth Torah and the word of God from Jerusalem" (to the entire world), while the Prophet Micha quotes Isaiah's words almost verbatim, and then concluding, "each nation will walk in the Name of its (individual) god

By the Friedman and Klahr families
on the occasion of the ninth yahrzeit of
their father, grandfather, and great grandfather,
Dr. Carl Klahr, a"h,
(Nosson Karpel ben Shmuel Zanvil Tzvi),
on the fifth of Sivan

and we will walk in the name of the Living Lord our God forever" – ethical absolutism (in accordance with the Torah demands of ethical absolutism – compassionate righteousness, moral justice, universal peace) and ritual pluralism!

I am ready to accept either view, and according to everyone at least the Biblical ethic will reign supreme. And the truth is that God initially blessed Abraham with becoming a great nation through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed with peace and security (Gen 12:1-3) – the Gentiles will certainly adopt our ethical outlook!

This is the vision of Shavuot and this is why we read about the righteous proselyte Ruth on Shavuot!

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

A Message for the Entire Team

All beginning students of Torah face this obstacle: in their original, the primary texts of our Jewish tradition have no punctuation. There are neither commas nor periods in the Torah scroll, the Sefer Torah. There are no question marks, nor are there indications of where one paragraph ends and another begins in standard editions of the Talmud.

In recent years, publishers have included vowels and punctuation marks in the new editions of almost all basic Jewish texts. This innovation has facilitated the ability to study Torah unimpeded by the necessity to puzzle over the various quandaries with which students of previous generations had to cope.

However, before these innovations and throughout our history, there have been numerous disagreements as to how the unpunctuated texts should be read. Let me provide one example of such a text from the Torah portion which we will read in the synagogue on the first day of the upcoming festival of Shavuot. The text is to be found in the book of Exodus/Shemot 19:5-6. Unpunctuated, and translated literally, it reads as follows:

And now if you listen will listen in My voice and keep My covenant and you will be for Me a treasure among all the nations for Mine is all the land and you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy people…

Many commentators struggle with the above verses. Permit me to introduce you to one of them. His name was Rabbi Naphtali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, and he lived in the latter half of the nineteenth century. He was the dean, or Rosh Yeshiva, of the "mother of all yeshivos," in the town of Volozhin in Lithuania. He is known as the Netziv, based upon the initials of his name. He wrote prolifically and gave daily lectures on each week's Torah portion. Those lectures formed the basis of his profound and extremely insightful five-volume commentary, entitled Haamek Davar.

As one becomes familiar with his work, one begins to realize that the author uses certain basic themes, again and again, to resolve a wide variety of textual problems. One of these themes is the distinction between passages directed to an exclusive audience, versus passages which are addressed to all of the Jewish people, and occasionally to all mankind.

To put it bluntly, some messages are for the spiritual superstars, and others are for the entire team.

The Netziv suggests that our text can be punctuated in two different ways: one with a message for the elite, and another with a message for us all. In this column, I will confine myself to the message for the broader group and leave the message for the aristocracy to those willing to consult the Haamek Davar on their own.

Here is the Netziv's suggested punctuation, with his interjected interpretive remarks, as addressed to the group he calls the hamon am, the "masses," or as I prefer, the "entire team," all who stood at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah.

And now if you listen well in My voice, and keep My covenant,
then, and only then, will you be My treasure, among all nations,
for people of all lands are Mine.
You are qualified to serve as My kingdom of priests/servants,
you are qualified to be a holy people…

The Netziv proceeds to elaborate upon the message:
"From this moment forward, you must 'listen to My voice.' That is, you must ponder Torah and attempt to understand it precisely. 'Listen in,' rather than merely 'listen to.' This is a precondition for My divine support of your national interests, your political agenda, matters of war and peace.

"Then, you must 'keep My covenant', the covenant I made with Abraham regarding sacrificial worship, the Avodah, in the Holy Temple. This is a precondition for My divine sustenance, providing you with a fertile land, with abundant food and nourishment.

"But note," continues the Netziv, "that reference is only made to Torah and Avodah, to Torah study and ritual observance! What about gemilut chesed? What about interpersonal relationships, charity, kindness, generosity, tolerance, compassion? I, the Almighty, expect those behaviors of all human beings, not just of you! Remember Sodom, totally destroyed because it neglected the poor and needy. Furthermore, I know that chesed/compassion comes naturally to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I need not stipulate that it is a precondition for My divine rewards.

"Beyond those two essentials, Torah and Avodah, without which there is no nation of Israel, you may elevate yourself yet higher by becoming exemplary in your relationships with others, by acting nobly in your dealings with others. But, when it comes to human relationships, much depends upon the special circumstances of time and place. In those matters, you must strive to discern My will, you must attempt to determine what the Almighty expects of you. For that, you must be a mamlechet kohanim, a 'kingdom of priests.'

"And then, you must be a goy kadosh, 'a holy people.' You must be able to determine for yourselves what makes for holiness in new and unfamiliar contexts which are not explicitly regulated in My Torah. You must ask what I, the Almighty, would want you to do in unprecedented and unanticipated new circumstances, which you are sure to encounter in your national and personal futures."

What a powerful message these words have for us as we enter Z'man Matan Torateinu, the Festival of Shavuot, when we not only commemorate the Almighty's revelation upon Mount Sinai, but when we relive it.

The Netziv reminds us of the fundamental requirements that we have as a people and as individuals: Torah study and ritual observance. He reminds us that we have responsibilities, not just as Jews, but as members of the human society. He urges us to go beyond those universal responsibilities and to excel morally and ethically.

I write these words in the midst of a terrible plague, a pandemic. We all find ourselves surrounded by uncertainty and confronted with difficult decisions at every turn.

It helps us to realize that a wise man, living more than a century ago, forewarned us that we will encounter drastically unpredictable dilemmas for which we must strive to ascertain the Almighty's will by living our lives as His "kingdom of priests, a holy people."

Dvar Torah
Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Why is it important to enjoy the meal at a wedding? The Gemara in Berachot 6b tells us, "כָּל הַנֶּהֱנֶה מִסְּעוּדַת חֲתָנִן…זוֹכֶה לַתּוֹרָה" – "whoever enjoys the meal at a wedding and makes the bride and groom happy… acquires Torah". What is the source for this? In the biblical account of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai the term 'קול- voice' is mentioned 5 times. Similarly in Jeremiah chapter 33 verse 11, with reference to a bride and groom that same word 'קול' is mentioned five times. A beautiful teaching but does it actually make sense? I could have understood perhaps some

of the more spiritual elements of the wedding ceremony being linked to acquiring Torah but why the physical activity of eating the meal?

I'd like to suggest the following peirush: Here we find an outstanding example of that Torah-true character trait of empathy.

Anyone who has hosted a simcha, a wedding or bar or bat mitzvah knows how much effort goes into creating the menu. All the considerations relating to the options for the food, the financial investment, the tasting, etc. But it's a long run up for a short jump -after so many months of planning it's all over within a few hours. That is why it's so important that as guests at a wedding, if we enjoy the meal, we must let the hosts know that we appreciated their choice of food – that will give them so much encouragement and make them feel good. If you relate to others in this way you are showing you can be 'Zocher Latorah'. The reason is, that our consideration for others in our tradition is always seen as an integral part of the way in which we connect spiritually with our creator.

The previous Gerer Rebbe was once asked 'what should the name be for the Shabbat before Shavuot?' After all the Shabbat before Pesach is called Shabbat HaGadol. The Shabbat before Yom Kippur is Shabbat Shuva, so what about the Shabbat before Shavuot? In an instant he replied: It should be called 'Shabbat Derech Eretz' – the Shabbat of menchlechkite, of being considerate, of being a decent human being -because the Mishna tells us 'Derech Eretz Kadma la'Torah' – 'being a good person precedes the Torah'. That is why the Shabbat before Shavuot should be 'Shabbat Derech Eretz'…

Let us take the very same message forward for all years to come and if indeed we show that beautiful empathy towards those living around us we will all be 'Zocher Latorah', we will have the privilege of embracing a Torah way of life.

May it be a shining light to guide us with meaning and joy throughout our lives. [*excerpted*]

OTS Dvar Torah

Is Rut Really a Role Model?
By Rabbanit Dena Freundlich

The Question - About a year ago, a Midreshet Lindenbaum alumna (Sarah Cabot, ML 5778) posed a thought-provoking question to me over WhatsApp about the character of Rut. Her query unsettled me because it hit on a troubling issue which I didn't know how to make sense of in a way that would satisfy her or myself. Sarah wrote that Rut left her feeling confused. She is extolled for her extreme acts of chessed and self-sacrifice, abandoning her home to cling to her penniless, bereft mother-in-law, selflessly devoting herself to provide sustenance for both of them, and humbly doing anything that might vouchsafe for them a secure future. However, as Sarah wrote to me, it seems as though Rut "is so committed to helping Naomi that her own identity is erased, and to me at least it seems to be contrary to the type of person that we're supposed to strive to be." In other words, Sarah was asking, Is Rut really a role model? Is she the type of character we should put on a pedestal for ourselves, our daughters, and our students to strive to emulate? Chessed, generosity, self-sacrifice, devotion, and commitment are all laudatory traits, but Rut seems to take them to extremes, perhaps even unhealthy extremes. The most disturbing scene in her short, 4-chapter scroll, is when Naomi bids her to wash and beautify herself, surreptitiously slip into Boaz's threshing floor at night, lie down next to him, and submit herself to whatever Boaz will instruct her to do.[1] Surely, Naomi and Rut must have desperately hoped and prayed for the fortunate ending that in fact transpires, but both of them must have been aware that the provocative scene could easily have ended very differently. Do we seek to become the types of people who would so lose our own sense of identity, dignity, and self-worth that we would meekly acquiesce to be a pawn in such a plot, as Rut does with her response "כל אשר תאמרי אעשה" – whatever you say, I will do? [2]

Following are several approaches to this question.

Approach #1: Rut is more self-effacing than we ought to be, yet she remains a role model[3]

The first approach accepts that in fact Rut has self-effacing qualities that are more extreme than what we should aspire to ourselves; this does not, however, detract from her standing as a heroine and role model. How so?

There are several possible answers. Sarah, the very student who proposed the question initially, herself suggested a particularly insightful one. She pointed out that the Megilla opens by highlighting its historical context – "ויהי בימי שפט השפטים" (and it was when the Judges judged) – indicating that this is a critical nugget of information. The era of the Judges was a disastrous one for the Jewish people, steeped in repetitive cycles of idol worship and then oppression by other nations in punishment for their abandonment of God. The most oft-repeated phrase throughout Sefer Shoftim, the line that best encapsulates the era is "איש הישר בעיניו יעשה" – each person did whatever was right in his own eyes.[4] It was an era marked by selfishness, insularity, and a lack of concern for anyone outside of oneself. In such a time period, there could not have been a more perfect heroine or role model than Rut.

The Rambam writes in Hilchot De'ot 2:2 that the best method for an individual to correct a character flaw is to go to the opposite extreme. For example, if he suffers from arrogance, writes the Rambam, he "should sit in the least honorable seat and wear worn-out clothes which shame their wearer." The Rambam explicitly writes that he does not believe it is ideal to subject oneself to humiliation; he recommends it only as a temporary corrective for someone suffering from arrogance. He concludes, "So too should a person behave regarding all character traits. If he is on one extreme he should move to the opposite extreme and accustom himself to such behavior for a good while until he may return to the proper middle path."

Perhaps Rut demonstrates to us that the Rambam's prescription for correcting an individual's character traits is equally applicable on the national level. As a nation, Bnei Yisrael during Rut's time were falling prey to excessive selfishness; Rut emerged on the scene and modeled unreserved self-sacrifice that was precisely what was needed as a corrective measure. Rut's contemporaries trampled on others' identities in order to assert their own; Rut muted her own identity in order to restore Naomi's.[5] The people in Rut's time needed to behave selflessly not merely in appropriate amounts but to Rut-esque excessive degrees precisely to serve as an antidote to their self-centeredness, and help them eventually achieve the "proper middle path."[6]

Approach #2: Rut is a role model of trust and faith

A second approach was suggested to me by a wise mother-in-law,[7] who pointed out that Rut is not blindly heeding the instructions of just anyone; the disturbing command to seek out Boaz in the middle of the night has been issued by none other than Naomi, whom Rut has learned to trust deeply and unconditionally through many years of living, breathing, eating, sleeping, suffering, and surviving side-by-side. From all these experiences, Rut has developed unswerving faith and confidence both in Naomi's goodness and in her utter devotion to Rut's well-being. Within the context of this relationship, Rut's blind obedience to Naomi's plan is transformed from troubling docility to a praiseworthy act of trust and faith. A trusted, beloved parent asking us to embark on a questionable mission or to perform an arduous favor is entirely different than a random stranger requesting the identical thing.

This point resonated deeply with me. Yet, I was still somewhat unsettled, largely because of recent alarming incidents in which trusted figures, including Rabbinic ones, have manipulated and abused unsuspecting congregants. Did I really want to convey the message to my students that they should unquestioningly agree to anything a trusted figure in their life asks of them?

A fascinating twist emerges from noting the specific time that Chazal selected for the

reading of Megillat Rut, the holiday of Shavuot. Numerous commentators have pondered the connection between the two.[8] Perhaps the key lies in the fact that it was at Har Sinai that Am Yisrael declared, "נעשה ונשמע!" – we will do and we will hear, placing submission to God's will prior to, and not predicated upon, understanding it. Perhaps Rut and Noami's relationship is meant to be a metaphor for our relationship with God. Just as Rut had developed unwavering trust in Naomi, leading her to ultimately submit to whatever Naomi would suggest, so too had Am Yisrael acquired steadfast faith in God over the course of the Plagues, the Exodus, and the Splitting of the Sea, culminating in their declaration of absolute commitment to His commandments at Har Sinai. No human being deserves the kind of blind trust that Rut places in Naomi, but God does. On the holiday of Shavuot when we relive our acceptance of God and His Torah, Rut is the perfect heroine. Her traits of faith, obedience, and submission are precisely the ones to emulate in the realm of our relationship with our Creator.

Approach #3: Rut is not as self-effacing as she appears

This final approach goes in a completely different direction than either of the first two. It suggests that a close reading of the text of the Megilla reveals that Rut is a much stronger, more proactive character than she appears at first glance. First, it is Rut's own decision, and her decision alone, to cling so determinedly to Naomi. In fact, Naomi repeatedly attempts to dissuade her, yet Rut tenaciously holds fast.

More significantly, a neighbor of mine, Micah Gimpel, suggested the following fascinating read: The most disturbing scene of the Megilla is Rut's rendezvous with Boaz on his threshing floor. There are many troubling aspects[9] but for our purposes, the most problematic is Rut's obedient acquiescence to be a pawn in such a potentially humiliating, degrading plot. Wouldn't we want to teach our daughters and students to have the confidence and self-respect to resolutely refuse to participate in such a plan? How can we possibly view Rut as a heroine and role model?

What Micah pointed out is that Rut may not be as passive and docile as she appears. When Naomi describes the plan, she essentially instructs Rut to be merely a puppet, first her own and then Boaz's, with no agency of her own. Naomi directs her to bathe, anoint, dress attractively, descend to the threshing floor, lie down next to the satiated and perhaps inebriated Boaz, uncover his feet, and then await his instructions for what to do next. In other words, in Naomi's plan, Rut is to pass directly from following her (Naomi's) explicit, detailed instructions to following Boaz's without a moment to think or act on her own. And Rut dutifully assents, "כל אשר תאמרי אעשה" – all that you say I will do.[10]

Everything begins exactly according to plan. Pasuk 5 informs us, "ותעש ככל אשר צותה חמותה" – Rut does everything that her mother-in-law commanded her. She goes down to Boaz's threshing floor, uncovers his feet, and lies down beside him to await the unfolding of events. Boaz in fact awakens and is shocked to discover a woman at his feet. He inquires as to her identity, and Rut responds, "אנכי רות אמתך" – I am Rut your maidservant. What happens next is the critical turning point. According to Naomi's plan, Rut ought to be silent at this point and await Boaz's instructions. But that is not what Rut does! She continues speaking, and seizes the opportunity to voice her own hope, nay her own demand: "ופרשת כנפך על אמתך כי גואל אתה" – spread your wing over your maidservant for you are a redeemer. Rather than silently, passively await Boaz's response to discovering a woman at his feet as Naomi had instructed her, Rut veers from the script and takes matters into her own hands, demanding that Boaz do something to protect her and secure her future.[11] Just as Esther has her transformative moment in her Megilla when she ceases to follow everyone else's commands[12] and pronounces one of her own,[13] this is Rut's moment of transformation. Precisely at the moment when she might appear weakest and most submissive is exactly the moment when she charts her own future and directs the course of how it will play out. Remarkably, Boaz endorses Rut's newfound bold, assertive voice by declaring "ברוכה את לה' בתי" – blessed are you to Hashem, my daughter. He then completes the role reversal by declaring that he will do all that Rut says – "כל אשר תאמרי אעשה לך", a remarkable turnaround from Naomi's plan in which Rut was supposed to do all that Boaz instructed.[14] Even more striking is that these words echo almost verbatim the very language with which Rut initially expressed her submission to Naomi's plan – "כל אשר תאמרי אעשה".[15] The fact that Boaz now employs the identical phraseology to affirm his submission to Rut underscores the stunning reversals that have taken place between the lines of this brilliant Megilla.

Conclusion - We have explored three different approaches to understanding why Rut's seemingly self-effacing character is in fact a role model: that Rut was in fact overly meek but she was a role model and corrective for her specific era; that Rut's blind faith in Naomi models for us the kind of deep trust and obedience we should strive to develop in our relationship with God (perhaps other trusted figures in our life as well); and that a close read indicates that Rut is in truth a much more assertive character than she appears. Whichever approach resonates most with you, I hope you feel as I do – that delving into the character of Rut has enriched and deepened my appreciation of her, her Megilla, and the myriad lessons hidden within its four chapters.

[1] "ורחצת וסכת ושמת שמלותיך עליך וירדת הגורן אל תודעי לאיש… ושכבת והוא יגיד לך את אשר תעשין" (רות ג:ג-ד)

[2] Rut 3:4

[3] In theory, another approach could suggest Rut is not meant to be a role model at all. Not every character who appears in Tanach is a hero meant to be emulated. However, to me it seems clear that she is portrayed as a positive character from whom we are supposed to learn how to behave ourselves in at least some way. After all, the Megilla ends by delineating the direct line of descent from Rut to King David.

[4] See for example Shoftim 17:6 and 21:25

[5] Naomi's loss of identity is highlighted by her insisting on a name change for herself. As she and Rut are returning to Israel from the fields of Moav, Naomi tells the townspeople, "אל תקראנה לי נעמי קראן לי מרא כי המר שקי לי מאד" (א:כ) – Do not call me Naomi; call me "Bitterness (Mara)" for God has done bitter things to me. It is incredibly significant then that at the end of the Megilla (4:17), the townspeople proclaim that Rut's baby should be to Naomi a "משיב נפש" – restorer of her spirit, and they (the women of the town) are the ones who bestow upon him a name, declaring that a son has been born to Naomi – "ותקראנה לו השכנות שם לאמר ילד בן לנעמי". Through Rut and her son, Naomi's spirit, her name, and her family line have been restored.

[6] Along similar lines, Dr. Yael Ziegler also posited that Rut's historical context provides the key, but she focused on Rut as the prelude to the era of Kings, rather than as an antidote to the period of the Shoftim. She suggested that since monarchs are at such high risk of arrogance and utilizing their power to subjugate others, the Torah inserted the story of Rut immediately prior to the inception of that era as a powerful message to maintain humility and a deep sense of service to others.

[7] Mrs. Chani Poupko

[8] A quick Google search will reveal a multitude of different answers

[9] Such as: What was Naomi thinking in sending Rut out on such a mission? Does the Torah approve of using such methods? See Rav Mordechai Sabato's article https://www.etzion.org.il/en/night-threshing-floor-uncovering-motives-naomi-ruth-and-boaz

[10] Rut 3:4

[11] The specific language that Rut employs amplifies the chutzpah thinly veiled in her request. In their first interaction, Boaz praises Rut for her devotion to Naomi and blesses her that she should be recompensed by God under whose wings she has sought refuge – "ישלם ה' פעלך ותהי משכרתך שלמה מעם ה' אלקי ישראל אשר באת לחסות תחת כנפיו" (ב:יב) . In her transformational moment, Rut expresses her demand utilizing strikingly similar imagery – "ופרשת כנפך על אמתך" – spread your wing over your maidservant. Her bold message seems to be, "If you really believe I am so praiseworthy, do not leave it to God to protect me under His Divine wings; take action yourself and protect me under yours!"

[12] Esther 2:10, 2:15, 2:20

[13] Esther 4:15-16

[14] Interestingly, Megillat Esther contains almost an identical role reversal. Initially, Esther does everything Mordechai commands her, even when she is queen of the land – "ואת מאמר מרדכי אסתר עשה כאשר היתה באמנה אתו" (אסתר ב:כ). Yet, once Esther undergoes her transformation and issues a command to Mordechai, the Megilla relates: "ויעש ככל אשר צותה עליו אסתר" (אסתר ד:יז) – Mordechai did everything Esther commanded him.

[15] Rut 3:4

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Yakov Haber: Thoughts on Shavuos, Corona and Coronation

The world is, with the help of G-d and His kindness, possibly at the cusp of healing - at least for now - from the greatest epidemic that has hit humanity for decades although the danger lurks of a second breakout.[1] To be sure, the world is no stranger to tragedies of epic proportions: war, famine, disease, massacres and myriad "natural" disasters. The Jewish people especially have been victims of targeted persecution because of their religion or race throughout the ages. But a world-wide crisis of this proportion on so many planes certainly requires much reflection. Many prominent Rabbinic figures both here in Eretz Yisrael and in chutz la'aretz have voiced their suggestions as to what particular areas of avodas Hashem require improvement and which are the areas concerning which the Creator of the world and Giver of the Torah is sending us messages to improve.[2] The Tochacha of parashas B'chukosai is read before Shavuos since this holiday is also considered a Rosh Hashana (Megilla 31b), a day on which we not only celebrate the momentous event of the giving of the Torah but is also meant as a day on which to reflect on an individual and communal level as to how well we are committed to the covenant of Sinai. It is in light of this perspective that I add these humble words well aware of the fact that מי אני ומה אני כלפי רבותי החשובים שליט"א וכל שכן לומר דברי מוסר לרבים.

[R. Shimon b. Yochai taught,] "This is analogous to one who was punishing his son, and [the son] did not know why he was being beaten. After he beat him, he said to him, 'Go do what I commanded you to do for many days already and you didn't pay any attention to [it] [me].' So too all the thousands who fell [during a plague] in the days of David only fell because they did not demand the building of the mikdash. ... If even regarding the [generation] who never had a Beis Hamikdash in their time and it was not destroyed in their time, this happened to them and they were punished for note demanding it, we, in whose time it was destroyed, and we do not sufficiently mourn over it, and we do not request mercy [for its rebuilding] all the more so! Therefore the original pious ones instituted that we should pray three times a day and instituted in the amida, 'Please, Merciful One with Your abundant mercy, restore Your Presence to Zion and the sacrificial order to Jerusalem.' And they also instituted the building of Jerusalem as a separate blessing in the amida and in birchas hamazon. (Midrash Tehillim (Shochar Tov) 17)

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> R. Shimon b. Yochai taught ... "They [a large segment of the Jewish people] ultimately will despise the Kingdom of Heaven, the kingdom of the house of David and the Beis Hamikdash ... in the days of Rechav'am (Yorovam) ... Said R. Simon b. Menasia, "Israel will not see a sign of redemption (blessing) ever unless they return and request all three. This is indicated by the verse, (Hoshei'a 3:5) "Afterward the Children of Israel will return and seek out Hashem, their G-d" - this refers to the Kingdom of Heaven - "and David their king" - this refers to the kingdom of the house of David - "and they shall tremble for Hashem and His goodness (in the End of Days)" - this refers to the building of the Beis Hamikdash. (Yalkut Shimoni, Shmuel 106 from Midrash Shmuel 13 with slight differences)

The aforementioned midrashic teachings underscore the centrality of longing for geula bringing in its wake the recognition of malchus Hashem over the entire world, the restoration of the Davidic dynasty, one which represents the kingdom of Torah in this world, and the mikdash, the house serving as a place manifesting the Divine Presence specifically among G-d's beloved people whose fame and centrality affects the entire world (see Yeshayahu 56:7). The first midrash underscores the connection of a plague, or national pandemic, to an insufficient yearning for mikdash.

The State of Israel has had, in an unprecedented turn of events, had several inconclusive elections recently. A "unity" government was formed with the prime minister currently on trial for a variety of charges placing even the current government in Israel in a tenuous state of stability. In addition, almost worldwide, shuls and batei midrash were shuttered for several months. Even outdoor prayer was been banned by many governments for a time and even where allowed was been prohibited by various Rabbinic authorities. Here in Israel shuls were reopened after months of closure, subject to strict rules to avoid further spread of disease. I humbly submit that there are perhaps two crucial messages inherent in these two seemingly unrelated events.

The current State of Israel has been the subject of much hashkafic and halachic analysis. Mori v'Rabi Rav Hershel Schachter shlita has often presented his view that its existence is a partial fulfillment of the mitzvah of appointing a Jewish king, namely a Jewish government. The ideal government would be malchus beis Dovid, but even one not matching this criterion also is included in this commandment.[3] His view is agreed upon by many. Other Rabbinic authorities vociferously debate this characterization. But all agree that from a Torah perspective, it is certainly not the ideal model of government both because it is not malchus beis Dovid and - notwithstanding all of the positive religiously significant developments which were fostered by it - because it was not founded from the perspective of Torah fulfillment.[4] As people committed to Torah values, whereas we are certainly bound to be loyal to governmental authorities and, in at least the worldview in which many maintain we greatly value all that the State of Israel has accomplished for the Jewish people,[5] we certainly long for the Ribono shel olam to restore the ideal form of Jewish government. Perhaps a message inherent in the recent uncertainty regarding the State is meant to awaken us to more fully to long for the ideal Jewish malchus which we pray for every day. Granted that we value and thank Hashem for the great gift of Medinat Yisrael, but we view it as a "transitional government", one preparing the way for the ideal malchus.[6] I believe this message is all the more important for those who value the Medina so greatly. Do we sufficiently long for the ideal Torah government of the Davidic dynasty?

Our shuls and batei midrash are referred to as midkeshei me'at, mini-temples granted as a Divine gift wherein Hashem yisborach promises to rest His Shechina even during the long exile (see Megilla 29a based on Yechezkel 11:16). But here too, the ideal, glorious resting place for the Divine presence is the "bayis hagadol v'hakadosh hazeh", not just the mikdash me'at. Perhaps the events of these past few months whereby our shuls were closed to us are meant as a sign for us to redouble our efforts in praying for the mikdash hagadol in the amida, in birchas hamazon as mentioned by the above midrash and in our personal prayers. The prayer of ya'aleh v'yavo as well as the Mussaf prayer to be recited b'ezras Hashem multiple times on the upcoming holiday of Shavuos also contain these same themes.

An enlightening ruling stated in the Talmud Yerushalmi - actually relevant halachically in these past few months - is most informative. If a congregation does not have a sefer Torah, should they read the Torah reading that week from a chumash? The Yerushalmi (Megilla 3:1 quoted in Beis Yosef 143) rules in the negative since if they would do so, there would be no motivation to acquire a real sefer Torah. Even though we follow the view that we should read from a chumash without blessings (see Shulchan Aruch ibid.) so that in some manner we hear the Torah reading even though not in an ideal fashion, the Yerushalmi's message of not being comfortable with a non-ideal situation is most important and sheds light on the themes discussed above.

Rav Shimshon Pincus zt"l beautifully describes the urgency of taking advantage of the ten days of repentance with an impactful mashal I believe very relevant to the current situation as well. A king's son rebelled against him, and he was exiled from the palace. Wandering aimlessly through the forest, the prince fell into a pit. Helpless, in need of food and medical care, he desperately screamed out "Help! Help!" Sure enough, the king's entourage, making its way near the forest, heard the cries for help. Hearing his beloved son's voice, the king quickly rushed to the edge of the pit and asked, "My dear son, how can I help you?" The son answered, "Father, Your

Majesty, I need food! I need doctors!" The king quickly lowered in tons of food and commanded doctors to jump into the pit to heal his son. The king asked, "Is there anything else you need?" The son replied, "No, that's all." The king bid his son farewell saying, "Maybe next time we pass by, you'll ask for something else..." So too, explains Rav Pincus, we often solely focus on our personal needs: continued health, healing, sustenance, family etc. But we have to member to fervently, with a sense of urgency, ask our Father, the King, to "take us out of the pit!", to take us out of exile, to restore His Kingdom in the world and his Holy Temple!

[1] The idle banter of several across the world that this is just a case of world overreaction to a type of influenza does not in any way reflect the reality of what has actually happened.

[2] The very attempt at uncovering root causes for tragedy is reinforced by the oft-quoted powerful words of Rambam in hilchos Ta'aniyos. Those not possessing specialized ruach hakodesh cannot be certain that their assessment is correct, but it would appear that this does not exempt communal leaders from attempting such an analysis with all due disclaimers of possible error either made explicit or remaining implicit. In a carefully formulated statement by Rav Elyashiv zt"l and Rav Shteinman zt"l a number of years ago in calling for improvement in certain mitzvos during the Second Lebanon War, they wrote that they are not claiming to know that weakness in those areas caused the tzara, but nevertheless improvement in those areas will definitely lead to a bettering of the situation if not its elimination. It is with this spirit, I believe, that the words of our Rabbinic leaders are given and should be received.

[3]Also see Rav Chaim Jachter, "The Halachic Status of the State of Israel" available on koltorah.org.

[4] An oft-repeated phrase in the Israeli political scene is "מדינת החוק ולא מדינת הלכה". This tension most recently surfaced in barbs hurled between MK Smotrich and MK Lieberman.

[5] Just as one recent example, in this pandemic, Israel's governmental guidance saved countless lives.

[6] An apocryphal story circulating has one of the Gedolei Yisrael telling one of the prime ministers that he will "hand over the keys" to the melech hamashiach.

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subject: Rabbi Reisman's Weekly Chumash Shiur
Rabbi Yisroel Reisman - Parshas Bamidbar 5781

1 – Topic – A Thought on the Upcoming Yom Tov of Shavuos.

As we prepare for Shabbos Parshas Bamidbar and the Chag of Mattan Torah which is a time of great for Klal Yisrael tempered by great concern for the situation in Eretz Yisrael and the welfare of Acheinu Bnei Yisrael in Eretz Yisrael and all of the children in Eretz Yisrael who are facing a difficult time again after a very difficult year. Hashem Yiracheim.

Let's start by discussing Shavuos. There are really two faces to Shavuos. Shavuos is Zman Mattan Toraseinu which is of course what is most foremost on our mind, but also as the Torah points out the end of Sefiras Ha'omer, not only the counting of the Omer, but in the agricultural cycle the Omer which is brought on Pesach is the beginning of the time that Yidden eat from the new crop. The Shtei Halechem on Shavuos is the beginning of the time that Korbanos and Menachos are brought in the Bais Hamikdash from the new crop, and therefore, the Omer or the Pesach – Shavuos period is the Chag Habikkurim, it is the time that new things are brought first in our homes and then in the Bais Hamikdash. So these are the two aspects of Chag Hashavuos.

The Gemara in Maseches Menachos 45b makes the following comment. The Gemara observes that the Korban of Shavuos is brought in Parshas Emor and in Parshas Pinchas. The Gemara says (22 lines from the top) (יכול הן הן כבשים האמורים כאן הן הן כבשים האמורים בחומש הפקודים). I would think it is the same Korban, the Shavuos Korban that is mentioned in Emor and the one brought in Pinchas is it the same? You have to be careful. (אמרת כשאתה מגיע אצל פרים ואילים אינן הן). If you think when you are Mavir Sedra, you will see it is not the same. Why? In Emor it is one Par and two Ailim. In Pinchas it is two Parim and one Ayil. Says the Gemara (אלא הללו באין בגלל עצמן והללו באין בגלל לחם).

What the Gemara is saying is that there are two parts to Shavuos. (בגלל עצמן). There is the Yom Tov itself, the Chag Hashavuos of Mattan Torah and there is the Yom Tov of Yom Habikkurim the Shtei Halechem which is brought together with the two Parim.

So therefore, what the Gemara is saying is the following. We have the Yom Tov of Mattan Torah, of Shavuos which is mentioned in Parshas Emor with the other Yomim Tovim, and then we have the Yom Tov of Yom Habikkurim (וּבְיוֹם הַבִּכּוּרִים, בְּהַקְרִיבְכֶם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה). In Pinchas 28:26 it says clearly that we are talking about a Yom Tov to be Makriv a new Mincha and the Posuk in Pinchas says (וּבְיוֹם הַבִּכּוּרִים, בְּהַקְרִיבְכֶם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לה'--בְּשָׁבֻעֹתֵיכֶם). Yom Bikkurim is the day you bring a new Mincha to Hashem, (בְּשָׁבֻעֹתֵיכֶם) on your Shavuos. So that there are two faces to Chag Hashavuos.

Why do we eat Milchigs, why does Klal Yisrael have this Minhag? We find two reasons. The Rama says because we bring the Shtei Halechem, there are two breads offered on Shavuos from the new crop, so therefore, we have two Lechem. A Fleishig bread and Milchig bread (that doesn't mean that the bread is Fleishig or Milchig). It is a bread that is eaten with Fleishig and a bread eaten with Milchig so that it is K'negged the Shtei Ha'Lechem.

The Mishna Brura brings a second reason because at Mattan Torah when Moshe Rabbeinu came down Klal Yisrael had Milchigs, they didn't have Kosher Fleishigs ready for them. One reason based on one aspect of Shavuos and one reason based on the other aspect of Shavuos. So that we have these two parts to the Yom Tov that we are about to begin.

The question is why mix it together, Kabbalas Hatorah. The main moment in the history of the world accepting the Torah at Har Sinai has to be mixed with an agricultural holiday, with the celebration of the bringing of the new crop, making the new crop useable. Why mix Mattan Hatorah with anything?

The answer is there is a message as Rav Pam used to say about Shavuos. The Gemara says that every Yom Tov if you want can be Kulo L'Hashem, it can be a purely spiritual Yom Tov. Except for Shavuos. As it says in Maseches Pesachim 68b (29 lines from the top) (הכל מודים בעצרת דבעינן נמי לכם). Everyone agrees that on Shavuos you need Lachem. Why Shavuos, why Mattan Torah you have to have things that you enjoy?

Somebody might make a mistake and think that Olam Hazeh is a contradiction to Mattan Torah. That the pleasures of this world are somehow not in line with the serving of the Ribbono Shel Olam. (הכל מודים בעצרת דבעינן נמי לכם). No! By Mattan Torah the Torah is given to be observed in the world, not as a contradiction to the world. Therefore, everyone agrees that on Shavuos you have to have a Geshmake meal, something that you enjoy. Therefore, there is a mixing of the Yom Tov of Kabbalas Hatorah with the Yom Tov of a Yid who works B'olam Hazeh, works the land and does the 10 Mitzvos that a person has to do to bring bread. There is more than 10 Mitzvos, but there are at least 10 Mitzvos. There is a Mayla by Hamotzie that you should hold the bread with all 10 fingers K'negged the 10 Mitzvos that have to be performed in order to bring bread to your table. That is why it says that the Beracha of Hamotzie has 10 words in it. This is because when you look at a piece of bread you are looking at 10 Mitzvos. It is not a contradiction to Mattan Torah to have the good Gashmios of Olam Hazeh as long as it is done in the spirit of the Torah.

Along those lines, the Chasam Sofer asks a question regarding Megillas Rus. Boaz we are told was a Nasi, a Shofet, he was the judge of Klal Yisrael. He was a man in his 80's. What is he doing working in the field and sleeping in the tent in the field. Why isn't he home or in the Beis Medrash and have his workers do their work?

Enfert the Chasam Sofer, because working the land of Eretz Yisrael is a Mitzvah as Yishuv Eretz Yisrael which includes working the land. The Chasam Sofer says that it is a Mitzvah She'e Efsher Al Yidai Shaliach. This is what the Chasam Sofer says on Megillas Rus. This is taken actually from the Drashos Chasam Sofer. He says it was a Mitzvah and that is why he worked the land. It is not a Stira to Torah. It is with Torah that we serve HKB"H and we have the Geshmak of Olam Hazeh. So we stay up Shavuos night and we learn and with it we have refreshments, we have things that make us feel good in our Avodas Hashem.

2 – Topic – A second thought regarding Chag Hashavuos.

It has been noted that we celebrate Mattan Torah with the first Luchos. The first Luchos were broken. Logic would dictate to observe Mattan Torah when Moshe Rabbeinu went up to receive the second set of Luchos on Rosh Chodesh Elul and we say no. It is one long lesson. From the beginning of the first Luchos until the second Luchos came down on Yom Hakkipurim it is one long 120 day lesson of Mattan Torah. The last words in the Torah are (Devarim 34:12) (לְעֵינֵי כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל). Rashi says that it goes on the breaking of the Luchos. When the Torah ends it is Miramez to us Moshe Rabbeinu's great accomplishment that he broke the Luchos.

There is a Kasha on this. That is Moshe Rabbeinu's great accomplishment that he broke the Luchos? Moshe Rabbeinu did so much and that is what you remember him for? For breaking the Luchos? It doesn't seem to make any sense. Remember Moshe Rabbeinu for taking us out of Mitzrayim, for going up and receiving the Torah, for Davening to HKB"H all the time. What is going on?

I once saw in the Sefer Toras Chessed he says an incredible Pshat. He said that Moshe Rabbeinu came down with the Luchos. Klal Yisrael was serving the Eigel. Hashem didn't say break the Luchos. (ג' דברים עשה משה מדעתו). There are three things that Moshe Rabbeinu did on his own as it says in Maseches Shabbos 87a (8 lines from the top). He broke the Luchos on his own. HKB"H said you are right (והסכים הקב"ה). He didn't have to break the Luchos. The Luchos has a Parsha of Teshuva. He could have brought down the Luchos and have Klal Yisrael do Teshuvah.

Moshe Rabbeinu said no. Moshe Rabbeinu taught Klal Yisrael there are times in life where you can get something but if you wait and are patient, and you prepare properly, you can get something better. When it comes to ice cream, take the ice cream you get now. If it is going to take patience and work to get better ice cream then take the ice cream you got. It is good enough. Good enough is for Gashmios.

When it comes to Kabbalas Hatorah, Moshe Rabbeinu said what? A B'dieved Kabbalas Hatorah. I am going to bring down Luchos that are going to involve doing Teshuva if you want to be Mekabeil the Luchos? No!

Moshe Rabbeinu broke the Luchos and said we are going to start all over again. We are going to get new Luchos and we are going to have a new Kabbalas Hatorah. It is better to wait and do it right then to accept a B'dieved in things that are Ruchnius, things that are spiritual (יישר כחך ששברת). Moshe Rabbeinu taught us that things should be done in the Lechatchila'dika Ofen, in the best way when it comes to the serving of HKB"H. That is a lesson. The lesson in our service of HKB"H to do it in the most Lechatchila'dika way.

3 – Topic – A Thought on Parshas Bamidbar.

Let me not forget Parshas Bamidbar. We are talking about Har Sinai and Mattan Torah and Parshas Bamidbar starts with it. (וַיְדַבֵּר יְרֻוָר אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינָי). Why is it mentioning Midbar Sinai? Maybe because HKB"H knew that Parshas Bamidbar will come out around the same time as the Simcha of Kabbalas Hatorah. But what is the lesson of Bamidbar Sinai?

Says the Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7 that it says Bamidbar Sinai that a person who wants to learn Torah he has to make himself Hefker like a Midbar (וידבר ר' אל משה במדבר סיני אלא כל מי שאינו עושה עצמו כמדבר הפקר, אינו יכול לקנות את החכמה והתורה, לכך נאמר: במדבר סיני). He can't be too Makpid on his own things. The lesson here is if you want to have Hatzlacha in serving HKB"H Maisim Atzmo K'midbar, you have to put aside your own personal needs. You have to put aside the Ani of the person. My needs have to be second most important to the service of HKB"H.

It has been noted that in Parshas Chayei Sarah we learn about the extraordinary work of the extraordinary Shadchan Eliezer. Eliezer goes, Eliezer travels, Eliezer does… People ask, guess how many times it says the name Eliezer in Parshas Chayei Sarah? The answer is zero. It doesn't say his name once. It says Eved Avraham all the time. Vayomer Eved Avraham, Vayeilech Eved Avraham. It never says Eliezer. Do you know why Eliezer had such great Hatzlacha? Because there was no Ani, there was no me. He was Eved Avraham and he did what he had to do.

Klal Yisrael, we have to be Avdai Hashem, we have to serve the Ribbono Shel Olam and with that approach we go to Midbar Sinai, we go to Har Sinai, we go to Kabbalas Hatorah. Put aside the Ani. I know. It is hard to stay up Shavuos by night. It is much more enjoyable to go into a comfortable bed. Ani. No!

Imagine if G-d forbid, if Chas V'chalila all of Klal Yisrael were like you and they all went to sleep Shavuos by night. It would be a reenactment of the disaster that happened the first time. Who are the ones in Klal Yisrael that are going to stay up and go to the Bais Medrash? Other people? You!

You go to the Bais Medrash and you do what you have to do. This time Shavuos is Sunday night. Working people for the most part are off on Sunday (unless they are accountants). Working people are off on Sunday. Take a nap. Prepare. It is Sheloshes Yemai Hag'bala, take three days of naps. But by Mattan Torah you got to be awake. You got to be there. Klal Yisrael needs you! Put aside the Ani and Maisim Atzmo K'midbar. Then you will be able to have a proper Kabbalas Hatorah.

As we march towards Kabbalas Hatorah lets Daven that HKB"H should give Seichel to those in Eretz Yisrael to ignore the Kochi V'osem Yadi for wanting to do everything on their own. They should be careful with the lives of Klal Yisrael, with the Neshamos of Klal Yisrael. HKB"H should help us and we should have a Siyata Dish'maya. Our enemies should kill each other and leave us alone. If only they would fight a little more among themselves that would be wonderful and if only Klal Yisrael would not fight among themselves that would be wonderful. We have to get there. B'ezras Hashem to have a wonderful Chag Hashavuos. Hashem should help that by the time Shavuos comes this Tzarah should have passed and we should be able to successfully serve HKB"H B'simcha Rabbah. I wish everyone a Gutten Shabbos and a Gutten Kabbalas Hatorah. Make it happen!

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from: **The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust** <info@rabbisacks.org> via gmail.mcsv.net reply-to: The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust <info@rabbisacks.org> date: May 13, 2021, 10:39 AM
subject: **Shavuot Inspiration** | Download the new 'Ceremony & Celebration: Family Edition'

Shavuot in a Nutshell SHAVUOT is the second of the three biblical foot festivals (the Shalosh Regalim), falling on the 6th of Sivan (and continuing on 7th of Sivan in the diaspora). Shavuot celebrates the moment when, fifty days after the Exodus from Egypt, the Jewish People stood at Har Sinai for the Giving of the Torah. It also celebrates the wheat harvest in Eretz Yisrael. Shavuot means "weeks", as it falls seven weeks (a "week of weeks") after Pesach, the culmination of the 49-day Omer period which began on the second night of Pesach. Because of this, Shavuot is also known as "Pentecost" which means fifty in Greek (it is the fiftieth day after the completion of the counting of 49 days). Other names for Shavuot found in the Torah are Chag HaKatzir (the Festival of Reaping), and Yom HaBikkurim (Day of the First Fruits) and in the Talmud it is also known as Atzeret (refraining or holding back). This connects Shavuot to Pesach in a similar way that Shemini Atzeret is connected to Succot). We also refer to Shavuot in our prayers as Zeman Matan Torah (the Time of the Giving of the Torah). While there are no rituals associated with Shavuot in the Torah, there are several beautiful and meaningful customs that have developed to help us celebrate Shavuot. These include Tikkun Leil Shavuot (staying up all night to learn Torah), eating dairy foods, decorating the shul with flowers and greenery, and the reading of Megillat Rut.

From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks

TORAH: OUR GREATEST GIFT

Zion in Jerusalem but at Mount Sinai in the desert. The law came before the land. Therefore, though they had lost the land, they still had the law. Though they had lost the country, they still had the covenant. The law of

Israel was not like the law of every other nation – the decree of kings or the edict of a legislative assembly. It came from God Himself, the Infinite Eternal. Therefore, it could never be lost or nullified. This was when the full significance of Shavuot began to come clear. The real miracle was not the land but the law that preceded the land. Ezra and Nechemiah understood this after the Babylonian exile, as did Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai in the midst of the rebellion against Rome. Without them it is highly doubtful whether Jews or Judaism would have survived. For the better part of two thousand years Jews lost their land, and once again – as it was for the exile in Babylon – it was Torah that sustained the people as a people, giving them the assurance that one day they would return. For in truth this always was our greatest gift: the Torah, our constitution of liberty under the sovereignty of God, our marriage contract with Heaven itself, written in letters of black fire on white fire, joining the infinity of God and the finitude of humankind in an unbreakable bond of law and love, the scroll Jews carried wherever they went, and that carried them. This is the Torah: the voice of heaven as it is heard on earth, the word that lights the world.On the face of it, Shavuot is a brief festival with few distinctive practices and, at least as far as the Torah is concerned, no specific historical content. But Shavuot is the festival of Jewish identity. Judaism is supremely a religion of the land – the whole of Torah from Avraham to the death of Moshe is a journey toward it – and Shavuot was the supreme festival of the land. There were agricultural elements on Pesach and Succot also, but Shavuot was the time of the grain harvest and of bringing first fruits to the Temple and declaring: "My father was a wandering Aramean…. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt…. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey." However, from the outset Shavuot was also the festival of the Giving of the Law, seen as the culmination of the seven-week journey that began with Pesach. But every nation had laws, and for much of the biblical era, other issues, political, military and cultural, held centre-stage. The Prophets tirelessly argued that without faithfulness to God and justice and compassion to their fellow humans, Israel would eventually suffer a momentous defeat, but all too few were listening, and the reforms of Kings like Chezekiah and Yoshiyahu proved too little too late. Only with the experience of the Babylonian exile did people come to see that the law of Israel was unlike that of any other nation – not just because of its content but because of who gave it, when and where. It was given not at Mount Zion in Jerusalem but at Mount Sinai in the desert. The law came before the land. Therefore, though they had lost the land, they still had the law. Though they had lost the country, they still had the covenant. The law of Israel was not like the law of every other nation – the decree of kings or the edict of a legislative assembly. It came from God Himself, the Infinite Eternal. Therefore, it could never be lost or nullified. This was when the full significance of Shavuot began to come clear. The real miracle was not the land but the law that preceded the land. Ezra and Nechemiah understood this after the Babylonian exile, as did Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai in the midst of the rebellion against Rome. Without them it is highly doubtful whether Jews or Judaism would have survived. For the better part of two thousand years Jews lost their land, and once again – as it was for the exile in Babylon – it was Torah that sustained the people as a people, giving them the assurance that one day they would return. For in truth this always was our greatest gift: the Torah, our constitution of liberty under the sovereignty of God, our marriage contract with Heaven itself, written in letters of black fire on white fire, joining the infinity of God and the finitude of humankind in an unbreakable bond of law and love, the scroll Jews carried wherever they went, and that carried them. This is the Torah: the voice of heaven as it is heard on earth, the word that lights the world.

Deep Diving into Megillat Rut BACKGROUND The story of Ruth is one of the most beautiful in the Bible. It begins in dislocation and grief. Famine leads Elimelech, together with his wife Naomi and their two sons, to leave their home in Bet Lechem, to go to Moav to find food. There, the sons marry Moavite women, but all three men die, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law childless widows. Naomi decides to return home, and Ruth, who had married her son Machlon, insists on going with her. There, in Bet Lechem, in a field at harvest time, Ruth meets a relative of Naomi's, Boaz, who acts kindly toward her. Later at Naomi's suggestion, Ruth asks him to act the part of a kinsman-redeemer. Boaz does so, and he and Ruth marry and have a child. The book that begins with death ends in new life. It is a story about the power of human kindness to redeem life from tragedy, and its message is that out of suffering, if transformed by love, can come new life and hope. The commentators make two primary connections between Ruth and Shavuot. The first is seasonal. The key events in the book are set during the barley and wheat harvests, the time of the counting of the Omer and Shavuot itself. The second is substantive. Ruth became the paradigm case of a convert to Judaism, and to become a convert you have to enter the covenant of Sinai with its life of the commands: what the Israelites did when they accepted the Torah on the first Shavuot. THE BOOK OF LOYALTY AND LOVE All three megillot read on the pilgrimage festivals are about love: the stages of love as we experience it in our growth from youth to maturity to old age. The Song of Songs, read on Pesach, the festival of spring, is about love in the spring: the passion between two lovers that has nothing in it of yesterday or tomorrow but lives in the overwhelming intensity of today. The book is structured as a series of duets between beloved and lover, their voices loaded with desire. There is nothing in it about courtship, marriage, home-building and having children: the world of adult responsibilities. The lovers long simply to be together, to elope.

Kohelet, read on Succot, the festival of autumn, is about love in the autumn of life, as the heat cools, light fades, the leaves fall, and clouds begin to hide the sun. "Live well, with the woman you love," says Kohelet (9:9). This is love as companionship, and it is rich in irony. Kohelet is written as the autobiography of Shlomo Hamelech, the King who married seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (I Kings 11:3), and in the end concluded, "And this is what I found: woman is more bitter than death, for she is all traps, with nets laid in her heart; her arms are a prison" (Kohelet 7:26). A thousand wives will not bring you happiness. Faithfulness to one will. Ruth is about the love at the heart of Judaism, the love of summer, when the passion of youth has been tamed and the clouds of age do not yet cover the sky. Ruth is about love as loyalty, faithfulness, committing yourself to another in a bond of responsibility and grace. It is about caring for the other more than you care about yourself. It is about Ruth setting her own aspirations aside to care for her mother-in-law Naomi, bereaved as she is of her husband and two sons. It is what Boaz does for Ruth. The root a-h-v, "love," which appears eighteen times in the Song of Songs, appears in Ruth only once. By contrast, the words chessed, loving-kindness, and the verb g-a-l, "to redeem," do not appear at all in the Song of Songs, but figure in Ruth respectively three and twenty-four times. The megillot are framing devices that force us into seeing the festivals themselves in a new light. When we read the Song of Songs on Pesach it transforms our understanding of the Exodus from a political event, the liberation of slaves. Kohelet turns Succot into a philosophical reflection on the succah as a symbol of mortality, the body as a temporary dwelling. It is the sobering story of how Shlomo, wisest of men, sought to deny death by taking refuge in possessions, wives, servants and worldly wisdom, yet at every step he found himself face to face with the brevity and vulnerability of life. Only at the end did he discover that joy is to be found in simple things: life itself, dignified by work and beautified by love. Ruth likewise invites us to reframe Shavuot, seeing the making of the covenant at Sinai not simply as a religious or political act, but as an act of love – a mutual pledge between two parties, committing themselves to one another in a bond of responsibility, dedication and loyalty. The covenant at Sinai was a marriage between God and the Children of Israel. The covenant at Sinai was a bond of love whose closest analogue in Tanach is the relationship between Boaz and Ruth. One of the most sustained libels in religious history was Christianity's claim that Judaism was a religion not of love but of law; not of compassion but of justice; not of forgiveness but of retribution. The book of Ruth, read on Shavuot, is the refutation. Judaism is a religion of love, three loves: loving God with all our heart, our soul and our might (Devarim 6:5); loving our neighbour as ourselves (Vayikra 19:18); and loving the stranger because we know what it feels like to be a stranger

(Devarim 10:19). Judaism is, from beginning to end, the story of a love: God's love for a small, powerless and much afflicted people, and a people's love – tempestuous at times to be sure – for God. That is the story of Ruth: love as faithfulness, loyalty and responsibility, and as a marriage that brings new life into the world. That is the love that was consecrated at Sinai on the first Shavuot of all.

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from: Aish.com <newsletterserver@aish.com>
date: May 12, 2021, 2:38 PM
subject: Advanced Parsha - Bamidbar
Leading a Nation of Individuals
Bamidbar (Numbers 1:1-4:20)
May 9, 2021
by **Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks**

Leading a Nation of Individuals

The book of Bamidbar begins with a census of the Israelites. That is why it this book is known in English as Numbers. This raises a number of questions: what is the significance of this act of counting? And why here at the beginning of the book? Besides which, there have already been two previous censuses of the people and this is the third within the space of a single year. Surely one would have been sufficient. Additionally, does counting have anything to do with leadership?

The place to begin is to note what appears to be a contradiction. On the one hand, Rashi says that the acts of counting in the Torah are gestures of love on the part of God:

Because they (the Children of Israel) are dear to Him, God counts them often. He counted them when they were about to leave Egypt. He counted them after the Golden Calf to establish how many were left. And now that He was about to cause His Presence to rest on them (with the inauguration of the Sanctuary), He counted them again. (Rashi to Bamidbar 1:1)

When God initiates a census of the Israelites, it is to show that He loves them.

On the other hand, the Torah is explicit in saying that taking a census of the nation is fraught with risk:

Then God said to Moses, "When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each must give to God a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them." (Ex. 30:11-12).

When, centuries later, King David counted the people, there was Divine anger and seventy thousand people died.1 How can this be, if counting is an expression of love?

The answer lies in the phrase the Torah uses to describe the act of counting: se'u et rosh, literally, "lift the head."(Num. 1:2) This is a strange, circumlocutory expression. Biblical Hebrew contains many verbs meaning "to count": limnot, lifkod, lispor, lachshov. Why does the Torah not use these simple words for the census, choosing instead the roundabout expression, "lift the heads" of the people?

The short answer is this: In any census, count or rollcall there is a tendency to focus on the total - the crowd, the multitude, the mass. Here is a nation of sixty million people, or a company with one hundred thousand employees, or a sports crowd of sixty thousand. Any total tends to value the group or nation as a whole. The larger the total, the stronger the army, the more popular the team, and the more successful the company.

Counting devalues the individual and tends to make him or her replaceable. If one soldier dies in battle, another will take their place. If one person leaves the organisation, someone else can be hired to do their job.

Notoriously, too, crowds have the effect of tending to make the individual lose their independent judgment and follow what others are doing. We call this "herd behaviour," and it sometimes leads to collective madness. In 1841 Charles Mackay published his classic study, Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds, which tells of the South Sea Bubble that cost thousands of people their money in the 1720s, and the tulip mania in Holland when entire fortunes were spent on single tulip bulbs. The Great Crashes of 1929 and 2008 had the same crowd psychology.

Another great work, Gustav Le Bon's The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind (1895) showed how crowds exercise a "magnetic influence" that transmutes the behaviour of individuals into a collective "group mind." As he put it, "An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will." People in a crowd become anonymous. Their conscience is silenced. They lose a sense of personal responsibility.

Crowds are peculiarly prone to regressive behaviour, primitive reactions and instinctual behaviour. They are easily led by figures who are demagogues, playing on people's fears and their sense of victimhood. Such leaders, Le Bon noted, are "especially recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous excitable half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness,"2 a remarkable anticipation of Hitler. It is no accident that Le Bon's work was published in France at a time of rising antisemitism and the Dreyfus trial.

Hence the significance of one remarkable feature of Judaism: its principled insistence – like no other civilisation before – on the dignity and integrity of the individual. We believe that every human being was created in the image and likeness of God. The Sages said that every life is like an entire universe.3 Maimonides wrote that each of us should see ourselves as if our next act could change the fate of the world.4 Every dissenting view is carefully recorded in the Mishnah, even if the law is otherwise. Every verse of the Torah is capable, said the Sages, of seventy interpretations. No voice, no view, is silenced. Judaism never allows us to lose our individuality in the mass.

There is a wonderful blessing mentioned in the Talmud to be said on seeing six hundred thousand Israelites together in one place. It is: "Blessed are You, Lord… who discerns secrets."5 The Talmud explains that every person is different. We each have different attributes. We all think our own thoughts. Only God can enter the minds of each of us and know what we are thinking, and this is what the blessing refers to. In other words, even in a massive crowd where, to human eyes, faces blur into a mass, God still relates to us as individuals, not as members of a crowd.

That is the meaning of the phrase, "lift the head," used in the context of a census. God tells Moses that there is a danger, when counting a nation, that each individual will feel insignificant. "What am I? What difference can I make? I am only one of millions, a mere wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the sea-shore, dust on the surface of infinity."

Against that, God tells Moses to lift people's heads by showing that they each count; they matter as individuals. Indeed in Jewish law a davar she-be-minyan, something that is counted, sold individually rather than by weight, is never nullified even in a mixture of a thousand or a million others.6 In Judaism taking a census must always be done in such a way as to signal that we are valued as individuals. We each have unique gifts. There is a contribution only I can bring. To lift someone's head means to show them favour, to recognise them. It is a gesture of love.

There is, however, all the difference in the world between individuality and individualism. Individuality means that I am a unique and valued member of a team. Individualism means that I am not a team player at all. I am interested in myself alone, not the group. Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam gave this a famous name, noting that more people than ever in the United States are going ten-pin bowling, but fewer than ever are joining bowling teams. He called this phenomenon "Bowling alone."7 MIT professor Sherry Turkle calls our age of Twitter, Facebook, and electronic rather than face-to-face friendships, "Alone together."8 Judaism values individuality, not individualism. As Hillel said, "If I am only for myself, what am I?"9

All this has implications for Jewish leadership. We are not in the business of counting numbers. The Jewish people always was small and yet achieved great things. Judaism has a profound mistrust of demagogic leaders who manipulate the emotions of crowds. Moses at the Burning Bush spoke of his inability to be eloquent. "I am not a man of words" (Ex. 4:10). He thought this was a deficiency in a leader. In fact, it was the opposite. Moses did not sway people by his oratory. Rather, he lifted them by his teaching.

A Jewish leader has to respect individuals. They must "lift their heads." If you seek to lead, however small or large the group you lead, you must

always communicate the value you place on everyone, including those others exclude: the widow, the orphan and the stranger. You must never attempt to sway a crowd by appealing to the primitive emotions of fear or hate. You must never ride roughshod over the opinions of others.
It is hard to lead a nation of individuals, but this is the most challenging, empowering, inspiring leadership of all.
AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE
Why do you think a census was taken just before the inauguration of the Mishkan?
What is the difference between a great leader who gives inspiring speeches to crowds, and a dangerously dictator who gives stirring oratories to the masses?
Jewish law follows the majority rule – how can it do this while also valuing every individual's opinion? (Hint: how are halachic decisions made and recorded in the Gemara?)
NOTES
1. 2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21. 2. Gustav Le Bon, The Crowd, London, Fisher Unwin 1896, 134. 3 Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:4. 4 Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4. 5 Brachot 58a. 6Beitsah 3b. 7. Robert Putnam, Bowling Alone, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000. 8. Sherry Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other, New York, Basic Books, 2011. 10Mishnah Avot 1:14.

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from: **Rabbi Yisroel Ciner** <ciner@torah.org>
to: parsha-insights@torah.org
date: May 13, 2021, 8:38 PM
subject: Parsha Insights - Where is Your Furniture?

Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya

Parshas Bamidbar Where is Your Furniture? This weeks parsha begins the Sefer of Bamidbar. "And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Midbar (wilderness) of Sinai… saying. (1:1)"
The Ramban writes that this sefer primarily deals with the mitzvos that we were commanded to perform in the midbar and the miracles that accompanied us through our travels. The Midrash states that the Torah was given through three mediums: water, fire and the wilderness. Avraham passed through the fire of Uhr Kasdim in his steadfast refusal to deny Hashem's existence. As we left Mitzraim we passed through the waters of Yam Suf. We then traveled into and through the midbar. The Ksav Sofer explains how each of these, teach us the underlying foundations of our connection to the Torah.
The Torah is compared to water. Just as water flows from a high place to a low one, so too Torah flows from a haughty person to a humble one. The Torah was given on Har Sinai, the lowest of the mountains, to demonstrate this aspect of the Torah. In order to develop and grow in Torah, one must properly recognize his position vis-a-vis Hashem. He must realize the incredible gift that has been offered to him to connect to the will of his Creator. Only such a humble approach will allow him to properly access the Torah and thereby properly access Hashem. The Torah is compared to fire. Fire illuminates the path of life for a person and allows him to choose the proper direction. Rav Shalom gives a parable of a person who had never yet seen a movie, who wandered into a theater. Upon seeing the screen and wanting to get a better understanding of what was happening, he shined a flashlight onto the screen. The mesmerizing, moving shapes and figures turned into a blank white screen. The fire of Torah illuminates this world, and gives us the perspective to distinguish between tempting illusions and reality. The Torah was given in the midbar. This relates to the Torah being given to 'the eaters of manna'. Such people had the perspective of the proper priorities of life and that which is unimportant. They had perfect faith that Hashem would provide for their needs as the need would arise. Luxuries were seen as impediments to proper growth. There is a famous story of a wealthy businessman who was passing through Radin and took advantage of the opportunity to visit the Chofetz Chaim. He was astounded by the lack of furniture in the Chofetz Chaim's home. Unable to contain himself, he asked, "Where is your furniture?" The Chofetz Chaim responded by asking him where was his furniture. The man, a bit surprised by the question, explained that he was only passing through. The Chofetz Chaim smiled and explained that in this world, he too, was only passing through. A lesser known story is told that when his wife asked to decorate the house with wallpaper, the Chofetz Chaim suggested that they just take pages from the gemara and paste them on the wall! The time spent obtaining the necessary money to buy the wallpaper comes at the expense of learning. On the level that they were on, sacrificing that time in order to get wallpaper was tantamount to pasting the pages of the gemara on the wall. This, of course, is a level that is far beyond us. With the environment in which we were brought up, with yesterdays luxuries becoming our necessities, we would not be able to function, must less to grow, in such surroundings. Nevertheless, we must try, each on our own level, to minimize our dependence on the luxuries. The Torah, for this reason, was given in the midbar to 'the eaters of manna'. To focus on the purpose of our lives and not get sidetracked by the many distractions. Our parsha also discusses the diglei midbar' – the flags of each tribe and the formation in which they camped and traveled. Why was it necessary to have these flags and this formation?
Rav Dessler writes that, in the physical realm, there are three reasons for order and organization. 1) There is order for the sake of order. One gets enjoyment from seeing things arranged in an organized fashion. 2) There is order to enable us to find something when we need it. 3) There is order to bring a unity and an efficiency of action. An intricate piece of machinery will only function optimally if each piece is in its proper place, accomplishing its objective.
In the spiritual realm only the third aspect applies. Neither divided groups nor a confused mixture can accomplish our purpose in this world of 'kiddush shem shamayim' – sanctifying Hashem's name.
Each individual must develop according to who he is, in an environment that is conducive to, and promotes, such growth. All groups are working toward this same goal, and each is gaining and learning from the other. When there is this diversity of experiences and this diversity of situations all leading to the same point, then the greatest kiddush shem shamayim is attained.
This is what we learn from the 'diglei midbar', the formation of encampment in the midbar. As the Ramban writes, Yehuda was royalty, Yissachar- Torah, Zevulun- wealth, Reuven- tshuva, etc. Each, necessary and crucial aspects of serving Hashem. Each tribe had its path to travel on. That was their midah, their attribute, their strong point. At the same time, each midah was necessary for all of the tribes to internalize. Each contributing his area of expertise to elevate the level of the group. All simultaneously combining their diverse talents into the symphony of kiddush shem shamayim.
Elazar, the son of Aharon, was in charge of transporting the oils, the incense and the flour (4:16). The medrash relates that, although Elazar could have easily delegated the carrying to others, he carried it all himself. How did he manage this feat? The oil for the menorah was in his right hand. The incense was in his left.. The flour for the morning offering hung from his arm and that for the evening offering hung from his belt.
The Ramban explains the amounts of some of these. The incense was 365 portions (weighing close to 400 pounds!) and the oil was 183 'lug' (about 15 gallons – quite a bit of lugging!).

If Elazar needed to carry such tremendous amounts why didn't he have someone help him?! The medrash explains that from this we learn that there is no haughtiness before Hashem! Those with the proper view of serving Hashem don't see anything as a burden. Every chance to serve, even if it leaves one with flour hanging from his belt, is seen as a golden opportunity that can't be passed.

When Rav Yerucham came to Kelm he saw the Saba MeKelm carrying out the bowl of water into which the kohanim had washed their hands. When Rav Yerucham tried to take the bowl from his hands he was given a reproachful look. "You are new here… you don't yet know how things here work!" The honor of carrying out the water was not easily earned!

As we draw close to Shavuos, may we use all of our capabilities to prepare for kabalas haTorah – the receiving of the Torah- sharing our strong points with others and drawing inspiration and strength from theirs. Realizing that only through lowering oneself before the Creator does one truly become elevated.

Good shabbos.

Yisroel Ciner

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

A Concise Guide to Mahshava

Shavuot We count the seven weeks of the omer beginning at Passover. At the conclusion of the seven weeks, on the fiftieth day, we celebrate the festival of Shavuot. According to the Sages, this was the day of the revelation at Mount Sinai, when the Jewish people received the Torah, although in the Written Torah no explicit date is mentioned with regard to this event. What do we do on Shavuot? Why does the Torah have so many names for this festival? And why is it not stated explicitly that it is the day on which the Torah was given? Every year, we engage in preparations to receive the Torah, recognizing our obligation to demonstrate that we truly want it. The giving of the Torah was not a one-time event. Each day, and each year, we relive that wonderful experience of connecting to the Giver of the Torah.

What Do We Do on Shavuot? Shavuot night is a time of preparation for receiving the Torah. The giving of the Torah is not just an event that took place thousands of years ago; rather, each year on this day, we receive the Torah anew, and are like a bride entering the wedding canopy with her husband, that is, with God. On Shavuot night, the Jewish people spend their time studying the Torah, which is likened to the jewel worn by a bride: Rabbi Shimon would sit and engage in Torah study on the night when the bride joins her husband [that is, on Shavuot]. As the Sages taught: On the night before a bride is to come under the wedding canopy with her husband, all those friends [that is, Torah scholars] who are close to the bride [that is, the community of Israel] must remain with her all night and rejoice with her during her preparations. They engage in the Torah, Prophets, and Writings, in interpretations of the verses, and in the concealed wisdom, because these are her enhancements and jewels. She enters and stands at the head of her attendants and is adorned by them. She rejoices with them all that night, and the next day she enters the wedding canopy accompanied by them. They are known as the wedding party. When she enters the wedding canopy, the Holy One, blessed be He, asks about them and blesses them, and crowns them with the crown of the bride. Fortunate is their lot. Those who study Torah on this night receive protection: Sit, honored ones, sit, and we will renew the preparation of the bride on this night. As everyone who joins her on this night will be protected, both above and below, for the entire year, and will end his year in peace. With regard to such people it is written (Psalms 34:8–9): "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them. Consider and see that the

Lord is good." (Zohar 1:8a)

Beyond feeling joy and gratitude at having received the Torah, we must strive to make it a meaningful part of our lives. Shavuot is the day of judgment with regard to the extent of our connection to Torah: One is obligated to greatly rejoice on this festival because it is the day on which we merited to receive the crown of Torah…. Nevertheless, it is written: "Rejoice with trembling" (Psalms 2:11); this joy is a spiritual joy of thanks and praise to God for giving us the Torah. One's heart is roused and he resolves to become sanctified, to rectify his ways, and to be crowned with the crown of Torah, in order to fulfill: "And you shall ponder it day and night" (Joshua 1:8). For this holy day is the day of judgment. (Rabbi Yeshaya HaLevi Horowitz, Shenei Luĥot HaBerit, Masekhet Shavuot, Ner Mitzva)

Names of the Festival: Shavuot Why is this festival named after the seven weeks that were counted starting from Passover, which culminate on this day? These weeks build up the bond of love between us and God. We renounce all else for the sake of our love for Him. The counting of these weeks is similar to the counting of the seven days [free of menstrual blood] before a wedding: The counting of weeks is to teach us that at the giving of the Torah we became joined to God like a bride entering the wedding canopy…. Now she will direct her love to him alone, and therefore she counts seven days especially for this bridegroom…. In the same way, aside from our obligation to observe the mitzvot, we became obligated to direct our love to Him alone. The seven weeks symbolize the period of preparation and the bestowal of our love upon God. This is why the festival is called Shavuot: Since it is not an easy matter for a person to direct his love to God like a woman does toward her husband, God commanded us to count seven weeks [shavuot]. This is why the festival is called Shavuot, that is, the Festival of Weeks, and not the Festival of Days [even though the days are also counted during the omer]. It is to enable us to understand that we must direct our love to God and restrain ourselves [ne'etzar] before Him [to disconnect from all mundane matters in order to concentrate on God]. This is why this festival is called Atzeret by the Sages; this is the purpose of Shavuot. (Netziv, Ha'amek Davar, Numbers 28:26) Names of the Festival: Atzeret The Sages called the festival of Shavuot: Atzeret [literally: restraint or cessation], because there are no specific mitzvot associated with the festival through which our connection to God is expressed. Therefore, it is a unique day, as the illumination that comes from above is not limited to specific types of connections. There are two types of divine light: that which comes as a result of observing the mitzvot, and that which is tied to a particular time: Why is Shavuot called Atzeret [in the Mishna], and likewise, why is the festival on the eighth day of Sukkot called Atzeret [see Leviticus 23:36]? There are two lights that the Creator shines upon the Jewish people. He shines the first one upon them because they fulfill His mitzvot. The other is not connected to the observance of mitzvot; rather, it comes as a result of the abundance of holiness at specific times. Now we will explain the difference between them: The light that comes as a result of the observance of mitzvot is limited and finite, as the mitzvot themselves are finite [that is, they each have a defined time, place, and procedure]. But the light that comes as a result of abundant holiness has had no limits set upon it. When the divine light is revealed through a certain mitzva, the illumination corresponds to the mitzva and is therefore limited. But illumination that is not linked to a particular mitzva is

unlimited: On Sukkot and Passover the light shines due to the mitzvot that are fulfilled on these days, for example, the mitzvot of sukka and lulav on Sukkot and the mitzva of matza on Passover, in addition to the other mitzvot associated with these days. But on Shavuot and Shemini Atzeret, there are no unique mitzvot, and the light on these days has had no limits set upon it. On these days of unlimited illumination, we must direct the light in accordance with our needs. The term Atzeret refers to the restraint and limitation of the light in furtherance of a certain purpose. We must limit the light until the upper and lower worlds receive it, for if the light is unlimited, the lower worlds cannot hold it. Each individual must limit the light to the matter that he is in need of, for example, wisdom, children, life [health], or livelihood. For this reason these two festivals, that is, Shavuot and the eighth day of Sukkot, are called Atzeret. The word Atzeret hints to restraint and limitation, from the term: "And [the plague] was stopped [vate'atzar]" (Numbers 17:13). We must restrain and limit the light. (Rabbi Levi Yitzĥak of Berditchev, Kedushat Levi, Numbers, Shavuot) Why Is It Not Written in the Torah That Shavuot Is the Festival of the Giving of the Torah? Is the day on which we received the Torah a joyous one? The gentiles did not want to receive it. In a certain sense it is the day we accepted upon ourselves obligations. Of course, we have accepted the Torah, and we rejoice over having received it. But since it is a day that also contains the necessity of servitude to God, the date is not explicitly mentioned in the verses that deal with the festivals. God gave the times for the festivals, which are the joy of Israel, as they merited receiving goodness. For example, the verse states with regard to Passover that Israel left the house of bondage, and with regard to Sukkot that "I had the children of Israel dwell in booths" (Leviticus 23:43)…. But on Shavuot, God gave us the Torah, which is a burden on Israel. Indeed, the nations of the world did not want to receive it. Even though we say: "The time of the giving of our Torah" (Shavuot prayer), that is, we ourselves accepted the Torah, saying: "We will perform and we will heed" (Exodus 24:7), nevertheless, God, who gave us the Torah, held the mountain over the children of Israel to force them to accept the Torah,26 because it is a burden upon them How could the time of the giving of the Torah be written in the Torah when God gave it with a decree against man? (Maharal, Tiferet Yisrael 27)

A fixed date limits the event that is said to have taken place on that date. One should accept the Torah every day and become renewed by it. Therefore, the Torah does not specify a date on which the Torah was given. God did not want to limit the giving of the Torah to a specific day because on every day of the year one should feel as though he has received the Torah from Mount Sinai that very day…. If so, the Torah is given every day to those who study it; therefore, it is not fitting to specify the day on which it was given. With regard to this, our Sages said (see Rashi, Deuteronomy 26:16) that the words of Torah should be for you as if they were brand new. (Rabbi Shlomo Efrayim Luntschitz, Keli Yakar, Leviticus 23:17)

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from: Ohr Somayach <ohr@ohr.edu>
date: May 13, 2021, 7:00 AM
subject: Talmud Tips - Meron 2021
For the week ending 15 May 2021 / 4 Sivan 5781
Meron 2021
by Rabbi Moshe Newman

These words are written while funerals are still taking place and so many families are joined by the entire Jewish People, who mourn the tragic and unfathomable loss of life at Mount Meron on Lag B'Omer this year. And there are many injured individuals — both physically and emotionally — whom we pray will be healed by the Healer and the healers quickly and completely. But here I would like to share a recent conversation I had with a colleague, in the hope that it will inspire if only one person in a small way to strive for a future that will be as bright for our nation as it was at the time of the Beit Hamikdash.

A few weeks ago, in Talmud Tips for Yoma 16-22, in an article titled "Personal Space," we addressed the nature of one of the miracles that took place then and there: Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav, "When they stood, they were extremely crowded, but when they bowed down they had a lot of room." There we cited Rashi's explanation that although it was extremely crowded in the Beit Hamikdash, there was nevertheless a miraculous expansion of one's personal space for prostration in order to say Vidui — a verbal confession to Hashem of one's sins. The person would miraculously have full use of a surrounding daled amot (four cubits) in which to prostrate and verbally confess, without a concern that the person nearest him would be within earshot and be able to hear this private admission — a factor which could potentially inhibit a person's confession due to embarrassment of others hearing his verbalizing his personal transgressions.

It has been reported that many survivors who were present at Mount Meron who felt certain of imminent passing from this world said Shma Yisrael, the traditional act of a Jew taking his final breath. Presumably, they also said or thought whatever type of Vidui was possible under the constraints of time and place of the sudden and swift tragic event.

A few days ago, a reader of this column reminded me of what I wrote only a few short weeks earlier, that Rashi explains the Rav Elazar's words "They would stand in a crowded manner" (in the Beit Hamikdash) as follows: " The word for "crowded" in the text is tzafufim, which Rashi says is based on the Hebrew root-word tzaf, which means "to float." He explains that the multitude of people in the Beit Hamikdash were so crowded that the physical human pressure on all sides caused them to be lifted from the ground and to be "floating" in the air without their feet being on the ground. I related there my own experiences, as well as those of my wife and friends who have attended funerals of great rabbis in Jerusalem over the years, which at times included turnouts of people that numbered in the hundreds of thousands. And sometimes, the scene being terrifying, with being lifted from our feet and moved like a wave to a place some distance away. For anyone who has not experienced this feeling of helplessness, it reminded me of driving a car on ice in my youth, when it was futile and meaningless to try and steer or use the brakes, due to a lack of traction and the "feet" of the car not making proper contact with the street. At least once I ended up in a shallow (fortunately!) ditch on the roadside. I am not advocating for either being or not being in such a crowd — especially when it involves a mitzvah — but one should at least be aware of what might happen and take necessary precautions as possible.

I replied to the reader that I appreciate his appreciation for having learned something from the "Torah Tips" article, and that after the horrific Meron incident I wanted to share an additional insight I had while crying in shock. In the Beit Hamikdash, despite the squeezing pressure experienced by the entire nation standing there (to be more exact, they were floating above ground) — there is no mention that anyone was ever injured in the slightest. I suggested that this great safety was also a display of another miraculous act by Hashem. He protected His nation from harm in "His house." But that was then and there. May we merit the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash and the renewal of Hashem once again showing us great miracles emanating from His gracious Countenance toward us — maintaining peace throughout the world and safety for all of us in all places and at all times. Amen.

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from: Chanan Morrison <ravkooklist@gmail.com>
reply-to: rav-kook-list+owners@googlegroups.com
to: Rav Kook List <Rav-Kook-List@googlegroups.com>
date: May 13, 2021, 5:55 AM
subject: [Rav Kook Torah] Shavuot: Seeing Sound

Shavuot: Seeing Sound

וְכָל־הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת־הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת־הַלַּפִּידִם וְאֵת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר.

"And all the people saw the sounds ..." (Exod. 20:15).

The Midrash calls our attention to an amazing aspect of the revelation at Sinai: the Jewish people were able to see what is normally only heard. What does this mean?

Standing near the Source

At their source, sound and sight are united. Only in our limited, physical world, in this alma deperuda (disjointed world), are these phenomena disconnected and detached. It is similar to our perception of lightning and thunder, which become increasingly separated from one another as the observer is more distanced from the source.

If we are bound and limited to the present, if we can only perceive the universe through the viewpoint of the temporal and the material, then we will always be aware of the divide between sight and sound. The prophetic vision at Mount Sinai, however, granted the people a unique perspective, as if they were standing near the source of Creation. From that vantage point, they were able to witness the underlying unity of the universe. They were able to see sounds and hear sights.

God's revelation at Sinai was registered by all their senses simultaneously, as a single, undivided perception.

(Gold from the Land of Israel (now available in paperback) p. 135. Adapted from Mo'adei HaRe'iyah, p. 491)

See also: Revealing Our Inner Essence

From: torahweb@torahweb.org
to: weeklydt@torahweb.org
date: May 12, 2021, 3:13 PM
subject: Rabbi Benjamin Yudin - Petty Cash or Mega Millions

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

Petty Cash or Mega Millions

This year, as in most years, we read Parshas Bamidbar before the yom tov of Shavous. This is found in Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 428:4) which teaches "manu v'atzru" - count and celebrate the holiday of Shavous. The Gemara (at the end of Megillah) teaches that we should have a buffer, a separation, between the curses that were read in Parshas Bechukosai and the holiday of Shavous.

I'd like to suggest another reason. Bamidbar, which literally means "in the desert", represents the sheer sense of dependency that the Jewish people had on Hashem during their forty-year trek in the desert. Devarim (8:15) describes the midbar as "The great and awesome wilderness- of snake, fiery serpent, and scorpion, and thirst where there was no water - Who brings forth water for you from the rock of flint, Who feeds you manna in the wilderness, which you forefathers knew not."

The Gemara (Yoma 76a) relates that the students of R' Shimon bar Yochai asked him, given there were so many miracles associated with the manna, why did Hashem not give them their allocation of manna once a year and it would have stayed fresh the entire year? He answered with a parable: the king who supported his son by giving him an annual stipend was visited by the prince, but once a year. When he changed his allocation and provided for his son on a daily basis, his son would then visit his father every day. Similarly, Hashem allocated manna daily in order to internalize within the millions of recipients their total reliance on Him. This feeling of total reliance is a prerequisite for our accepting His Torah.

The Mechilta (in Parshas Yisro) describes in detail the events that took place on the days preceding the revelation at Sinai. On the fifth of Sivan the nation experienced an inaugural ceremony as a prerequisite for Matan Torah. Moshe wrote and read to the people Sefer Habris -the Torah starting from Bereshis until Sinai. The Jewish people who underwent conversion at Sinai pronounced their acceptance of mitzvos with the declaration of "naasah v'nishma - we will do and we will listen". Offerings were brought; blood was sprinkled on the people. Moshe then declared, "behold you are inextricably bound to Hashem, tomorrow come and receive the entirety of His Torah."

How does one become bound to Hashem? The Gemara (Yevomos 64a) teaches in the name R' Yitzchak, "why were each of the Avos and Imahos barren? Because Hashem desires the prayers of the righteous." The Maharal, in his commentary on this Gemara, teaches that prayer was the great connector which created the constant bond between the barren matriarchs and patriarchs, and Hashem.

One week after we left Egypt we experienced the miraculous splitting of the Sea. The Medrash (Shemos Raba 21:5) teaches in the name of R' Yehoshua Ben Levi, to what may it be compared? To a king who was traveling and heard the cries of a princess begging for help from robbers. The king heard and saved her from them. A short time later, the king was interested in having a relationship with her, but she was not interested. The wise king created the situation again that she would be in danger, and once again he responded to her cries. Similarly, when the Jewish nation were severely persecuted by the Egyptians, the Torah tells us (at the end of chapter 2 in Shemos), "the Children of Israel groaned because of the work, and they cried out; their outcry went up to G-d". Hashem heard their deep-felt pain and suffering. Thereupon, He brought ten miraculous plagues, punitive to the Egyptians and establishing a relationship with the fledgling Jewish nation. When they left Egypt, Hashem desired to again hear their voices in praise and thanksgiving. Unfortunately, this did not come. Hashem therefore orchestrated that Pharoh and the Egyptians should pursue them so that He would deliver the Jewish nation from the ensuing danger. Miraculously splitting the sea, He evoked from them the song of Thanksgiving, expressed with the same enthusiasm that they had prior demonstrated in Egypt.

Prayer, as the Maharal teaches, creates a bond. During the difficult months of COVID, experiencing the death of many (and especially gedolim) and many seriously sick individuals, we davened with great fervor and emotion. The verse (Shemos 12:30) "for there was not a house where there was no corpse" was acutely felt. Now that we are privileged to have a vaccine, our prayers are not the same. Unfortunately, there is a mindset of "getting back to normal". What each individual will personally learn from COVID is something that they must grapple with by themselves. However, I'd like to suggest that collectively, one lesson that we can all learn is to attempt to keep the strong connection to Hashem through prayer. When one, G-d forbid, survives a car accident, they recite Birkas haGomel and Nishmas. Think about it: if one was not in a car accident, should they not thank Hashem all the more?!

As we are emerging from COVID and our teffilos are "getting back to normal", perhaps one reason Klal Yisroel has experienced the tragedy in Meron and a war in Israel is to remind us about the need for, and importance of, constantly upgrading of our teffilos.

I'd like to strongly recommend that we daven more slowly. Having those additional minutes will give us the opportunity to focus on the meaning and understanding of our prayers. What a different connection there is if one actually understands what he is asking for in each of the nineteen blessing of the Shemone Esrei. I believe that it is most reasonable to allocate no less than fifteen minutes from the beginning of berachos to Yishtabach, enabling the tzibur to actually appreciate the praises being offered to Hashem, reminding us of the privilege it is to pray before Whom we are praying. The Shulchan Aruch (51:8) teaches that "one

should not say the Pesukei D'Zimrah verses rapidly, but at a leisurely pace". The Mishneh Berurah (20) teaches that one should recite the words as if he were counting money. Ask yourself: are you counting small change, so that if you miss a few it is relatively inconsequential, or are you counting hundred-dollar bills? He heard our voices in COVID, may we be privileged to maintain the connection and the fervor.

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Shavuot Edition, 4 Sivan, 5781 | May 15 2021

Rabbi Zecharia Wallerstein

My Daughter, Ruth

As Boaz is told by his servant overseeing the harvesters that Ruth, a young Moabite girl, has entered his field to harvest grain, he approaches her and says, “Hear me well, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field, and do not leave here, but stay close to my maidens” (Ruth 2:8). The Midrash explains that Boaz told this to Ruth as the other harvesters had conspired to physically evict her from the field. Believing her to be a Moabite, they were vehemently opposed to her collecting from the field along with Jews. But Boaz reassured Ruth that she had nothing to worry about. She would be safe under his auspices as he was looking after her well-being. As Ruth heard the kind-hearted words of Boaz, she bowed to the ground and said, “Why have I found favor in your eyes that you should take special note of me even though I am a foreigner?” (ibid. v.10). Herein lays the number one key ingredient in chinuch: noticing a student and giving him or her recognition. When Ruth felt that Boaz was especially looking after her and caring for her, she said, “You have comforted me…you have spoken to the heart of your maidservant…” (ibid. v.13). How do you console someone who feels left out? When you see a child at risk, how do you open the conversation? I was once asked by a parent, “What did you do to help my daughter? What is the template? You changed her whole life!” I said to her, “Look in Megillas Ruth. The Pasuk says that Ruth was comforted because Boaz spoke to her heart. He realized that she was special.” The key to parenting and chinuch is to making children feel cared for and special. “Rebbe loves me! Morah loves me!” But how exactly did Boaz speak to Ruth’s heart? What did he say which so powerfully and effectively made her feel special? One word – “Biti,” my daughter. Boaz’s opening words to Ruth say it all. How different would it be if when a parent wished to call over his or her child, they would say, “My daughter, Miriam, come here right now! My son, Chaim, come here right now!” If the same parent would open a conversation with the words, “My daughter,” or “My son,” their feelings would change and their child’s response would likely be positively different. But why in fact did Boaz give Ruth so much attention? What did he see in her that no one else did? Boaz realized where she had come from and how much she had given up. She was a female Avraham Avinu. She left her homeland, her birthplace and her father’s house. She gave up everything and loyally clung to Naomi as the two of them journeyed to

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https://www.yeshiva.co/ask/58788
Shavuot
Torah-giving not explicit in Tora on Shavuot+ Why "Atzeret"?
Rabbi Ari Shvat
Nisan 22, 5781
Question
A couple of important and basic question: What are the explanations about why Shavuot is also called by the name “Atzeret” (where is the first time it was called it and by who?)? Does it have something to do with the completion of the Sefirat haOmer ? Or what makes Shavuot “atzeret” ?
Another question: why does the Torah not mention that Ma’amad Har Sinai and the giving of the Torah took place in the holiday of Shavuot, but rather in other terms (completion of the Sefirat haOmer, the harvest of the fruits ...) ? How are these other terms connected to Ma’amad Har Sinai ... given that the best known aspect of the holiday is the Giving of the Torah! Please, I’d like to have as many explanations (if there are divergences) / sources as possible!
Answer
Atzeret literally means "the end" from the root: ATzR= "stop". Accordingly, just as Shmini Atzeret is the 8th day and end of Sukkot, already chazal (Mishna, Rosh HaShana 1, 2) in the Oral Law, refer to the end of the Pesach period after 7 weeks (not days, as in Sukkot!), with the 50th day of Atzeret, the beginning of the 8th week. All explanations of this Omer period, deal with the gradual process of spiritual independence and freedom, which sees the Pesach period as climaxing with Shavuot. The Yalkut Shimoni on Pinchas (782) explains that actually Shmini Atzeret should have also been the 8th week (and not 8th day) counting from the 1st day of Sukkot, but God didn't want to trouble us during the rainy season to come twice to Jerusalem.
R. Ovadia Sforno explains that the Shavuot was "supposed to" be called Atzeret already in the Written Torah, for it also means "holy gathering" (= all "stop" their regular actions and "stop" to meet together), for that was what happened at Sinai, but when 3,000 people worshiped the Golden Calf there, and ruined the "holy gathering", that term was not used.
All Torah holidays represent a national, historical and religious event, as well as an annual agricultural event. This isn't felt that much outside of the Land of Israel, where the climate and agricultural seasons may differ greatly from where the holiday was, and today- once again is, meant to be observed, in Israel.
Regarding the date of the Torah giving, there is also an opinion in the Talmud (Shabbat 87b) that the Torah was given on the 7th of Sivan. Similarly, when the Sanhedrin would consecrate Rosh Chodesh through witnessing the new moon, the holiday could come out anywhere between the 5-7 of Sivan (depending if Nissan and/or Iyar were 30 days). Accordingly, the 50th day may not necessarily fall on the day the Torah was given in the original year of the exodus! The Magen Avraham (494, 1) explains that's why the holiday is called in Ya'aleh v'Yavo: "Zman Matan Toratenu"= the time/period (and not "the day"!) of the giving of our Torah, for it may not be the exact date, but it is the period of time (Pesach and Shavuot were also worded accordingly).

Cutting hair after lag bomer
Rabbi David Sperling
Iyyar 17, 5772
Question Is it permissable for a woman to cut her hair after Lag Bomer?
Answer Shalom,
During 33 days during the time of counting the Omer, we refrain from haircuts and weddings (and certain other celebrations) as a sign of semi-mourning for the death of Rabbi Akiva's students. The widespread custom is that women refrain from haircuts like men. (There are exceptions, but they do not seem to apply to your question).
There are many customs as to when during the 49 days of the counting of the Omer we observe days of mourning. Some people start this semi-mourning period from the beginning of the Omer until the 33rd day - Lag B'Omer, in which case they may certainly get a hair-cut after Lag B'Omer. In fact, the Ashkenazim who observe these days cut their hair from the day of Lag B'Omer itself (from the morning, not the evening). Sephardim wait until the morning of the 34th day (the day after Lag B'Omer).
Others, however, start their semi-mourning from Rosh Chodesh Iyar and continue it until 3 days before the festival of Shavu'ot. (There is a variation on this custom that counts from the 2nd day of Rosh Chodesh until the day before Shavu'ot). According to this tradition, one would not cut their hair after Lag B'Omer. The Ashkenazim who hold according to this opinion may cut their hair on Lag B'Omer itself (in the daytime) but not the days after - until reaching the days before Shavu'ot.
There are others who refrain from haircuts during the entire Omer period until the day before Shavu'ot, for reasons based on the Kabbalah.
So, in short, the answer to your question depends on your custom. If you have no set practice, then if you are Sephardi, you should adopt the

practice of allowing haircuts after Lag B'Omer. If you are Ashkenazi, you may certainly get a haircut on Lag B'Omer day itself (in the daytime), and if you started the semi-mourning from straight after Passover, may get a haircut any day (or night) after Lag B'Omer. If you started the semi-mourning period from Rosh Chodesh you should either get a haircut on Lag B'Omer itself, or wait until just before Shavu'ot.
Blessings.

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PARSHAT NASO - Intro to Sefer Bamidbar

Parshat Naso contains what appears to be a very strange progression of topics. After all, what logical connection exists between:

* the duties of the Leviim in chapter 4
* laws concerning "korban asham" in chapter 5
* the laws concerning a "sotah" in chapter 5
* the laws of a "nazir" in chapter 6
* "birkat kohanim" in chapter 6
& * the dedication ceremony of the Mishkan in chapter 7?

Certainly, if we use our imagination, we could suggest some tangential connections; but the fact remains - at first glance, all of these various 'parshiot' appear to very unrelated.

So why does the Torah record them together?

To your surprise, this week's shiur will NOT explain why they are indeed connected. Instead, we will do exactly the opposite - we will suggest a reason for why these parshiot do NOT follow in logical progression!

To explain why, we will study the overall structure of Sefer Bamidbar - in search of its unifying theme. While doing so, we will uncover a rather fascinating pattern - that will explain why it becomes so difficult to find a unifying theme for Sefer Bamidbar.

INTRODUCTION

In our Parsha series thus far, our approach to the study of Chumash has been based on the assumption that each "sefer" carries a unique theme. To uncover those themes, we have studied the progression of 'parshiot' of each Sefer.

[For a quick review, we could 'oversimplify' and summarize as follows: Breishit focused on BECHIRA, Shmot on GEULAH, and Vayikra on KEDUSHA.]

Following this methodology, we would expect that a unifying theme for Sefer Bamidbar could be found as well. However, as we will see, finding such a theme for Sefer Bamidbar will be much more difficult, for the progression of many of its 'parshiot' appears to be rather arbitrary.

To demonstrate this difficulty, we have already cited (in our opening paragraph) an example from Parshat Naso. Let's take another example from Parshat Shlach, where the story of the 'spies' (see chapters 13->14) is followed by several totally unrelated mitzvot (see chapter 15):

* the laws of "nesachim" for korbanot
* the laws of separating "challah" from dough
* laws concerning korbanot "chatat" of the nation
* the story of one who publicly defiled the sabbath
* the mitzvah of tzizit

[A similar phenomenon occurs in chapters 28 & 29 in Parshat Pinchas as well re: the laws of the “musafim”.]

To complicate manners, we also find that some of the laws that are recorded in Sefer Bamidbar had already been mentioned in Sefer Vayikra! [e.g. 5:5-7 compare w/Vayikra 5:20-25]

So what's going on in Sefer Bamidbar?

To answer this question, we must undertake a comprehensive analysis of the book.

DIVIDE & CONQUER

To begin our analysis, we must differentiate between the two basic types of 'parshiot' that we encounter when we study Chumash in general, and in Sefer Bamidbar in particular:

1) **NARRATIVE** - i.e. the ongoing STORY of Chumash

2) **COMMANDMENTS** - i.e. the MITZVOT that God commands Bnei Yisrael to keep for all generations.

In our series thus far, we have shown how each "sefer" of Chumash has been (primarily) either one type, or the other. For example:

* Sefer Breishit was primarily NARRATIVE - i.e. the STORY of the Creation and God's covenant with the Avot.

* Sefer Shmot was also primarily NARRATIVE (the story of the Exodus, etc.), even though it included numerous mitzvot that were presented as an integral part of that narrative. [For example, the Ten Commandments are recorded as an integral part of the story of Ma'amad Har Sinai.]

* Sefer Vayikra was primarily MITZVOT - presented in thematic order (even though it did include two very short narratives).

How about Sefer Bamidbar?

As we will see, it definitely contains BOTH narrative and mitzvot. However, the relationship between its narrative and those mitzvot is rather confusing.

To complicate matters, Sefer Bamidbar also contains two types of mitzvot:

“**mitzvot l’sha’ah**” – commandments that applied only to the generation of the desert (but not to future generations)

"**mitzvot l'dorot**" - commandments that apply to future generations as wekk

To clarify this distinction, here are a few examples:

- **MITZVOT L'SHA'AH:**
* Organizing the camp around the Mishkan (chapters 1->4)
* sanctifying the Leviim (chapter 8)
* Taking the census in chapter in chapter 26.

- MITZVOT L'DOROT:
* the laws of "sotah" (chapter 5)
* the laws of "nazir" (chapter 6)
* the laws of "korbanot tmidim u'musafim" (chaps. 28->29).]

As the "mitzvot l'sha'a" are essentially an integral part of the ongoing narrative, in our analysis we will simply treat them as part of the ongoing narrative of the Sefer.

In contrast, most of the "mitzvot l'dorot" in Sefer Bamidbar don’t appear to have anything to do with the ongoing naarative! In fact, it seems more like they ‘interfere’.

To explain how, the following outline charts the progression of topics Sefer Bamidbar, highlighting this contrast by recording the MITZVOT L'DOROT in CAPS.

As you study this outline, note the logical flow of topic within its narrative, in contrast to the 'random' progression of its mitzvot.

CHAPTER	TOPIC
1->4	Organizing the camp
5	KORBAN ASHAM
	LAWS OF 'SOTAH'
6	LAWS OF 'NAZIR'
	BIRKAT KOHANIM
7	Dedication of Mishkan
8	The appointment of the Leviim
9	Offering Korban Pesach in the desert / Travelling following the "anan"
10	Gathering camp by trumpet / "chatzotrot" Leaving Har Sinai (on 20th of Iyar)
11	Complaints during the journey ("mitoninim", "mitavim", etc.)
12	Complaints against Moshe (sin of Miriam)
13	Sin of the 'spies' ("chet ha'meraglim")
14	The punishment: 40 years' wandering
15	LAWS OF THE 'NESACHIM' (wine & flour offering)
	LAWS RE: 'CHALA'
15	LAWS RE: KORBAN OF THE 'EYDA'
	LAWS RE: DESECRATING SHABBAT
	LAWS OF TZIZIT
16-17	Korach's rebellion
18	LAWS RE: KOHEN'S COMPENSATION
19	LAWS RE: TUMAH CAUSED BY A DEAD BODY
20-21	Events of the 40th year: death of Miriam; the "mei mriva" incident; (Moshe's sin) death of Aharon; conquest of Transjordan, etc.
21-24	Story of Bilam & Balak
25	Sin of Baal P'or and the act of Pinchas
26	The census for inheriting the Land
27	Transfer of leadership from Moshe->Yehoshua
28-29	LAWS OF THE KORBAN TAMID & MUSAF
30	LAWS RE: 'NEDARIM' [VOWS]
31	War against Midyan
32	Inheritance of Reuven & Gad, & half of Menashe
33	Summary of the journey through the desert
34	Guidelines for upcoming conquest of the Land
35	Cities of the Levites, and cities of Refuge
36	Inheritance issues re: to daughters of Tzlofchad

Before you continue, review this table once again, but this time ignoring all of the topics in CAPS - while noting how the narratives (that remain) comprise a congruent story; i.e. of Bnei Yisrael's journey from Har Sinai (through the desert) until they reach Arvot Moav (some forty years later).

Hence, if we simply 'filter out' the "mitzvot l'dorot' from Sefer Bamidbar, that story (of what transpired as they traveled for forty years through the desert) emerges as its primary topic.

ALMOST LIKE SEFER SHMOT

As such, the style of Sefer Bamidbar appears to be most similar to Sefer Shmot. Just as Sefer Shmot describes Bnei Yisrael's journey from Egypt **to** Har Sinai - plus various MITZVOT; so too Sefer Bamidbar describes Bnei Yisrael's journey **from** Har Sinai towards Eretz Canaan - plus various MITZVOT.

However, there still exists a major difference in style between these two books, in regard to the relationship between the MITZVOT and the STORY in each book. Whereas the "mitzvot l'dorot" in Sefer Shmot form an integral part of its narrative, most of the "mitzvot l'dorot" in Sefer Bamidbar appear to be totally unrelated (or at best tangentially related) to its ongoing narrative.

In other words, the mitzvot in Sefer Shmot 'fit' - while the mitzvot in Sefer Bamidbar don't!

Furthermore, when you take a careful look at the various mitzvot l'dorot in Sefer Bamidbar (see outline above), you'll notice how most of them would have fit very nicely in Sefer Vayikra!

INTENTIONAL 'INTERRUPTIONS'

To appreciate these observations, review the above outline once again, this time noting how the ongoing story in Sefer Bamidbar is periodically INTERRUPTED by certain MITZVOT, while the topic of those mitzvot is usually totally unrelated to that ongoing narrative.

To illustrate how this style is unique to Sefer Bamidbar, let's compare it to the respective structures of Sefer Shmot and Sefer Vayikra.

Sefer Shmot records the story of Bnei Yisrael's redemption from Egypt (chapters 1->13), their subsequent journey to Har Sinai (chapters 14->17), and the events that took place at Har Sinai (chapters 18->40 / Matan Torah, chet ha'egel, and building the Mishkan). As an integral part of that story, Sefer Shmot also records certain mitzvot that were given at that time. For example, as Bnei Yisrael leave Egypt, they are commanded to keep the mitzvot of Pesach and Chag Ha'matzot (that commemorate that event). At Ma'amad Har Sinai, the Torah records the Ten Commandments and the laws of Parshat Mishpatim, for they are part of that covenant (see 24:3-7). In reaction to "chet ha'egel" (or to perpetuate Ma'amad Har Sinai), Bnei Yisrael are given the laws of the Mishkan.

Hence we conclude that the MITZVOT in Sefer Shmot form an integral part of its ongoing narrative!

Sefer Vayikra is quite the opposite for it contains primarily "mitzvot l'dorot" organized by topic. In fact, the lone narrative that we do find in Sefer Vayikra - the dedication of the Mishkan (8:1-10:10) - relates specifically to the topic of the mitzvah under discussion (i.e. the various korbanot).

In contrast to those two books, Sefer Bamidbar contains an ongoing narrative, which is periodically 'interrupted' by "mitzvot l'dorot" that appear to have very little thematic connection.

RAMBAN'S INTRODUCTION

This analysis can help us understand the strange statement made by Ramban in his introduction to Sefer Bamidbar:

> "... and this book deals entirely with "MITZVOT SHA'AH" that applied only during Bnei Yisrael's stay in the desert...";

Then, only three lines later, Ramban makes a very bold, yet puzzling, statement:

> "This book does NOT CONTAIN any MITZVOT L'DOROT (commandments for all generations) EXCEPT for a FEW MITZVOT DEALING WITH KORBANOT that the Torah began discussing in SEFER VAYIKRA, but did not finish their explanation there, and they are finished here instead." [see Ramban 1:1]

Note how Ramban differentiates between two types of mitzvot that are found in Sefer Bamidbar, one type - "mitzvot l'sha'ah" that DO belong in the sefer, while the other type - "mitzvot l'dorot" that DON'T belong!

This distinction between 'parshiot' that DO belong and DON'T belong - implies that Sefer Bamidbar indeed carries one primary theme, i.e. the story of Bnei Yisrael's forty year journey from Har Sinai to Arvot Moav. The stories and the "mitzvot sha'ah" that relate to that topic - 'belong' in the sefer, while those mitzvot that are unrelated (to that topic) do not!

> [Note that even though the Ramban did not preface his introduction to Sefer Bamidbar with 'questions for preparation and self study', he clearly expected that the reader was aware of this overall structure!]

[Note as well that Ramban never explicitly defines the primary topic of Sefer Bamidbar, however he does mention that: This book contains:... the miracles that were performed for Bnei Yisrael and how He began to deliver their enemies before them... and He commanded them how the Land should be divided among the tribes...]

To clarify the thematic connection between the various narratives in Sefer Bamidbar, it is helpful to divide the book into three distinct sections:

Chapters 1->10
How Bnei Yisrael prepare for their journey to Canaan;
Chapters 11->25
Why they don't make it to Canaan (i.e. their sins); &
Chapters 26->35
How the new generation prepares to enter the Land.

Basically, the book should have been the story of how Bnei Yisrael traveled from Har Sinai to Israel. Instead, it becomes a book that explains how and why they didn't make it.

How about the MITZVOT L'DOROT of Sefer Bamidbar?

Are they simply random, or do they share a common theme? At first glance, most of these mitzvot appear to be totally unrelated to Bnei Yisrael's journey through the desert.

WHERE DO THEY ALL BELONG?

Before we suggest an answer to this question, let's review this list of mitzvot in Sefer Bamidbar, and attempt to determine where they DO BELONG.

Take for example:

* **Parshat "sotah" (5:11-31) and Parshat "nazir" (6:1-21):**
Both of these 'parshiot' contain a set of laws that Chumash refers to as "torot" (ritual 'procedures' /see 5:29 & 6:21), and focus on what korbanot need to be offered. Hence, it would seems that these parshiot belong with the other "torot" found in the first half of Sefer Vayikra.

* **Parshat "parah adumah" (chapter 19):**
These laws clearly 'belong' in Parshiot Tazria/Metzora, together with all of the other laws of how one becomes "tamey" and the necessary procedures to become "tahor".

* **The laws of "korbanot tmidim u'musafim" (chap. 28->29):**
These laws also clearly belong in Sefer Vayikra, together with the laws of the holidays in Parshat Emor (see Vayikra 23 / note that on each holiday mentioned in Emor we must bring an "ishe rayach nichoach l'hashem", while Bamidbar chapters 28 & 29 details the specific "ishe" (korban) which must be brought for each holiday. (see Vayikra 23:37)

Thus, it appears as though Chumash has deliberately taken numerous parshiot of mitzvot, which could have been recorded in Sefer Vayikra, and randomly 'inserted' them throughout the narrative of Sefer Bamidbar! But - why would the Torah take a mitzvah which 'belongs' in one sefer and move it to another?

One could maintain that these 'unrelated parshiot' are recorded in Sefer Bamidbar simply for the 'technical' reason that they just happened to have been given to Moshe Rabeinu at this time (i.e. during this journey from Har Sinai through the desert). For example, the mitzvah of "shiluach tmayim" (5:1-4) - sending unclean persons outside the camp - most likely was commanded only after the camp was organized (see chaps. 1->4).

However, that approach would explain only a few of these parshiot, for most of the "mitzvot l'dorot" that are recorded in Sefer Bamidbar seem to have been given at an earlier time (most likely on Har Sinai or after "hakamat ha'Mishkan"). For example, the laws of "tumat meyt" (in chapter 19) must have been given before the Mishkan was erected, otherwise it would have been impossible for the Kohanim to perform the "avodah". Furthermore, certain mitzvot recorded in Bamidbar had already been mentioned earlier in Chumash (e.g. see 5:5-8 / compare with Vayikra 5:20-26).

Hence it would seem that this 'commercial break' type pattern in Sefer Bamidbar is deliberate! And thus, our question must be re-worded to: why does the Torah employ this unique structure in Sefer Bamidbar?

THE 'PSHAT' OF 'DRASH'!

If this special structure of Bamidbar is deliberate, then the obvious temptation is to find a connection, even if only tangential, between these 'unrelated mitzvot' and the juxtaposed narrative in Sefer Bamidbar.

In other words, it appears that the Torah deliberately juxtaposes certain sets of laws to the ongoing narrative, EVEN THOUGH they are unrelated - in order that we search for a thematic connection between them! Thus, through this special structure the Torah in essence is telling us to make up "drash" to explain the reason for this juxtaposition. [We could refer to this as the "pshat" of "drash".]

In this manner, the unique style of Sefer Bamidbar challenges us to find a THEMATIC connection between these "mitzvot l'dorot" and the ongoing story. And that is exactly what Chazal do in their various Midrashim.

[This also explains why so often the commentaries ask the famous question: "lama nis'm'cha..." (why are certain parshiot juxtaposed...?)]

Therefore, when we study Sefer Bamidbar, we should not be surprised to find certain parshiot of mitzvot that don't seem to belong. Nonetheless, we are 'obligated' to attempt to uncover a more subtle message that the Torah may be transmitting through the intentional juxtaposition of these mitzvot to its narrative.

With this background, we will now suggest some possible reasons for the inclusion of these specific parshiot of mitzvot in Parshat Naso, even though they could have been recorded in Sefer Vayikra as well.

SHCHINA IN THE CAMP

The first topic of Sefer Bamidbar is the organization of the camp ("sidur ha'machanot") surrounding the Mishkan (chapters one thru four). As we explained last week, this re-organization of the camp stresses the importance of the interdependent relationship between the camp ["machine"] and the Mishkan, i.e. between the nation and the kohanim & leviim.

This may explain the reason why Sefer Bamidbar chose to include the parshiot which follow:

A) "shiluach tmayim" (5:1-4)

As the camp was organized with the "shchinah" dwelling at its center, the first mitzvah is to remove anyone who is "tamey" from the camp.

B) "gezel ha'ger". (5:5-10)

Here we find laws that reflect the special relationship between the nation and the kohanim.

This mitzvah begins with the standard law of the "korban asham" as explained in Parshat Vayikra (5:20-26). The halacha requires that prior to bringing the Korban, the transgressor must first repay the person ("keren v'chomesh"). This 'parshia' also relates to the case when the payment is given to the kohen, when the person who is owed the money has passed away and left no inheritors (see Rashi 5:8). The 'parshia' continues with a general statement regarding the legal ownership of tithes which the nation must give to the kohanim (see 5:9-10).

C) Parshat Sotah (5:11-31)

Here again we find a special relationship between the Mishkan and the nation, as the Kohen is instrumental in solving problems in a marital relationship. Even though this is a "korban mincha", its nature is quite different from those korbanot mentioned in Sefer Vayikra (see Ramban 5:9) - for it is only offered as part of this special circumstance, where the kohen attempts to solve a marital problem within the camp.

D) Parshat Nazir (6:1-21)

Here we find a case where a member of the nation takes upon himself laws similar to those of a Kohen (see 6:6-8), as well as the 'kedusha' of a Kohen. Note also the similarity between the Korban which the "nazir" must bring (6:13-21) and the special Korbanot brought by the Kohanim during the 7 day "miluim" ceremony (see Vayikra 8:1-30).

E) Birkat Kohanim (6:22-27)

The blessing which the kohanim bestow on the nation is yet another example of the connection between the kohanim and the camp. The kohanim serve as vehicle through which God can bless His people.

TRAVELLING WITH THE "SHCHINA"

So why are specifically parshiot from Sefer Vayikra woven into Sefer Bamidbar? One could suggest an answer that relates to the underlying theme of each book.

Recall our explanation of how the laws of Sefer Vayikra reflect the fact that God's "shechina" now dwells in the Mishkan. Hence, we found numerous laws that relate to the special level of kedusha in the Mishkan itself in the first half of Vayikra (e.g. korbanot, tumah & tahara, etc.) as well as laws that relate to the consequential "kedusha" on the entire camp in the second half of the book (e.g. the laws of "kedoshim t'hiyu" [adam], holidays [zman], shmitta [makom], etc.).

Sefer Bamidbar, on the other hand, discusses how Bnei Yisrael travel through the desert on their way to the Promised Land. Considering that Bnei Yisrael will now travel with the Mishkan at the center of their camp (as discussed in the opening four chapters), it becomes thematically significant that the Torah periodically interrupts the details of that journey with mitzvot from Sefer Vayikra, especially those that deal with the special connection between the Kohanim and the nation.

As Bnei Yisrael leave Har Sinai, they must now deal with mundane tasks such as preparation for the conquest and settlement of the Land. While doing so, they must constantly remind themselves of their spiritual goals, symbolized by the Mishkan at the center of the camp - and applied in the various laws that relate to the "kedusha" of Am Yisrael - because they are God's nation.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN:
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A. CHANUKAT HA'MIZBAYACH (7:1-8:26)

This parsha, discussing the dedication ceremony of the Mishkan, appears to be out of place. The story of the dedication of the Mishkan was already detailed in Parshat Pkudei (Shmot 40) and Parshat Shmini (Vayikra 9). Furthermore, this dedication ceremony took place on the first of Nisan, while the narrative of Sefer Bamidbar began a month LATER, on the first day of Iyar (1:1)! Why then is it included in Bamidbar, and why specifically here?

The primary topic of this perek is the 'korban' which the tribal leaders brought on the day of the dedication of the Mishkan. Their offering included a joint presentation of six wagons and twelve oxen as well as an offering for the mizbayach presented by each "nasi" individually.

Those wagons are given to the Leviim to help them while transporting the Mishkan. Therefore, this detail of the dedication ceremony is recorded in Bamidbar for it relates to the organization of the camp ("sidur ha'machaneh") and the duties of the Leviim in preparation for the journey from Har Sinai. Even though the wagons were presented a month earlier, Sefer Bamidbar begins with the census of the army in anticipation of the journey from Har Sinai.

Once the detail of how the camp will travel is completed, Sefer Bamidbar recalls the story of how "nsiim" presented the Leviim with the wagons. The remaining details of that joint presentation of the nsiim are detailed in the parsha that follows (see 7:12-89).

B. Considering that chapters 7->8 discuss the dedication of the Mishkan that took place on the first of Nisan (see 7:1) including the appointment of the Leviim to work in the Mishkan in place of the first born (see 8:5-15), one could also conclude that the counting of the Leviim described in chapters 3->4 took place earlier - i.e. before the Mishkan's dedication and definitely BEFORE the MIFKAD of the twelve tribes as described in chapters 1->2 [note Ramban on 8:5 that would seem to imply this, even though this seems to contradict Ramban on 1:45].

If so, then chapters 3-4 as well as 7-8 took place on (or close to) the first of Nisan. Hence, one could conclude that these parshiot of mitzvot detailed in chapters 5->6 were given to Moshe Rabeinu from the Ohel Moed on the first of Nisan as well.

Parshot Bamidbar and Naso: Introduction to Sefer Bamidbar

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

PART I

This week, we will introduce the 4th book of the Torah. What is the name of this new sefer? Or, more properly, what are its names?

1) Hebrew: "Sefer BeMidbar."
2) Latin: "Numeri."
3) English: "Numbers."
4) Hazal: "Humash ha-Pekkudim."

Which of these names does not belong? Clearly, "BeMidbar": this name says nothing about the content of the sefer. The origin of this name is the fact that it is the first significant word in the book (like the word "bereshit" in the first book of the Torah, the word "shemot" in the second book, the word "va-yikra" in the third book, and the word "devarim" in the fifth book). On the other hand, the other names here all seem to fit into a category: numbers, or "pekkudim," which means "counting." These names tell us there will be counting and listing in this book, and indeed, there is plenty of that. But "pekkudim" is more than just "numbers." What does the root "P-K-D" mean in the context of the Humash Ha-Pekkudim?

MEANINGS OF P-K-D IN THIS SEFER:

P-K-D means to remember something and pay special attention to it. This basic meaning of P-K-D is what ties together the three specific ways in which P-K-D is used in our sefer:

1) P-K-D = to count or list. Counting or listing is a process which recalls each individual and focuses attention on every individual in the list or count.

2) P-K-D = to appoint to a task / position. Appointment to a task, or the appointment of an institution, is a process which involves considering a person's (or an institution's) capabilities and record and then focusing special attention on that individual as a person capable of a particular task.

3) P-K-D = to punish. Punishment takes place when Hashem decides to "remember" what a person has done and that the time has come to pay special attention (in this case, special negative attention) to that person.

[Reward, of course, is the opposite of punishment: Hashem decides to "remember" a good deed or a promise He has made to someone, and pays special attention to that person by fulfilling the promise. In Tanakh, we often find P-K-D used in this positive sense, like when Hashem 'recalls' His promise to give Sara a son -- "va-Hashem pakad et Sara." But this sense of P-K-D does not appear in the Humash Ha-Pekkudim.]

P-K-D AS COUNTING OR LISTING:

What counting takes place in this sefer, or what lists do we find in the sefer?

1) Nesi'im (chiefs or leaders of tribes) are listed many times in the Humash ha-Pekkudim:

a) When they are selected to help take a census of the nation.
b) As commanders of the fighting force of each shevet (tribe).
c) When they donate large gifts to the Mishkan (portable Temple) to celebrate its grand opening.
d) When scouts are sent to Eretz Yisrael to check out the land and the strength of its inhabitants.

2) Counting of all males of fighting age:

a) Each shevet's fighting-age males are counted and their number is reported to us.
b) The total of all the shevatim is also reported.
c) Toward the end of the sefer, all fighting-age males are counted again; the Torah again reports the number of each shevet and total of all shevatim.

3) Listing of the degalim:

a) The Torah describes how the shevatim were split into four degalim (military wings, or "flags"). Several times, the Torah lists the degalim and each of their member shevatim, as well as listing the number of fighting men in each degel and listing the commander of each degel.

4) Counting of the Leviyyim: The Leviyyim are not counted with the fighting men of the nation because their job is to be the "army of Hashem." But they are counted separately:

a) First, their total number is counted.
b) In a second count, the number of Leviyyim old enough to be part of the "army of Hashem" is also counted and reported.

5) Counting of bekhorim: One of the major events of the Humash Ha-Pekkudim is that the bekhorim (first-born), who are considered holy, are replaced by the members of Shevet Levi. The bekhorim and Leviyyim are both counted, then the bekhorim transfer their holiness to the Leviyyim.

6) Gifts of the Nesi'im: The leaders of each of the twelve shevatim help celebrate the 'grand opening' of the Mishkan with large donations. Even though all of the Nesi'im donate exactly the same thing to the Mishkan, the Torah still takes the trouble to present a complete list of the gifts, repeating exactly the same lengthy description of the gift twelve times.

7) Travels: Toward the end of the sefer, the Torah reviews for us the long list of all the places where the nation stops to camp in its 40-year journey through the desert.

8) Korbanot of Succot: The Torah reports the korbanot (sacrifices) of each day of Succot, which follow a very regular and systematic pattern. On the first day, they are to bring 13 bulls; on every successive day, one less bull. But instead of telling us what pattern to follow, the Torah spells out exactly what korbanot we are to bring on each day, spelling it out: on the first day, 13. On the second day, 12. On the third day, 11 . . . .

[An example of contrast: the Talmud does not spell out how many candles to light on each night of Hanukka; it simply tells us to start with one and to add one each night.]

P-K-D AS APPOINTING:

To be "poked" means "to appoint"; in modern Hebrew, for example, "pakid" means "an official" or "clerk," someone "appointed." Sefer BeMidbar is the Humash ha-Pekkudim in the sense of "Book of Appointment" because it describes how the nation is to be organized: each group and individual is appointed a specific task; a national infrastructure is created.

1) Nesi'im are appointed to help with the count of their people.

2) Fighting-age men are assigned to the task of being the nation's military force.

3) First-born sons of the nation are removed from their designation as servants for the Mishkan. The Leviyyim are appointed in place of these bekhorim. Shevet Levi is assigned the task of being the nation's "religious force," paralleling the appointment of the rest of the adult males as the "military force." The Leviyyim are assigned to the Mishkan as guards, transporters, and builders/dismantlers. The three family groups within the Leviyyim are each assigned responsibility for a specific part of the Mishkan:

a) Kehat family: the kelei ha-kodesh (holy vessels: Aron, Shulhan, Menora, Mizbehot)
b) Gershon family: the curtains which cover the Mishkan and surround it.
c) Merari family: the structure of the Mishkan itself.

4) The Kohanim are assigned the task of supervising the Leviyyim and protecting them from overstepping their bounds and being injured by Hashem; for instance, the Leviyyim are not to touch the kelim or look at them, so the Kohanim must wrap the kelim before the Leviyyim enter to take the kelim in order to transport them.

5) The camp itself: everyone is assigned a place to camp and a position in which to move with the camp as it travels. The nation is divided into four degalim, each with three shevatim. Each degel is led by one shevet, and the Nasi of that shevet is appointed supreme military commander of that degel. The Kohanim and Leviyyim travel with the Mishkan in the center of the camp; each of the four degalim has an assigned position around the Mishkan.

6) The trumpets: besides the setting up of the camp, the Torah also sets up an intra-camp communication system: two silver trumpets. One kind of blast on the trumpet gathers the Nesi'im together. Another type gathers the whole nation. Another type is the signal to decamp and begin travel. Another type is the signal of war. And another type is blown over korbanot on festive occasions.

7) The Mishkan: in Sefer VaYikra, we saw that the grand opening of the Mishkan was celebrated with an elaborate series of korbanot. This was an appropriate angle to take on the grand opening when we were in the middle of VaYikra, which is all about korbanot. In Sefer BeMidbar, the Torah focuses on a different aspect of the "appointment" of the Mishkan in its official capacity as the Center of Worship: it focuses on the 12-day celebration of the grand opening of the Mishkan by presenting us with a grand list, the list of the identical gifts of the Nesi'im. The list is as typical of BeMidbar as the korbanot are of VaYikra.

8) The Zekenim: later on in the sefer, Moshe becomes frustrated with the burden of leading this uncooperative people through the desert and refuses to go on as leader alone. In response, Hashem commands him to assemble 70 elders and takes some of the spritual power which is concentrated in Moshe and bestows this power on the elders.

9) Elazar succeeds Aharon: also later on in the sefer, Aharon transfers his authority as the Kohen Gadol to his son, Elazar, by giving him the special clothing worn only by the Kohen Gadol.

10) Yehoshua succeeds Moshe: also later on in the sefer, Moshe transfers his authority as leader to Yehoshua by giving him semikha.

P-K-D AS PUNISHMENT:

One of the darker meanings of "P-K-D" is "punishment." Misdeeds and punishment for misdeeds are one of the major themes of Sefer BeMidbar. The opening sections of Sefer BeMidbar paint a picture of beautiful order and organization as the nation prepares for its journey from Sinai to Eretz Yisrael. The structure of the physical camp is set up, the military structure is created, and different groups are assigned to different tasks. But once we get past the first part of the sefer, we encounter a series of stories in which, time after time, an individual or the whole nation does something wrong and is punished, and the beautiful structure which was designed to bring the people successfully to their land becomes ineffectual and irrelevant:

1) Tav'era: people complain against Hashem and are punished by Him. This is the first hint of trouble in the sefer.

2) Kivrot Ha-Ta'ava: the people complain that they are tired of the "man" (i.e., manna from heaven) and want meat. For the first time, we hear rumblings of enormous ingratitude: the people look back nostalgically at Egypt (!) and wish they had never left that lap of luxury and culinary delicacies. Hashem becomes angry, and although He provides them with meat, He sends a plague to punish them.

3) Moshe becomes frustrated with the people: they just don't seem to get it. They receive the Torah straight from Hashem, and 40 days later they're worshipping an idol; they are taken out of slavery with miracles, and before long they are wishing to be back in good old Egypt and furious with Moshe for taking them out. Moshe, demoralized and frustrated, refuses to go on alone as leader, so Hashem removes some of the burden of leadership from him and places it on the 70 elders Moshe selects.

4) Miryam: Miryam and Aharon, Moshe's siblings, join with the chorus of voices challenging Moshe's leadership. Moshe, ever humble, does not react, but Hashem does, angrily putting Miryam and Aharon in their place and striking Miryam with tzara'at (*not* leprosy; if you want more details, see the shiur on Parashat Tazria). It is Moshe who magnanimously prays for her recovery.

5) The Meraglim: Hashem commands that the nation send scouts to reconnoiter Eretz Yisrael. When they return, they describe the beauty of the land but convince the people that they do not have the strength to conquer the powerful nations of the land. The people accept this evaluation even though they have been promised Hashem's help, and they again raise the cry for a return to Egypt. Hashem, furious, decrees that no one of this generation will see the land. For the next 40 years, they will wander the desert, until they are all dead; then the new generation will enter the land.

6) Aftermath of Meraglim: once Hashem has decreed their punishment, the people realize they have made an enormous mistake. They try to regain the opportunity they have lost: they try to enter Eretz Yisrael. But Moshe warns them that they

will fail, as indeed they do. The nation of Amalek meets them in battle, and without Hashem's help, they flee the field and fall before Amalek.

7) The Korah rebellion: Korah, a Levi, challenges the status of Aharon as a Kohen (Aharon is also the Leviyyim's chief supervisor), while Datan and Aviram challenge Moshe's leadership as chief of the people. Moshe becomes angry and arranges a test to show who has truly been selected by Hashem, and the result of the test is the deaths of Korah, Datan, Aviram, and all of their followers in an angry Divine confirmation of the selection of Moshe as leader and Aharon and his sons as Kohanim.

8) Aftermath of Korah rebellion: the people blame Moshe and Aharon for the deaths of the rebels. Hashem, furious again, responds by sending a plague against the people, which Moshe and Aharon halt -- showing the people that, if anything, they are the people's defenders. But then the people simply transfer blame for the deaths to Hashem, and whine that everyone who appproaches Hashem seems to meet with a terrible fate.

9) Mei Meriva: Moshe and Aharon lose their chance to enter Eretz Yisrael when they hit the rock and disobey Hashem's instructions to speak to it to tell it to release its water. This is a disaster of tremendous proportions for Moshe personally, as he himself will tell us when we get to Sefer Devarim and he describes how he begged Hashem to allow him to enter the land.

10) Ba'al Pe'or: Toward the end of the sefer, as the people are moving closer to Eretz Yisrael, they encounter the nation of Midyan. The people of the two nations mix, and Bnei Yisrael quickly become involved in the worship of the god of the Midyanites, Ba'al Pe'or, and also in sexual immorality with the Midyanites. Ironically, this takes place just after Hashem has protected Bnei Yisrael from the curses of Bil'am the prophet; instead of cursing Bnei Yisrael, Bil'am is forced to sing praises of their faithfulness to Hashem, but before you can turn around, the people are behaving unfaithfully.

In all of these incidents, individuals or the entire nation makes terrible mistakes which lead to "pekida" -- punishment. These incidents are so frequent that they become part of the theme of the sefer.

PART II:

In Part I of this shiur, we traced many of the events of Sefer BeMidbar. We split these events into three different caegories of "pekida," since Sefer BeMidbar is the Humash Ha-Pekkudim. In this sefer, "pekida" has three primary meanings: counting/listing, appointing, and punishment.

In this part of the shiur, we will first present a number of examples of how the word P-K-D is used in the sefer in these three different ways, and then we will discuss how the three themes of pekida interact with one another to produce the coherent literary unit we call a "sefer."

P-K-D: SOME EXAMPLES:

The word P-K-D appears in various forms in Sefer BeMidbar 96 times (Shemot runsa distant second place, with fewer than 20 "P-K-D"'s. Many of these instances (the great majority) are in contexts in which counting or listing takes place. In order to demonstrate the use of P-K-D in this "counting" sense but not to belabor the point, I will cite just one example:

BeMidbar 1:19 -- . . . Just as Hashem commanded Moshe, he counted (P-K-D) them in the Sinai Desert.

Somewhat less frequently, we find P-K-D used to describe the appointment of an individual or group to a particular position or function. Some examples:

BeMidbar 1:50 -- "Appoint (P-K-D) the Leviyyim over the Tabernacle of Testimony and over all its utensils and all that belongs to it . . . ."

BeMidbar 3:32 -- The head of the princes of Levi was Elazar, son of Aharon, the kohen, appointed over (P-K-D) the guards of the watch of the holy.

BeMidbar 3:36 -- The appointed task (P-K-D) of the children of Merari was the boards of the Tabernacle, its bars, pillars, and sockets, all of its utensils....

BeMidbar 27:16 -- "Let Hashem, God of the spirit of all flesh, appoint (P-K-D) a leader over the congregation."

Finally, our last P-K-D category is that of punishment. Certainly, not every punishment in the sefer is described as a pekida, but I have found it useful to organize the themes of the sefer around this root because the word is used in these ways in the sefer and because, as we will see, the intimate interactions of these three themes, all traceable to this one root, produce the unique character of the sefer. Some examples of this last category:

BeMidbar 14:18 -- Hashem, slow to anger and great in kindness, forgiving sin and transgression, but who will not simply forgive, who visits (P-K-D) the sins of the fathers on the children . . . .

BeMidbar 14:29 -- "In this desert will your carcasses fall, all of your countings (P-K-D) according to all of your numbers, from age twenty and up . . . ." [This example will be explained further.]

BeMidbar 16:29 -- "If like the deaths of all men do these men perish, and if the visitation (P-K-D) of all men is visted (P-K-D) upon them, then [you will know that] Hashem did not send me."

THE THEMES OF THE HUMASH HA-PEKKUDIM:

Why is it important for the Torah to tell us all of these details about the various countings, listings, and appointings? Since our assumption in reading Tanakh is that it is written for its meaning to all generations, why do we care how many soldiers there were in the shevet of Naftali over 3,000 years ago in the desert? Why is it important for the Torah to painstakingly repeat -- 12 times! -- the gifts of the Nesi'im? Do we really need to know how many male Leviyyim there were from one month old and up, and also how many Leviyyim there were from 25 years old and up? Why does the Torah tell us -- more than once -- all the details of how the degalim were set up, who were the military commanders, and how many soldiers they each commanded? How many times, after all, does the Torah need to repeat to us the list of the Nesi'im?

Second, whatever the significance of these numbers and lists, what do they have to do with all of the disasters and punishments with which the sefer is so occupied?

It seems to me that two of the aspects of P-K-D are in tension with the third aspect: the P-K-D of counting and the P-K-D of appointing stand together in contrast with the P-K-D of punishment. More fundamentally, the former two represent a vision which conflicts with the vision represented by the latter.

The Humash Ha-Pekkudim presents Hashem's grand plan for the entrance of Bnei Yisrael into Eretz Yisrael. These former slaves -- miraculously rescued from the death and despair of Egypt, presented with the Torah amid flashes of lightning and peals of thunder -- are now ready to march triumphantly on to their land, trumpets blaring, ready to scatter their enemies with the help of Hashem's sure hand. Soldiers are numbered and formed into battle units, military leaders appointed, each shevet assigned a specific place in the symmetrical formation of the nation surrounding its crown jewel, the Mishkan. Within the army's protective circle nestles the Levite circle, again with each family assigned to a particular task and position in the traveling camp. With the Kohanim directing, the Leviyyim dismantle the Mishkan, shoulder the Aron and other Kelim, and prepare to transport the movable Temple. The silver trumpets blast a signal, the nation breaks camp, and incredibly, two million people move in unison through the desert in ponderous synchronicity.

The lists and numbers of Sefer BeMidbar seem repetitive only when we expect them to communicate discrete bits of information rather than painting a picture. When we put the entire Sefer into perspective, what appears is a dynamic representation of organization, regimentation, assignation, preparation, and finally transportation. The telos of this vision is clear as well: confident, with roles defined and well understood, this group is on the road home. No obstacle can deter them. This is the vision of Hashem and the vision of Moshe.

But it is not the vision of the people. The people do not see the drama or share the excitement; for them, tomorrow is not filled with promise, but with insecurity. At the time of the enslavement, Egypt had been unbearable, a daily genocide. But in rosy hindsight, Egypt was not only the lap of culinary luxury but also, strangely, a place of security. The people made no choices and bore no responsibility to make decisions; their tasks were thrust upon them, their government provided for them from without. In the desert, they must organize themselves, create their own institutions -- their own judiciary, their own army, their own political structure, their own religious representatives. Hashem guides them in all of these tasks, but ultimately the people are responsible for themselves. As if this were not unfamiliar enough after over 200 years of slavery, their daily bread comes falling down from the heavens; instead of the predictable fish, fruits, and vegetables of Egypt, the people are provided with supernatural food directly from Hashem.

Despite incrontrovertible evidence of Hashem's presence among them and of His intention to help them reach their goal (after all, He did split the sea and drown their enemies in it), the people cannot muster the courage to undertake the conquest of the Land and its powerful inhabitants; their insecurity deafens them to assurances that Hashem will help them and amplifies the claims of those who insist that the nation cannot match the power of the Cana'anites.

The creation of institutions and the appointment of individuals and groups to various responsibilities becomes for many of the people an opportunity to pursue power struggles and bicker over who deserves honor; those who are blind to the Divine vision behind the counting and appointing impute to those in power -- to Moshe especially -- the same motives which energize them. Throughout the Sefer, Moshe's leadership is challenged by those who want more power than they have; for his part, Moshe is bewildered and eventually angered by these attacks, as he sees his leadership function in the context of the Divine process and not as part of the dynamic of ego-driven self-promotion and political jockeying. A reluctant leader from the first moment of his career, Moshe can hardly believe that others accuse him of promoting himself to a position he tried so hard to decline.

In this sense, Sefer BeMidbar is a tragic story of the clash of two visions. The clash between the grand, orderly beauty of P-K-D/counting/appointing and the petty, chaotic P-K-D/punishment produce a Sefer which opens with energy, momentum, and promise, but ultimately delivers death and disappointment. As Hashem says when the people accept the spies' evaluation that they cannot conquer the land, "In this desert will your carcasses fall, all of your countings (P-K-D) according to all of your numbers, from age twenty and up . . . ." All of the pekudim, all of the countings and appointings which have been such a focus of this Sefer, all of that will crumble in the desert and come to nothing. All of the planning, all of the assignations of leaders and tasks, all of it is ultimately meaningless and wasted; all of these pekudim are trampled by the pekida of punishment. In this sense, the vision of the people wins out over the vision of Hashem. They refuse (or are unable) to abandon their position, and eventually Hashem gives up on them and pins His 'hopes' on their children, the next generation. For this reason, there is another great counting at the end of the sefer, where the Torah pointedly notes that no one included in the second counting had been counted in the first counting. That entire generation dies; their count amounts to zero. The new generation, unbound by the limitations of their parents, is counted again, undergoing the same process of the setting up of institutions and structures so that they, this time successfully, can enter the land.

Besides being a tragic Sefer, the Humash Ha-Pekkudim is also an ironic Sefer: we accompany emancipated slaves whose most plaintive refrain is, "Too bad we left slavery"; we learn of mitzvot introduced by the phrase, "When you get to the Land I am giving to you," when the recipients of these mitzvot already know they will die in this desert and will never see the Land at all; the Leviyyim enjoy the status of being raised to holiness above the rest of the nation in an elaborate public ceremony and are assigned to the caretaking of the Mishkan, but they are the same people who, led by Korah, challenge Moshe and Aharon: "Why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of Hashem?"; the Nesi'im, constantly in the spotlight in our Sefer, appointed to positions of responsibility and leadership, are the very same people who participate in the greatest catastrophes of the Sefer: the Torah notes that Korah's supporters are "nesi'im," as are the meraglim (spies), as is Zimri ben Salu, the man who publicly fornicates with a woman from the nation of Midyan; Moshe's leadership, attacked by Korah and his supporters, by the entire nation's frequent angry complaints ("Why did you take us out of Egypt?"), and even by Miryam and Aharon, is something Moshe never wanted at all. He tried unsuccessfully in Sefer Shemot to resist Hashem's command that he lead the people, and in our Sefer, Moshe repeatedly demonstrates great willingness to share his power with others: he wistfully wishes that all of the people could be prophets (not just himself), he willingly grants a portion of his authority to the seventy elders, he is described as an "exceedingly humble" man who did not bother to respond to Miryam's carping at him and indeed seems unperturbed by it (it is Hashem who is furious with Miryam; Moshe intercedes and asks Hashem to heal her of her tzara'at); Bil'am, the sorcerer hired to curse Bnei Yisrael, is forced by Hashem to sing their praises: "[Hashem] sees no evil in Ya'akov, no bad in Israel . . . ," but the very next perek reports that the God-beloved nation has become entrenched in the worship of the idol Ba'al Pe'or and in sexual immorality with the Midyanites.

Above all, the greatest irony of the Sefer is the clash of visions: Hashem and Moshe attempt to build a grand, beautiful organization to accomplish transcendent goals, but the people remain interested in water, tasty and varied food (not just manna every day!), and power politics.

Sefer BeMidbar is a Sefer of missed opportunities. It sets the stage for Sefer Devarim, where Moshe reviews these failures for the benefit of the second generation, attempting to inoculate them against these mistakes, and exhorts them to learn from the limitations of their parents.

Shabbat Shalom

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

What's Wrong With Wikipedia?

"...in the Tent of Meeting..." (1:1)

I must admit to a tinge of nostalgia for the demise of that great 244-year-old creaking behemoth called *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. It has been ten years since the last printed edition. Britannica continues online in its electronic version, but as far as its online future is concerned, I'm not so convinced. I think people are far more likely to search Wikipedia than Britannica.

One reason, of course, is because Wiki is free, and everyone likes free. However, I think there's another reason. We love democracy. Anyone can write an entry in Wikipedia. In our society it is axiomatic that democracy is the only legitimate form of social organization. Our mindset is that the will of the majority is the best, the fairest, and indeed the only way to run society. This ideology seeps into other areas of life as well, including encyclopedias. Critics of Britannica claim that it suffers from the biases of the experts it employs. Wiki, however, suffers no less from bias. An article in Forbes magazine reports that Feng Zhu, an assistant professor in the Technology and Operations Management unit at Harvard Business School, and Shane Greenstein of Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, found that in almost all cases, Wikipedia was more left-leaning than Britannica.

We love democracy, but, presumably, the democratization of our lives has its limits: I'm not sure how many of us would submit to extensive invasive surgery based on a straw poll taken on Twitter or Facebook. The idea that if you ask enough people a question, you are bound to come up with the right answer, is inimical to Torah thought. The spiritual Masters teach, "The opinion of the Torah is the opposite of the man in the street." Rav Nota Schiller, our esteemed Rosh HaYeshiva, once observed, "The Torah is a democracy of opportunity and an aristocracy of opinion." Anyone can open a Talmud and start to learn. However, for your opinion to be significant it must pass a self-policing system of peer approval that validates only the most expert.

The Book of Bamidbar deals in great detail with the laws and history of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle.

"...in the Tent of Meeting..." (1:1)

The Ramban draws striking comparisons between these laws and the Revelation at Sinai. The Mishkan, the Beit Hamikdash, and, to this day our synagogues, are the distant echoes of that revelation. They all remind us that Judaism is based on revelation and not the "wisdom of the masses." The Torah was not given as the "Ten Suggestions; please twitter this to your friends and see what they think." It was given as Ten Statements, Divine and immutable. Maybe check that on Wikipedia and see if I'm right?

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Meron 2021

These words are written while funerals are still taking place and so many families are joined by the entire Jewish People, who mourn the tragic and unfathomable loss of life at Mount Meron on Lag B'Omer this year. And there are many injured individuals — both physically and emotionally — whom we pray will be healed by the Healer and the healers quickly and completely. But here I would like to share a recent conversation I had with a colleague, in the hope that it will inspire if only one person in a small way to strive for a future that will be as bright for our nation as it was at the time of the Beit Hamikdash.

A few weeks ago, in Talmud Tips for Yoma 16-22, in an article titled "Personal Space," we addressed the nature of one of the miracles that took place then and there: Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav, "When they stood, they were extremely crowded, but when they bowed down they had a lot of room." There we cited Rashi's explanation that although it was extremely crowded in the Beit Hamikdash, there was nevertheless a miraculous expansion of one's personal space for prostration in order to say *Vidui* — a verbal confession to Hashem of one's sins. The person would miraculously have full use of a surrounding *daled amot* (four cubits) in which to prostrate and verbally confess, without a concern that the person nearest him would be within earshot and be able to hear this private admission — a factor which could potentially inhibit a person's confession due to embarrassment of others hearing his verbalizing his personal transgressions.

It has been reported that many survivors who were present at Mount Meron who felt certain of imminent passing from this world said *Shma Yisrael*, the traditional act of a Jew taking his final breath. Presumably, they also said or thought whatever type of *Vidui* was possible under the constraints of time and place of the sudden and swift tragic event.

A few days ago, a reader of this column reminded me of what I wrote only a few short weeks earlier, that Rashi explains the Rav Elazar's words "They would stand in a crowded manner" (in the Beit Hamikdash) as follows: "The word for "crowded" in the text is *tzafufim*, which Rashi says is based on the Hebrew root-word *tzaf*, which means "to float." He explains that the multitude of people in the Beit Hamikdash were so crowded that the physical human pressure on all sides caused them to be lifted from the ground and to be "floating" in the air without their feet being on the ground. I related there my own experiences, as well as those of my wife and friends who have attended funerals of great rabbis in Jerusalem over the years, which at times included turnouts of people that numbered in the hundreds of thousands. And sometimes, the scene being terrifying, with being lifted from our feet and moved like a wave to a place some distance away. For anyone who has not experienced this feeling of helplessness, it reminded me of driving a car on ice in my youth, when it was futile and meaningless to try and steer or use the brakes, due to a lack of traction and the "feet" of the car not making proper contact with the street. At least once I ended up in a shallow (fortunately!) ditch on the roadside. I am not advocating for either being or not being in such a crowd — especially when it involves a mitzvah — but one should at least be aware of what might happen and take necessary precautions as possible.

I replied to the reader that I appreciate his appreciation for having learned something from the "Torah Tips" article, and that after the horrific Meron incident I wanted to share an additional insight I had while crying in shock. In the Beit Hamikdash, despite the squeezing pressure experienced by the entire nation standing there (to be more exact, they were floating above ground) — there is no mention that *anyone was ever injured* in the slightest. I suggested that this great safety was also a display of another miraculous act by Hashem. He protected His nation from harm in "His house." But that was then and there. May we merit the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash and the renewal of Hashem once again showing us great miracles emanating from His gracious Countenance toward us — maintaining peace throughout the world and safety for all of us in all places and at all times. Amen.

Q & A

BAMIDBAR

Questions

1. Why were the Jewish People counted so frequently?
2. What documents did the people bring when they were counted?
3. What determined the color of the tribal flags?
4. What is the difference between an "*ot*" and a "*degel*"?
5. How do we see that the Jews in the time of Moshe observed *techum Shabbat* - the prohibition against traveling more than 2,000 *amot* on *Shabbat*?
6. What was the signal for the camp to travel?
7. What was the sum total of the counting of the 12 tribes?
8. Why are Aharon's sons called "sons of Aharon and Moshe"?
9. Who was Nadav's oldest son?
10. Which two people from the Book of Esther does Rashi mention in this week's Parsha?
11. Why did the *levi'im* receive *ma'aser rishon*?
12. Which groups of people were counted from the age of one month?
13. Name the first descendant of Levi in history to be counted as an infant.
14. Who assisted Moshe in counting the *levi'im*?
15. Why did so many people from the tribe of Reuven support Korach in his campaign against Moshe?
16. Why did so many people from the tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun become great Torah scholars?
17. In verse 3:39 the Torah states that the total number of *levi'im* was 22,000. The actual number was 22,300. Why does the Torah seem to ignore 300 levi'im?
18. The firstborn males of the Jewish People were redeemed for five *shekalim*. Why five *shekalim*?
19. During what age-span is a man considered at his full strength?
20. As the camp was readying itself for travel, who was in charge of covering the vessels of the *Mishkan* in preparation for transport?

Answers

1. 1:1 - They are very dear to G-d.
2. 1:18 - They brought birth records.
3. 2:2 - Each tribe's flag was the color of that tribe's stone in the breastplate of the *kohen gadol*.
4. 2:2 - An "*ot*" is a flag, i.e. a colored cloth that hangs from a flagpole. A *degel* is a flagpole.
5. 2:2 - G-d commanded them to camp no more than 2,000 amot from the *Ohel Moed*. Had they camped farther, it would have been forbidden for them to go to the *Ohel Moed* on Shabbat.
6. 2:9 - The cloud over the *Ohel Moed* departed and the *kohanim* sounded the trumpets.
7. 2:32 - 603,550.
8. 3:1 - Since Moshe taught them Torah, it's as if he gave birth to them.
9. 3:4 - Nadav had no children.
10. 3:7 - Bigtan and Teresh.
11. 3:8 - Since the *leviim* served in the *Mishkan* in place of everyone else, they received tithes as "payment."
12. 3:15, 40 - The *leviim*, and the firstborn of *Bnei Yisra*el.
13. 3:15 – Levi's daughter Yocheved was born while the Jewish People were entering Egypt. She is counted as one of the 70 people who entered Egypt.
14. 3:16 G-d.
15. 3:29 - The tribe of Reuven was encamped near Korach, and were therefore influenced for the worse. This teaches that one should avoid living near the wicked.
16. 3:38 - The tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun were encamped near Moshe, and were therefore influenced for the good. This teaches that one should seek to live near the righteous.
17. 3:39 - Each *levi* served to redeem a first-born of the Jewish People. Since 300 *leviim* were themselves firstborn, they themselves needed to be redeemed, and could therefore not redeem others.
18. 3:46 - To atone for the sale of Yosef, Rachel's firstborn, who was sold by his brothers for five *shekalim* (20 pieces of silver.)
19. 4:2 - Between the ages of 30 and 50.
20. 4:5 - The *kohanim*.

Q & A

NASO

Questions

1. What is the significance of the number 8,580 in this weeks Parsha?
2. Besides transporting the Mishkan, what other service performed by the leviim is referred to in this Parsha?
3. On which day did Moshe teach the command to send those who are *temeim* (ritually impure) out of the camp?
4. Name the three camps in the desert.
5. Who was sent out of each of the camps?
6. A person stole from another and swore that he was innocent. If he later confesses his guilt, what are his obligations?
7. Who determines which *kohen* receives the gifts that must be given to the *kohanim*?
8. What does the Torah promise a person who gives *matnot kehuna*?
9. Why are the verses about *matnot kehuna* followed by the verses about the *sotah*?
10. Why is the *sotah* given water from the holy basin?
11. What does the *kohen* do to the hair of a *sotah*?
12. When a sotah who is guilty of adultery drinks the water, she dies in a very specific fashion. What happens to the adulterer?
13. Before the name of G-d is erased, the sotah has the option either to admit guilt or to drink the water. Does she have a third option?
14. What are *chartzanim*? What are *zagim*?
15. What sin does a *Nazir* commit against himself?
16. Where was the cut hair of a *Nazir* placed?
17. A *kohen* should bless the people "with a full heart". What word in the Parsha conveys this idea of "a full heart"?
18. What is the meaning of the blessing "May G-d bless you and guard you"?
19. What is the meaning of the blessing "May G-d lift up His countenance upon you"?
20. The tribe of Yissachar was the second tribe to offer their gifts. Why did they merit this position?

Answers

1. 4:47-48 - It is the number of *leviim* between ages thirty and fifty.
2. 4:47 - Singing and playing cymbals and harps to accompany the sacrifices.
3. 5:2 - The day the Mishkan was erected.
4. 5:2 - The camp of the Shechina was in the center, surrounded by the camp of Levi which was surrounded by the camp of Yisrael.
5. 5:2 - A *metzora* was sent out of all three camps. A *zav* was permitted in the camp of Yisrael but excluded from the two inner camps. A person who was *tamei* from contact with the dead had to leave only the camp of the Shechina.
6. 5:6-8 - He pays the principle plus a fifth to the victim, and brings a *korban asham*.
7. 5:10 - The giver.
8. 5:10 - Great wealth.
9. 5:12 - To teach that someone who withholds the gifts due the *kohanim* is deserving of eventually bringing his wife to the *kohanim* to be tried as a *sotah*.
10. 5:17 - The holy basin was made from the mirrors of the righteous women who left Egypt; the *sotah* strayed from the example set by these women.
11. 5:18 - He uncovers it.
12. 5:22 - He dies a similar death.
13. 5:27 - Yes, she can refuse both: She can refuse to admit guilt and also refuse to drink the water. (After the Name of G-d is erased, she loses this option.)
14. 6:4 - *Chartzanim* are seeds. *Zagim* are peels.
15. 6:11 - He abstains from enjoying wine.
16. 6:18 - It was placed on the fire under the pot in which the *nazirs shelamim* offering was cooked.
17. 6:23 - "*Amor*."
18. 6:24 - "May G-d bless you" that your property may increase, "and guard you" from robbery.
19. 6:26 - "May He suppress His anger."
20. 7:18 - The Tribe of Yissachar was well versed in Torah. Also, they proposed the idea that the *nesiim* should offer gifts.

Reading Megillat Ruth on Shavuot

Here are seven reasons why we read the Megillah of Ruth on Shavuot:

1. The events occurred during the harvest season. Shavuot is the harvest festival.
2. Ruth was a convert to Judaism. Conversion is an individual *Kabbalat HaTorah* – receiving and accepting the Torah.
3. Ruth the Moabite was permitted to marry Boaz, based on a *drasha* (a teaching in the Oral Law) of the verse, "A Moabite may not marry into the Congregation of Hashem" (*Devarim 23:4*). This hints at the unity between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.
4. King David was born on Shavuot. The Megillah of Ruth concludes with David's lineage.
5. To teach the greatness of *gemillut chassadim* – acts of loving-kindness.
6. To teach that the Torah is acquired only through affliction and poverty.
7. The name "Ruth" has the numerical value of 606. At Mount Sinai the Jewish People accepted 606 mitzvahs in addition to the 7 Noachide Laws which were incumbent upon them already (606 plus 7 equals the 613 mitzvahs).

@OHR

The students, alumni, staff and events of Ohr Somayach

by Rabbi Shlomo Simon

This is the first in a series of articles about this project.

Mechina Program Renovation

I would like to report a sensational news story that has been unfolding over the past few months at our Ohr Somayach campus — the renovation of the Mechina Program's Lauffer Building.

In itself, of course, the renovation of a yeshiva building that is in need of some repair is nothing to write home about, let alone write an article about. However, because the process and the people involved in this renovation are so unique, it deserves to be publicized.

The Lauffer Building was originally built when we moved to our present location in Maalot Dafne in 1977. After almost 20 years of extensive use it was in serious need of a facelift and some other structural and cosmetic surgery. One of the members of the Mechina staff, Rabbi Reuven Lauffer, had recently lost his father, Reb David Lauffer, *z"l*, and he asked the family to provide funds to renovate the building in his father's name.

The renovations needed were extensive. The plain floors and plastered walls were replaced with marble; a beautiful internal staircase was built; and offices, classrooms, and a library were added. The renovation of the building is a testimonial to and an illustration of the loyalty and love that our staff shows to Ohr Somayach — or, as we like to say, the Ohr Somayach Family. The building now bears the name of his father.

The Mechina Program, as well, has gone through a number of transformations (or renovations to stay true to the title of this article) throughout the years. It has been variously known as the Beginners' Program, the Shoresh Program, and the Mechina Program. For many years now it has been under the able leadership of Rabbis Reuven Geffen, Shlomo Schiller, and Guy Matalon.

Originally a preparatory program for the Intermediate Program, it has morphed into a program that is tailored for *talmidim* who are at different levels in their spiritual journeys.

The highest level is the *Gemara shiur* given by Rabbi Dr. Guy Matalon. When Rabbi Matalon considers a *talmid* ready, he will recommend that he apply to the Beis Midrash Program, where Rabbi Uriel Goodwin will *farher* (test) him. If he passes the exam, the *talmid* will be placed in one of Beis Midrash entry *shiurim*. The test requires that the *talmid* be proficient in reading *Gemara* and Rashi and be able to prepare the *Gemara* on his own, without *Artscroll.*

The Mechina Program requires the *talmid* to learn for two *sedarim* a day. Some in the program are working at night or studying for a degree. A few months ago, one of the *talmidim* with a flair for design decided that the Lauffer *beis midrash* would look better if one of the bookcases was placed on an opposite wall. When he emptied the bookcase and began to move it, he discovered why it had been placed precisely there. The wall behind the bookcase was peeling and cracked and filled with mold. He showed it to Moshe Males, a Mechina student who had worked in construction and had just gotten his degree in Structural Engineering in Israel. He knew exactly what to do to correct the problem. Another *talmid* suggested that they approach the yeshiva to fix it. Moshe told him: "The yeshiva has enough problems just trying to pay the *rabbeim* on time; they can't be burdened with another expense." Just then, another *talmid*, Seva Dorn, told Moshe not to worry, that he would provide the funds needed to fix the problem. Moshe undertook to do the work himself over *bein hazmanim*.

After extensive repairs to that wall, the *talmidim* decided that one new wall in their *beis midrash* wasn't enough. The whole *beis midrash* needed fixing. The ceiling was stained from water damage, the lighting fixtures needed replacing, and the whole room needed repainting. Again, the *talmidim* of the program provided both the funds and the work. And they didn't skimp; they used the best materials and the most expensive type of paint. It turned out that other *talmidim* were also professional construction tradesmen. The *beis midrash* is now spanking new. But, said the *talmidim*, why stop there? The outside door and the inside walls at the entrance to the lower floor of Lauffer were replaced and renovated. The bathrooms are almost done. The process is continuing; the work is professional and beautiful. And it was all financed and done by the students of the Mechina. Truly a story worth reporting!

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

To Believe Is To Behave (Part 6)

(Lailah Gifty Akita)

"These are the precepts whose fruits a person enjoys in this world, but whose principal remains intact in the World to Come. They are: honoring one's parents; acts of kindness; early arrival at the study hall in the morning and the evening; hosting guests; visiting the sick; providing the wherewithal for a bride to marry; escorting the dead; praying with concentration; making peace between two people; and Torah study is the equivalent of them all." (Tractate Shabbat 127a)

The fifth mitzvah is that of visiting the sick. So significant is this mitzvah that our Sages teach (Nedarim 39b) that when a person visits someone who is sick, they take away with them one-sixtieth of the sickness when they leave. Rabbi Menachem ben Shlomo Meiri, the brilliant thirteenth century Talmudist, explains that the patient enjoys their company so much that it makes them feel better than they did before the visit.

Not surprisingly, what our Sages knew two thousand years ago has become an integral part of understanding disease and trying to combat it in our modern world. For example, the research department at Johns Hopkins Medicine has published findings showing that people with a family history of heart disease, who also had a *positive outlook*, were one-third less likely to have a heart attack within five to twenty-five years than those with a more negative outlook. What makes this research even more startling is that the statistics remained unchanged even for those with a family history of heart disease. As part of the Johns Hopkins study, in order to reach their final conclusions, the research team created medical definitions of "positive" and "negative" which could be quantified. But, as the head of the research team put it, "You don't need a survey to assess your own positivity. I think people tend to know how they are."

A few lines later, on the next page, the Talmud relates that one of Rabbi Akiva's students fell ill and no one came to visit him. Rabbi Akiva, who was the leading Torah authority in his generation, came to see him. Rabbi Akiva saw that the conditions his student was being kept in were detrimental to his health. According to some accounts Rabbi Akiva himself improved the conditions, and according to other accounts he instructed household members to sweep the floor and sprinkle water over it to settle the dust. The student was revived after Rabbi Akiva's visit, and was so overwhelmed with gratitude that he told Rabbi Akiva, "Rebbe, you have returned my life to me!" From this story it is possible to begin to appreciate the many positive consequences of visiting the sick. According to one opinion, when those looking after the sick student saw the esteem that Rabbi Akiva held him in, they immediately started to treat him with more respect and to tend more attentively to his needs.

In his ethical work titled *Seder Hayom*, Rabbi Yechiel Yehoshua Rabinowitz, the Rebbe of Biala, writes that visiting the sick is the highest form of kindness there is. As the Talmud teaches, it has no limits. The Rebbe

adds that sometimes with encouraging and kind words, a visitor can revitalize an ill person to the point that the patient will tell everyone afterwards that *because of the visit* they now feel like a new person.

Undoubtedly, when done properly, visiting a sick person assists the patient and helps them find new strength to fight their illness. However, there is an additional dimension to this as well. Visiting the sick is also beneficial to the person who is doing the visiting. Too often we may take our good health for granted. We may just assume that we are supposed to be well. But when we visit someone whose health is not in the best of shape, it should serve as a reminder that good health is a delicate reality that can — and sometimes does — change in a moment. When we pay a sick call, we should use it as a means to remind ourselves that we should always be aware of where our good health comes from, and we should show our appreciation to the One who gives it to us.

- *To be continued...*

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources that express the special relationship between the people of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

by Rabbi Mendel Weinbach, *zatzal*

The Torah and the Land

In the second chapter of the *Shema* we recite each morning and evening, we repeat Hashem's warning that turning away from Him to worship idols will result in being exiled from the land He has given us. This is immediately followed by the commandments of tefillin and mezuza.

This connection is explained by the Midrash (Sifri Ekev) with a parable:

"A king became angry with his wife and sent her off to her parents' home. As he banished her, he instructed her to continue wearing her royal jewelry even while she was away so that she would be familiar with them when she eventually returned to his palace.

"In similar fashion Hashem instructed His beloved people as He banished them from His palace, Eretz Yisrael, to continue being distinguished with their mitzvahs so that they would be familiar with them when they returned."

Tefillin and mezuza are mitzvahs which are not dependent on living in Eretz Yisrael, unlike the many mitzvahs relating to agriculture, and they are as incumbent upon a Jew outside of Eretz Yisrael as upon one in the land. Why, then, is this connection made between these mitzvahs and the land?

The answer lies in the unique spiritual status of Eretz Yisrael, which is directly ruled by Hashem without the involvement of angels or any other heavenly forces. Mitzvahs fulfilled in Eretz Yisrael therefore have the ultimate spiritual quality, whereas those fulfilled outside of the land are of only secondary quality. This is

communicated in the statement of our Sages (Sifri Re'eh) that living in Eretz Yisrael is equivalent to all the mitzvahs of the Torah.

This unique status of Eretz Yisrael is also expressed in the land's sensitivity to sin. The Torah warns us that Eretz Yisrael is not like other lands and it will vomit out those who contaminate it (Vayikra 18:25). When the Kuttim (later known as the Samaritans) were brought to Eretz Yisrael by the Assyrian conqueror Sancheriv to replace the Ten Tribes he had exiled, they continued to worship idols, and Hashem sent lions to devour them (see Melachim II chapter 17). In their native land they were not punished in such swift fashion, but Eretz Yisrael cannot tolerate idolatry.

Hashem sanctified the nation dwelling in His land by commanding them with mitzvahs, and warned them that if they contaminate this land with idolatry or licentiousness, the land will vomit them out.

"Love of the Land" is therefore not expressed by merely mouthing patriotic slogans, but by maintaining a standard of loyalty to Hashem's Torah, and living according to the moral standards set by the Torah — which will grant us the privilege of remaining in our beloved land with security and sanctity.

- *Adapted from Nachmanides' Commentary on Vayikra 18:25*

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Shavuot: Brilliant Prohibitions

An ancient custom for the Holiday of Shavuot, dating back more than 1,000 years, calls for reading *piyyutim* which list the 613 commandments. These liturgical compositions comprise a category of poems known as *azharot* (literally, "warnings" or "prohibitions"). In this essay we will consider the etymological basis for the Rabbinic Hebrew word *azharah*. In doing so, we will explore how *azharah* differs from other seemingly synonymous terms like *issur* and *lav*.

When Jethro advises Moses on how to establish a judicial system, he tells his esteemed son-in-law, "And you shall warn (*v'hizhartah*) them about the statutes and the laws, and you shall notify them of the path that they shall walk in and the actions that they shall do" (Ex. 18:20). In this passage, Jethro uses a verb cognate of the word *azharah*, and, in fact, cognates of this root appear some twenty-two times throughout the Bible. The word *azharah* itself in the sense of a "prohibition" first appears in the Mishna, where it occurs a handful of times (*Pesachim* 3:1, 4:1, *Sanhedrin* 7:7, and *Karetot* 3:10). This particular word often denotes the "warning" aspect of a prohibition (i.e. "thou shall not…"), as opposed to the punishment aspect (for examples, see *Yevamot* 2b and *Sifrei Naso* 1).

All the early Hebrew lexicographers — including Menachem Ibn Saruk (920-970), Rabbi Yonah Ibn Janach (990-1050), Rabbi David Kimchi (1160-1235), and Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Parchon (the 12th century author of *Machberet He'Aruch*) — understand the source of the word *azharah* to be the triliteral root ZAYIN-HEY-REISH. They

understand this root to have two very distinct meanings: on the one hand, it means "warning" (hence, *azharah* is a "prohibition"), and on the other hand it means "light" (Hoshea 7:16, Ps. 132:12). None of these grammarians intimate a connection between the two distinct meanings of that root.

However, Maimonides' son, Rabbi Avraham Maimuni (1186-1237), writes that the root of *l'hazhir* in the sense of "to warn" is the three-letter root ZAYIN-HEY-REISH, which means "light" or "brilliance" (*zohar*). He explains that one illuminates another's intellectual perception by instructing that person as to his or her responsibilities. Therefore, "warning" a person can be said to be "shedding light" on that person's expectations. Accordingly, the shared theme common to both meanings of this root is the concept of "enlightenment," both in the literal sense of bringing "light" and in the figurative sense of "enlightening" a person through adding to their knowledge.

The late Rabbi Dr. Jose Faur (1934-2020) infers from this that at its core the word *azharah* does not just refer to what the Torah outlaws ("negative commandments"), but also to what the Torah prescribes ("positive commandments"). For this reason, the poetic liturgical compositions known as *azharot* list both types of mitzvahs — not just the negative commandments.

But not everybody agrees that the root of *azharah* is the triliteral root ZAYIN-HEY-REISH. Some trace the word to the two-letter root ZAYIN-REISH ("estrangement," as in *zar*), while others even suggest that its source is the monoliteral ZAYIN. In fact, there is one case in which a cognate of *azharah* is spelled without the letter HEY, which we have assumed until now is part of its root: In Lev. 15:31, G-d tells Moses, "and you shall warn (*v'hizartem*) the Children of Israel from their impurities..." The word used here to denote the warning is *v'hizartem*, instead of the expected *v'hizhartem*. Rabbeinu Efrayim touches on this point by noting that "warning" (*azharah*) a person means telling a person he should "estrange" himself (i.e., make himself *zar*) from that which he has been warned against.

Similarly, Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) traces the term *azharah* to the biliteral root ZAYIN-REISH. One group of derivatives of this root are headlined by the word *zoreh*, which means "to scatter" (see, for examples, Ex. 32:20, Lev. 26:33, Ruth 3:2, Ps. 106:27). A sub-derivative of that is the word *zohar* ("light"), which denotes the way light *scatters/spreads out*. In the same way that rays of light spread out in order to illuminate as much as possible, an enlightened person must spread out his intellectual purview across a wide body of knowledge in order to be cautious and not violate what is expected of him. Rabbi Pappenheim explicitly notes that *azharah* does not mean "a warning," as many have understood it. Rather, he explains that the verb *la'hazhir* means "to enlighten." For example: "You shall enlighten them and they shall not incur guilt" (II Chron. 19:10), "And you shall enlighten them from Me" (Yechezkel 3:17). Enlightening a person as to his obligations is tantamount to forewarning them about what they should be careful of. Thus, even as Rabbi Pappenheim traces *azharah* to the biliteral ZAYIN-REISH, he still offers the same basic explanation as Rabbi Avraham Maimuni, who traced that term to the triliteral ZAYIN-HEY-REISH.

Rabbi Aharon Marcus (1843-1916) traces the word *zohar* to the monoliteral root represented by the letter ZAYIN. He explains that this letter stands for "visual revelation" of that which can be seen by the eye, as Hebrew words derived from this root are related to the realm of the ocular. Most notably, the Hebrew pronoun *zeh* ("this") is derived from this root, and according to rabbinic tradition always refers to something perceivable by the sense of sight. Other words associated with this root include *zach* ("pure"), *zahav* (gold", i.e. shiny and sparkling), *ziv* ("countenance," dazzles one's eyes), *zikim/zekukin* ("sparks of fire," glitter and shimmer), *zanav* ("tail," which protrudes from behind an animal and is quite visible), *ozen* ("ear," which protrudes from a person's head and is also quite visible), and *chazah* (which either refers to "vision" itself, or to *chazeh*, "chest," i.e. a very visible part of the body). In the same sense, *zohar* refers to a "light/enlightenment" that illuminates the eye. Interestingly, Rabbi Marcus notes that the Germanic words for "seeing" (*sehen* in Modern German, *zien* in Dutch, *zen* in Yiddish, *sien* in Afrikaans, *see* in English) also seem to be phonetically related to the letter ZAYIN.

Elsewhere, Rabbi Marcus contends that the Hebrew word *zohar* with a ZAYIN is actually derived from the earlier Biblical Hebrew words *tzohar* ("light") and *tzoharayim* ("noon," when the sun's *light* reaches its peak) with a TZADI. The way he explains it, the letter TZADI later morphed into a ZAYIN (as the two letters are often considered interchangeable), such that *tzohar* became *zohar*.

In Biblical Hebrew, the word *assur* means "tied up" with actual ropes or cables. However, in at least one particular instance, that term assumes more of an abstract meaning: "When a man vows a promise to G-d or he swears an oath to tie a tying (*l'essor issar*) on his soul, he shall not profane his words — in accordance with all that exits his mouth shall he do" (Num. 30:3). In this verse, "to tie a tying" is meant in the proverbial sense, namely, to create prohibition upon oneself by forbidding a certain action or item. This usage is akin to the English expression "my hands are tied," which means I am prevented from taking certain actions, but does not literally mean that my hands are tied with ropes or cables. This abstract meaning of *assur* and various cognates thereof appear countless times through the Mishna, such that *assur* in post-Biblical Hebrew came to mean "forbidden" or "prohibited." As a result, the word *issur* ("prohibition") is a more abstract derivative of the Biblical *assur* ("tied"), and refers to the rule that renders something forbidden.

Rabbi Pappenheim ties the word *assur* to the biliteral root SAMECH-REISH ("removal"), explaining that when one is tied down, then one's freedom of movement is "removed." In fact, the notion that the ALEPH of *assur* is superfluous to the actual root has already been noted by the early grammarian Rabbi Yehuda Ibn Chayyuj (945-1000), who adduces that the phrase *bet ha'surim* (Ecc. 4:14) is the semantic equivalent to the phrase *bet ha'assurim* (see Gen. 39:20, 40:3).

Finally, the noun *lav* is an anthimeria derived from the Hebrew word *lo* ("no," "not," "do not"). This word does not appear in the Bible, but can be found quite often in later rabbinic writings. In most cases it simply denotes a prohibited act that the Bible has warned a person *not* to do, even if the punishment for the proscribed action is not as severe.

To quickly summarize our findings, we spoke about three words that refer to "prohibitions" that proscribe certain actions. The word *azharah* seems to focus on a prohibition as a way of "enlightening" a person of his duties and expectations. The word *issur* focuses on a prohibition as a way of "tying" a person's hands, so to speak, and banning him from taking certain actions. And finally, the word *lav* denotes a prohibition as a "no-no" that people are enjoined from committing.

For questions, comments, or to propose ideas for a future article, please contact the author at rcklein@ohr.edu

The Ohr Somayach Family wishes you - our readers, friends, alumni and your families - a festive and Torah-filled Shavout holiday! May it truly be for all of us "The Time of the Giving of our Torah"! Chag Somayach!

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Bamidbar

The Book of Bamidbar — "In the desert" — begins with Hashem commanding Moshe to take a census of all men over age twenty — old enough for service. The count reveals just over 600,000. The *levi'im* are counted separately later on because their service will be unique. They will be responsible for transporting the Mishkan and its furnishings, and assembling them when the nation encamps. The 12 Tribes of Israel, each with its banner, are arranged around the Mishkan in four sections: east, south, west and north. Since Levi is singled out, the tribe of Yosef is split into two tribes, Efraim and Menashe, so there will be four groups of three. When the nation travels, they march in a formation similar to the way they camp.

A formal transfer is made between the first-born and the *levi'im*, whereby the *levi'im* take over the role the first-born would have had serving in the Mishkan if not for the sin of the golden calf. The transfer is made using all the 22,000 surveyed *levi'im* from one month old and up. Only *levi'im* between 30 and 50 will work in the Mishkan. The remaining first-born sons are redeemed with silver, similar to the way we redeem our first-born today. The sons of Levi are divided into the three main families of Gershon, Kehat and Merari (besides the *kohanim* — the special division from Kehat's family). The family of Kehat carried the Menorah, the Table, the Altar and the Holy Ark. Because of their utmost sanctity, the Ark and the Altar are covered only by Aharon and his sons, before the *levi'im* prepare them for travel.

Naso

The Torah assigns the exact Mishkan-related tasks to be performed by the families of Gershon, Kehat, and Merari, the sons of Levi. A census reveals that more than 8,000 men are ready for such service. All those ritually impure are to be sent out of the encampments.

If a person, after having sworn in court to the contrary, confesses that he wrongfully retained his neighbor's property, he must pay an additional fifth of the base-price of the object and bring a guilt offering as atonement. If the claimant has already passed away without heirs, the payments are made to a *kohen*.

In certain circumstances, a husband who suspects that his wife had been unfaithful brings her to the Temple. A *kohen* prepares a drink of water mixed with dust from the Temple floor and a special ink that was used for inscribing Hashem's Name on a piece of parchment. If she is innocent, the potion does not harm her, but, rather, it brings her a blessing of children. If she is guilty, she suffers a supernatural death.

A *Nazir* is one who vows to dedicate himself to G-d for a specific period of time. He must abstain from all grape products, grow his hair and avoid contact with corpses. At the end of this period he shaves his head and brings special offerings. The *kohanim* are commanded to bless the people. The Mishkan is completed and dedicated on the first day of Nissan in the second year after the Exodus. The prince of each tribe makes a communal gift to help transport the Mishkan, as well as donating identical individual gifts of gold, silver, animal and meal offerings.

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LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Hershman

Bamidbar

To The Manner Born

After the description of the national census and the formation of the camp, the Torah describes the nature of the service of the Leviim and the manner of their counting.

The Leviim are appointed as guardians. Their mission is described as various forms of guardianship: of the Sanctuary, of Aharon [the Kohanim], of the entire community. Preparing the nation for, and educating it to the Sanctuary, is integral to the mission of the Levite guard. In this capacity, the Levi assists the Kohen, whose essential task is to direct and educate the people. (The linguistic root of Kohen means to prepare and direct.)

The position of the Leviim was initially given to the firstborn of each family. The firstborn in each family was in a way responsible for fulfilling G-d's Will within his family circle. As the Jewish people emerged from Egypt, they were gathered in groups of tribes, families and households. In order that these separate groups should remain united in a common mission, G-d appointed the firstborn within the families and homes to bear, cultivate and defend G-d's Will in the midst of families. In this way, each family was connected to the Divine mission of the national community. This is why the firstborn were consecrated to G-d. (Shemot 3:13)

Now, when this common element of Divine mission was given symbolic expression through the Sanctuary housing the Torah, it was necessary to appoint guardians. The firstborn, who had already been sanctified, were the natural choice. But they had forfeited this position when they failed to prove themselves the champions and guardians of Torah during the sin of the Golden Calf. What was expected of them was done by the Leviim — only the Leviim had rallied to the call of Moshe to stand up for the honor of G-d. In return, G-d raised the Leviim and assigned to them the task of the firstborn, which they had earned by virtue of their staunch commitment.

The Leviim are not counted from the age of twenty, as is the rest of the population, but rather from the age of one month — the legal age of viability. This indicates that their calling as Leviim entails far more than the performance of service assigned to them in the Sanctuary. This service — guarding the Sanctuary during the encampments, transporting the Tabernacle components and furnishings during travel — is only an outgrowth of their essential mission. For *that* work, the Leviim are counted from age thirty and upwards. (Bamidbar 4:33). But for their essential mission — securing the Torah which the Sanctuary represents — they are counted from one month old.

Because there were always more Leviim than necessary to fill the shifts required for service in the Temple, the Leviim had much spare time on their hands — time intended, and indeed used, for them to immerse themselves in Torah scholarship. In this way they became great Torah scholars and brought the Torah back to the people. *This* is the way they performed their most essential function of safeguarding the Torah. And for this vital task, training from the cradle was required to guide and direct the infant to a loftier and higher calling.

- *Sources: Commentary, Bamidbar 3:6-15*

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Hershman

Naso

The Priestly Blessing

Speak to Aharon and his sons as follows: Thus shall you bless the Children of Israel…May G-d bless you and keep you. May G-d illuminate His Countenance for you and favor you. May G-d turn His Countenance toward you and establish peace for you. (Bamidbar 6:23-26)

The priestly blessing speaks to three layers of blessing. The first — blessing and keeping — refers to the possessions that require safeguarding; the blessing alone without protection not be sufficient — they must remain in our possession to prove to be a true blessing. This is the blessing of prosperity and material possessions.

But there is more to life than prosperity and comfort — these alone leave a soul unsatisfied. The next blessing showers upon us G-d's illumination and favor. This illumination and grace refer to spiritual gifts; when granted, they endow us with spiritual wisdom whereby the aims of G-d are illuminated and revealed, so that we may understand our history and task in life.

Finally, there is one more layer of blessing. Material and spiritual blessings have already been pronounced. The final blessing — the crown of all three — is G-d *turning His Countenance* toward us. The meaning of this blessing is G-d's closeness. We will attain it if we properly utilize all the material and spiritual assets granted to us. After our eyes have been enlightened to recognize His will, we are to channel our material and spiritual assets toward the fulfillment of the Divine aims revealed to us. We do not yearn for G-d's closeness in order to attain through it material and spiritual blessing. Rather, we seek material and spiritual blessing in order to do with it G-d's Will — so as to be *worthy* of His closeness. That closeness is the absolute good.

The "Countenance" of G-d are His aims. If G-d illuminated those aims and we properly utilized our G-d-granted spiritual abilities and material means to achieve those aims, then this final blessing will vest: He will direct to us all the aims of His rule in nature and history. Because G-d is interested in the formation, continuance and development of a G-d serving people and community, the purpose of His rule will be focused on those people — they will be the object of His providence.

This, in turn, will lead to peace and harmonious accord. In the words of Rav Hirsch, "Every breath drawn by an individual who truly serves G-d will elicit a responsive chord from the universe around him."

When these blessings were recited in the Sanctuary, they were merged into one sentence, rather than three separate pronouncements followed by a congregational "amen." In the Sanctuary, no "amen" was recited at all. Instead, the people pronounced "Blessed be the Name of His glorious Kingship for eternity." Additionally, the Kohanim held their hands over their heads instead of at shoulder level, as they would do when blessing a congregation outside of the Temple.

All of these differences express the universal and far-reaching blessing emanating from the Sanctuary. "Amen" is an expression of personal acceptance and taking to heart. If "amen" were to be recited by only the fraction of the people standing in the Sanctuary at the time of the blessing, the blessing would be limited in its reach. Instead of saying "amen" and acting as *recipients* of the blessing, the people present are considered as if they pronounced the blessing along with the Kohanim. In this manner they are preserving the character of the blessing for the entire community.

- *Sources: Commentary, Bamidbar 6:23-26*

Special Shavuot Feature!

Why Was Six Scared of Seven?

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

In the Land of Israel, the Festival of Succot lasts for a majestic eight days. The Festival of Pesach lasts for an almost-majestic seven days. And the Festival of Shavuot lasts for just one day. It seems a little paltry compared to the other two and yet the Festival of Shavuot represents the absolute foundation of Judaism – the day that the Holy Torah was given to the Jewish Nation.

Why would it be that this day which exemplifies everything that Judaism stands for be encapsulated in just one day? And why is it that Shavuot is a Festival that seems to be devoid of any real trappings? It's true that cheese-cake appears extensively on the Shavuot menu, but there is no obligation to eat it (what a relief for the lactose-intolerant and the cheese-cake intolerant!). Pesach and Succot, on the other hand, are chock-a-block full of symbolism with special activities and special foods.

In Jewish philosophy, numbers are very significant. The Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Yehudah Loew, explains that the number seven represents the natural world. The number seven stems from the seven days of the creation and the seven days of the week. A number seven will always be connected to nature. The number eight, on the other hand, represents something that is beyond the natural world, something that belongs to the spiritual realms. With this in mind we can understand why Succot lasts eight days, since it's a time of intense spirituality culminating in Simchat Torah and our expression of love for G-d. But why would Pesach last for only seven days? Why is Pesach, the Festival of Freedom – the time that we commemorate all of the super-natural miracles that God wrought for His Chosen Nation – represented by the number seven? And, last of all, Shavuot, one of the holiest and spiritually transcendent days of the year, is just one day. Why?

Pesach does not finish when Pesach ends! The Festivals are given to us to draw closer to G-d and to join together with Him in such a way that we feel their influence throughout the entire year. Pesach is the Festival of Freedom, but Pesach does not define for us what freedom means. Freedom from what? Freedom for what? Pesach is the beginning of a process that ends with Shavuot. Shavuot, the Giving of the Torah, was the defining moment in Jewish history and theology. Of what use is freedom from slavery and subjugation if that freedom is not harnessed to aspirations and goals that will transform us into something better than we were? It transpires that Pesach really does have eight days in a sense. However, the eighth day — the culmination of everything that Pesach truly represents — is seven weeks later on Shavuot. Shavuot is the moment that we, the Jewish Nation, moved out of the physical realms and into the spiritual ones instead. By accepting the Torah on Sinai we declared our absolute allegiance to G-d. We took our oh-so-precious, new-found freedom from Egypt and slavery and we dedicated it to G-d. That is why there are no unique activities on Shavuot that set it apart from the other Festvals. On Shavuot we celebrate by learning G-d's Torah. What could be more Heavenly than that? We do not base the Festival around physical signs because to do so would be too "seven-like" and would detract us from the very essence of the day.

There is a famous children's joke, "Why was six scared of seven? Because seven eight (ate) nine". The children think it's hilarious and the adults think that it's ridiculous.

And I think that without Shavuot we would really have to be scared of the number seven, scared of the tremendous power that physicality has in the world and how it overwhelms and consumes us so easily. But we don't remain in the realm of seven. From Pesach through Shavuot we push forward and metamorphose into the number eight, leaving the physicality behind as we soar into the spiritual spheres that contain nothing but ourselves and Our Father in Heaven.

Bliss. Pure bliss. Far, far more sublime than even the tastiest cheese-cake in the world.

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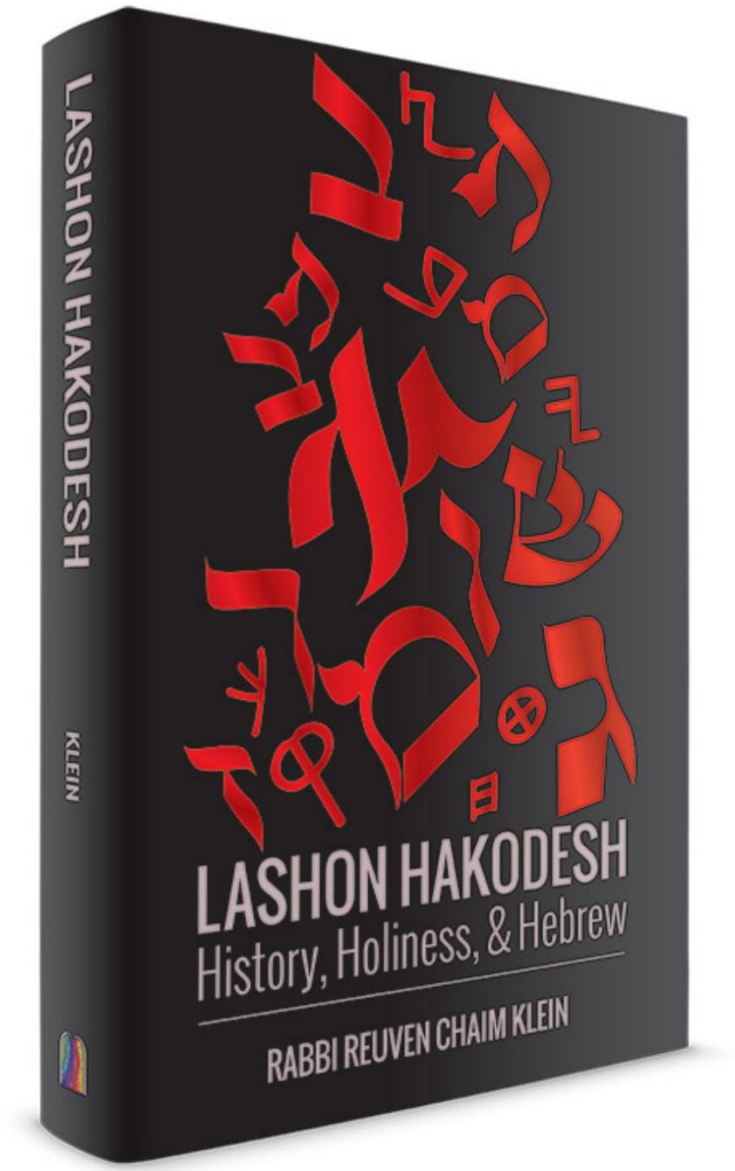

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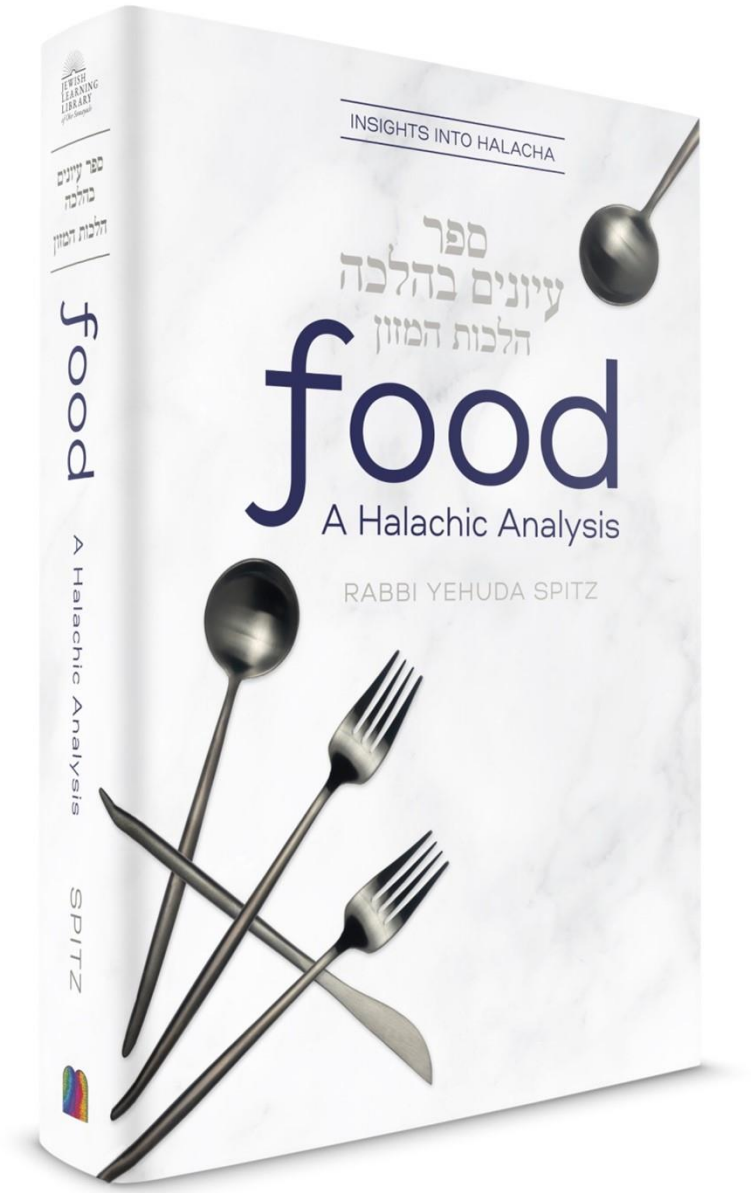

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