BS"D
June 3, 2022
Friday, 4 Sivan, is the 48th Day of the Omer

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 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 archives.

As we count down the final days before Shavout, the enemies of our people use their imaginations to find new lies about the evil of our people and to spread hatred. The Jerusalem Post reported today that the hate group JVP posted on social media an illustration allegedly showing IDF soldiers drinking the blood of Palestinians whom they supposedly murdered. Closer to home, someone posted "hateful, antisemitic flyers referencing the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust and featuring white supremacist tags" on a bus stop in the heart of the Kemp Mill, adjacent to three large shuls in the largest Orthodox neighborhood in the Washington, DC area. Enemies of our people have long used the period between Pesach and Shavuot as a time to attack our people. Some examples include the worst murders of the Crusades, the destruction and murders in the Warsaw ghetto, the attacks on Israel leading up to the Six Day War in 1967, and the rocket attacks from Gaza in 2021.

Perhaps our enemies focus so much of their hatred during this period because of what Shavuot represents – the complete unity of all Jews at the Revelation (Har Sinai) 3334 years ago, when every Jew stood next to Har Sinai and responded to the Almighty that "We shall obey and we shall listen." Shavuot also represents the unification of Jerusalem after the Six Day War on Rosh Hodesh Sivan, five days before Shavuot, 55 years ago. Even more than Jews keep Shabbat (and mitzvot), Shabbat has kept the Jews. Shavuot is a Shabbaton (as are all the chagim), so Shavuot is part of what has kept the Jews for so many centuries – and will keep the Jews in the future.

We read Megillat Ruth on Shavuot. Ruth came from the lowest possible source -- she was a Moabite woman. The Moabites, descendants of Lot, Avraham's nephew, refused to permit the Jews to cross their territory and would not even sell them water when our ancestors approached Eretz Yisrael during the 40th year in the desert. As a result of their sins, God ruled that no Moabite could ever become a member of the Jewish people. Ruth, however, a Moabite woman, widow of a Jewish man from Yehudah, was a faithful companion who left all her family and friends to go with her mother-in-law Naomi to Beit Lechem, and devoted her life to caring for her. Ruth accepted Judaism, followed the mitzvot, married a man from Yehudah (Boaz), and became the great grandmother of King David. (The Rabbis interpreted the prohibiton of intermarriage with a Moabite as applying to Moabite men, not Moabite women, to permit Ruth's conversion.)

Ruth is a symbol of the potential that all humans have. Even the lowest born and poorest person, through dedication, pure living, and effort, has the potential to achieve greatness. The Torah and later Jewish writings are honest about both the positive and negative aspects of every person. We read about Avraham's deceptions with non-Jews as well as his brilliant moral vision. We read about even more shortcomings of Yitzhak, Yaakov, Kings David and Solomon, and various prophets. As far as I know, Ruth is the only person in Jewish writings whose presentation from start to finish is completely positive. Moreover, is there a greater sign of merit than to be the matriarch of all of the kings of Israel? As we prepare to receive the Torah again on Sunday morning, could there be a better model of righteous living than Ruth?

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, featured children of congregants leading various parts of the service and reading Torah on the first day of Shavuot. This holiday has become a traditional time to recognize students attaining milestones in their Jewish education. For Rabbi Cahan, it was also a time to teach the beauty of Torah, Shavuot, Ruth,

and the rich heritage of our people. May we all merit sharing this message with ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren.

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In reviewing the Devrei Torah below, Rabbi Hayyim Ovadia is permitting me to include a major analysis of Sefer Bemidbar that is too long to run on a single week. He has therefore broken it down to run every week that we read from this Sefer. Last week, Rabbi Ovadia shared a brilliant analysis of Megillat Ruth that I attached by E-mail. If you have not already read this piece, go to PotomacTorah.org and download it from the archives from last week. We arranged to include this excellent article as a separate attachment so you may download it without searching through fifty or more additional pages of material. This week Rabbi Hayyim Angel has also sent his excellent Dvar on Megillat Ruth, and I am including it as an E-mail attachment. I recommend both pieces very highly.

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 Yehoshua Mayer HaLevi ben Nechama Zelda, Yonatan Ophir ben Ilana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Mordechai ben Chaya, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, who need our prayers. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Samaich,
Hannah & Alan

Dvar Torah: Shavous: 3327 Years Later! (2007)

by Rabbi Label Lam

And you should know it today and return it to your heart that HASHEM is G-d in the heavens above and on the earth below and the there is no other. (Devarim 4:39)

The Rambam states that “the foundation of foundations and the pillar of all wisdom is to know that there is a prime source of reality- namely G-d”. It is not a matter of belief or speculation but rather of knowledge. He continues, “The knowledge of this matter is a positive commandment, as it says, “I am HASHEM your G-d Who took you out of the land of Egypt…” The Kuzari asks, “Why such a small claim?” “I am HASHEM Who created heaven and earth” would be more grandiose.

The answer is that we were not there when the world was created but we did experience the Exodus from Egypt and the pronouncements on Mt. Sinai. This was a historical revelation and not a hysterical revolution. We, as a nation, were there and we witnessed it. That’s how we know, but how do we “know today?!

It was a glorious Sunday morning 25 years ago. My wife and I had just spent a beautiful Shabbos in Boston. We had two little boys in tow. We decided to travel north to visit Newburyport Mass. where my great grandfather lived most of his adult life and where I remember visiting him. Entering the city we found only strip malls. I was sure they had already “paved paradise and put up a parking lot”.

Then like out of a time warp, there it was; the cobble stone street, the lake, the old court house, and a civil war cannon. As we stood there surveying the area a gentleman approached us and asked, “Are you people- Chassidim?” I told him, “No! We’re just ordinary folk.” He persisted, “Is there a convention going on?” I thought to myself, “Four Jews is a convention. Five would be an incursion, and six would already be an occupation.”

I told him, “No! My great grandfather lived here after coming from Russia. He built that Synagogue down the block and his house is there across the street. I’m here to show my children where their great-great grandfather lived, worked, and prayed.” The man stood at attention. Real tears streamed down his cheeks and with a

quivering voice he declared, "When I see how you people keep your traditions from generation to generation you are truly G-d's chosen people." He backed up respectfully into in the day and disappeared. My wife and I were stunned. What was that all about? We reasoned that this fellow just came out from one of those Sunday services where they were reading the Bible which is all about the Jews. However, when they look at the news they are surprised to find out how often those who seem to be the descendants of the ones mentioned in "the book" represent causes that countermand the values of "the book". Something's wrong with this picture! A doubt is aroused about the veracity of "The Book". Behold, onto the Mall in Newburyport, Mass. strides a family looking hauntingly authentic, with Yarmulkas, and Tsitsis, and other overt signs.

I'm not saying that I am the paragon of virtue but something must have struck him. The "People of the Book" suddenly appear with loyalty to "the book" and all is confirmed true. We just walked out of the Bible -- stepped down from Mt. Sinai, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, witnesses to the giving of the Torah. "A matter is established by two witnesses", and here testify; the book and the people of the book. So it is written, "You are my witnesses, says HASHEM" (Isaiah 3:10). It was a glorious Sunday morning!

Our direct contact with Mount Sinai occurred 3327 years ago and here we are still animated by Torah and Mitzvos with its millions of minutiae resonating 3327 years later!

Good Shabbos!

https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5775-shavuos/

Shavuos: Your Livelihood Called Torah

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

Shavuos commemorates the event at which Hashem gifted us the Torah. That event changed the course of history by giving an official system of morals and values to the world. But perhaps even greater than the global impact of Torah in the form of the Bible, monotheism, and Jewish teachings, is the personal impact that Torah has in our lives. Torah is not just philosophical, academic, or legal. Torah is a way of life. Torah is personal.

Every day before we recite Shema, we ask Hashem, "Our Father, who has great compassion," for a gift that we yearn for deeply. We ask, "Grant us our personal portion in Torah." It is not enough for us that Torah is true. It is not enough for us that the scholars know Torah. We yearn for our personal relationship with Torah. As the verse so eloquently states, "It is an inheritance to the congregation of Yakov." Torah is not limited to any one class or Shevet (tribe) of Jews. It belongs to all of us.

Rav Mendel Kaplan, a great Torah educator who flourished in the United States in the 1950s through the 80s, once found that his Talmidim (students) were listening to his shiur (lecture) but were not engaging with comments or questions. He declared, "You think that it is enough that Rebbe knows the Sugya (topic). Well let me tell you. It is not enough that I know the Sugya, the point is that you should know it; that you should make it yours."

How exactly do we go about getting personal with Torah and making it ours?

There is a statement in Maariv which we recite every evening which may well hold the key. We declare, "For Torah is our life." What does it mean that Torah is our life? Perhaps we can suggest that Torah can be like our livelihood. Just like in whatever line of work we are, we take it personally; we remember all the details, rules, and exceptions. So, we can all develop a personal mastery and relationship with Torah.

I find it remarkable, for example, that the owner of a store is able to recall with precision where each item is in the store, its price, and even the history on the pricing as might be relevant for an item being returned. A store owner will instantly know if there is a special price when the item is purchased by the carton, and will even recall any special deals with customers, and grandfathered in prices which he honors with certain customers even as the regular store price has gone up.

It is in fact this inspirational comparison between one's livelihood and Torah that Eliyahu invoked (Eliyahu Zuta 14) to inspire a fisherman he met to study Torah. Eliyahu asked him, "Why do you not study Torah?" The man replied that he did not have the wisdom. Eliyahu asked him what he did for a living. The man replied, "I make nets and catch fish." Eliyahu said, "Do you really think that Hashem blessed you with wisdom to be able to practice your craft but did not give you wisdom to study Torah. Torah is described as close to you." Try and you will succeed.

The prayer that Torah should be personal to us, and the statement that Torah should be like our livelihood, appear to be linked. They are expressions of Hashem's goal when He gifted us the Torah. Torah is not just for the elite. Torah is not just a treasure that can be admired from the distance. Torah is a personal gift to each and every Jew.

Wishing you and yours a wonderful Shabbos and Yom Tov!

Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of over 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

I and Thou: Thoughts for Parashat Bemidbar

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

When the Israelites were liberated from their slavery in Egypt, they did not — and could not — immediately become free people. Although the physical servitude had come to an end, psychological/emotional slavery continued to imbue their perception of life.

For generations, they had been viewed as objects, as lowly slaves whose existence was controlled by Egyptian taskmasters. Not only did the Egyptians see the Israelites as beasts of burden, but it was inevitable for the slaves to internalize this evaluation of their own lives. They were dehumanized…and it was very difficult to retain their humanity, self-respect, and dignity.

In this week's Torah portion, we read about the census of the Israelites in the wilderness. The Torah specifies that those who were to be counted in the census were to be identified by their names and by their families. This was a dramatic way of telling them: you have names, you have families, you are dignified human beings; you are not chattel, you are not nameless slaves, you are not objects. Until the Israelites came to internalize their freedom and self-worth, they would continue to see themselves as inferior and unworthy beings.

In his famous book, I and Thou, Martin Buber pointed out that human relationships, at their best, involve mutual knowledge and respect, treating self and others as valuable human beings. An I-Thou relationship is based on understanding, sympathy, love. Its goal is to experience the "other" as a meaningful and valuable person. In contrast, an I-It relationship treats the "other" as an object to be manipulated, controlled, or exploited. If I-Thou relationships are based on mutuality, I-It relationships are based on the desire to gain functional benefit from the other.

Buber wrote: "When a culture is no longer centered in a living and continually renewed relational process, it freezes into the It-world, which is broken only intermittently by the eruptive, glowing deeds of solitary spirits." As we dehumanize others, we also engage in the process of dehumanizing ourselves. We make our peace with living in an It-world, using others as things, and in turn being used by them for their purposes.

In critiquing modern life, Erich Fromm has noted that "We have become things and our neighbors have become things. The result is that we feel powerless and despise ourselves for our impotence."

The line between I-Thou and I-It relationships is not always clear. Sometimes, people appear to be our friends, solicitous of our well-being; yet, their real goal is to manipulate us into buying their product, accepting their viewpoint, controlling us in various ways. Their goal isn't mutual friendship and understanding; rather, they want to exert power and control, and they feign friendship as a tactic to achieve their goals.

Dehumanization is poisonous to proper human interactions and relationships. It is not only destructive to the victim, but equally or even more destructive to the one who does the dehumanizing. The dehumanizer ultimately dehumanizes himself/herself, and becomes blinded by egotism and power-grabbing at any cost. Such a person may appear "successful" based on superficial standards; but at root, such a person is an immense failure who has demeaned his/her humanity along with the humanity of his/her victims.

The Israelites, after their long and painful experience as slaves, needed to learn to value themselves and to value others; to engage in I-Thou relationships based on their own human dignity and the dignity of others. One of the messages of the census in the wilderness was: you are a dignified individual and your life matters — not just for what you can do as an "It" but for who you are as a "Thou."

I-It relationships are based on functionality. Once the function no longer yields results, the relationship breaks. I-Thou relationships are based on human understanding, loyalty and love. These relationships are the great joy of life.

I recently received an email with the following message: "Friendship isn't about who you have known longest…it's about who came and never left your side."

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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.

https://www.jewishideas.org/article/i-and-thou-thoughts-parashat-bemidbar

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Orthodoxy and Diversity: Thoughts for Shavuoth **

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The Talmud)Berakhot 58a(teaches that one is required to recite a special blessing when witnessing a vast throng of Jews, praising the Almighty who is hakham harazim, the One who understands the root and inner thoughts of each individual. "Their thoughts are not alike and their appearance is not alike." The Creator made each person as a unique being. He expected and wanted diversity of thought, and we bless Him for having created this diversity among us.

The antithesis of this ideal is represented by Sodom. Rabbinic teaching has it that the Sodomites placed visitors in a bed. If the person was too short, he was stretched until he fit the bed. If he was too tall, his legs were cut off so that he fit the bed. This parable is not, I think, merely referring to the desire for physical uniformity; the people of Sodom wanted everyone to fit the same pattern, to think alike, to conform to the mores of the Sodomites. They fostered and enforced conformity in an extreme way.

Respect for individuality and diversity is a sine qua non of healthy human life. We each have unique talents and insights, and we need the spiritual climate that allows us to grow, to be creative, to contribute to humanity's treasury of ideas and knowledge.

Societies struggle to find a balance between individual freedom and communal standards of conduct. The Torah, while granting much freedom, also provides boundaries beyond which the individual may not trespass. When freedom becomes license, it can unsettle society. On the other hand, when authoritarianism quashes individual freedom, the dignity and sanctity of the individual are violated. I wish to focus on this latter tendency as it relates to contemporary Orthodox Jewish life.

Some years ago, I visited a great Torah luminary in Israel. He had given a shiur)Torah lecture(for rabbis and rabbinical judges in which he suggested introducing civil marriage in the State of Israel. He offered cogent arguments in support of this view, and many of those present actually thanked him for having the courage to put this issue on the rabbinic agenda. His suggestion, though, was vehemently opposed by the rabbinic establishment, and this rabbi was sharply criticized in

the media. Efforts were made to isolate him and limit his influence as much as possible. Students of the rabbi were told not to attend his classes any longer. This rabbi lamented to me: “Have you heard of the mafia? Well, we have a rabbinic mafia here.” This, of course, is an indictment of the greatest seriousness. It is not an issue of whether or not one favors civil marriage. The issue is whether a rabbinic scholar has the right and responsibility to explore and discuss unpopular ideas. If his suggestions are valid, they should be accepted. If they are incorrect, they should be refuted. But to apply crude pressure to silence open discussion is dangerous, and inimical to the best interests of the Torah community.

Similar cases abound where pressure has been brought to bear on rabbis and scholars who espouse views not in conformity with the prevailing opinions of an inner circle of Orthodox rabbinic leaders. As one example of this phenomenon, a certain rabbi permitted women to study Talmud in his class at his synagogue. One of the women in his congregation consulted a Rosh Yeshiva who promptly branded the synagogue rabbi as a heretic)apikores(for having allowed women to study Talmud. The Rosh Yeshiva told the woman she was not permitted to pray in the synagogue any more as long as that rabbi was there. When the synagogue rabbi was informed of this, he wrote a respectful letter to the Rosh Yeshiva and explained the halakhic basis for women studying Talmud. The Rosh Yeshiva refused to answer, and told the woman congregant that he would not enter a correspondence with a heretic. The woman stopped attending the rabbi’s synagogue.

Is this the way of Torah, whose ways are the ways of pleasantness? Does this kind of behavior shed honor on Orthodoxy? Shouldn’t learned people be able to speak with each other, argue a point of halakha, disagree with each other? Shouldn’t the Torah world be able to deal with controversy without engaging in name-calling and delegitimation?

Over the years, I have been involved in the planning of a number of rabbinic conferences and conventions. Invariably questions are raised concerning who will be invited to speak. Some says: If Rabbi so-and-so is put on the program, then certain other rabbis and speakers will refuse to participate. Someone says: if such-and-such a group is among the sponsors of the conference, the other groups will boycott the event. What is happening in such instances is a subtle — and not so subtle — process of coercion. Decisions are being made as to which Orthodox individuals and groups are “acceptable” and which are not.

This process is insidious and is unhealthy for Orthodoxy. It deprives us of meaningful discussion and debate. It intimidates people from taking independent or original positions, for fear of being ostracized or isolated.

Many times I have heard intelligent people say: I believe thus-and-so but I can’t say so openly for fear of being attacked by the “right”. I support such-and-such proposal, but can’t put my name in public support for fear of being reviled or discredited by this group or that group.

We must face this problem squarely and candidly: The narrowing of horizons is a reality within contemporary Orthodoxy. The fear to dissent from the “acceptable” positions is palpable. But if individuals are not allowed to think independently, if they may not ask questions and raise alternatives — then we as a community suffer a loss of vitality and dynamism. Fear and timidity become our hallmark.

This situation contrasts with the way a vibrant Torah community should function. Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein, in the introduction to Hoshen Misphat of his Arukh haShulhan, notes that difference of opinion among our sages constitutes the glory of Torah. “The entire Torah is called a song)shira(, and the glory of a song is when the voices differ one from the other. This is the essence of its pleasantness.”

Debates and disagreements have long been an accepted and valued part of the Jewish tradition. The Rama)see Shulhan Arukh, Y.D. 242:2,3(notes that it is even permissible for a student to dissent from his rabbi’s ruling if he has proofs and arguments to uphold his opinion. Rabbi Hayyim Palachi, the great halakhic authority of 19th century Izmir, wrote that “the Torah gave permission to each person to express his opinion according to his understanding...It is not good for a sage to withhold his words out of deference to the sages who preceded him if he finds in their words a clear contradiction...A sage who wishes to write his proofs against the kings and giants of Torah should not withhold his words nor suppress his prophecy, but should give his analysis as he has been guided by Heaven.”)see Hikekei Lev, O.H. 6; and Y.D. 42(

The great 20th century sage, Rabbi Haim David Halevy, ruled: “Not only does a judge have the right to rule against his rabbis; he also has an obligation to do so]if he believes their decision to be incorrect and he has strong proofs to support his own position[. If the decision of those greater than he does not seem right to him, and he is not comfortable following it, and yet he follows that decision]in deference to their authority[, then it is almost certain that he has rendered a false

judgment.”)Aseh Lekha Rav, 2:61(Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, in rejecting an opinion of Rabbi Shelomo Kluger, wrote that “one must love truth more than anything.”)Iggrot Moshe, Y. D., 3:88(

Orthodoxy needs to foster the love of truth. It must be alive to different intellectual currents, and receptive to open discussion. How do we, as a modern Orthodox community, combat the tendency toward blind authoritarianism and obscurantism?
First, we must stand up and be counted on the side of freedom of expression. We, as a community, must give encouragement to all who have legitimate opinions to share. We must not tolerate intolerance. We must not yield to the tactics of coercion and intimidation.

Our schools and institutions must foster legitimate diversity within Orthodoxy. We must insist on intellectual openness, and resist efforts to impose conformity: we will not be fitted into the bed of Sodom. We must give communal support to diversity within the halakhic framework, so that people will not feel intimidated to say things publicly or sign their names to public documents.

Let me add another dimension to the topic of diversity within Orthodoxy. Too often, Orthodox schools and books ignore the teachings and traditions of Jews of non-Ashkenazic backgrounds. Information is presented as though Jews of Turkey, the Balkans, North Africa and the Middle East simply did not exist. Little or no effort is made to draw from the vast wellsprings of knowledge and inspiration maintained by these communities for many centuries. Yet, these communities — deeply steeped in tradition — produced many rabbis and many books, rich folklore and religious customs; and these spiritual treasures belong to all Jews. To ignore the experience and teachings of these communities is to deprive ourselves and our children of a valuable part of the Jewish heritage.

Why, then, isn’t there a concerted effort to be inclusive in the teaching of Jewish tradition? Among the reasons are: narrowness of scope, a tendency toward conformity, lack of interest in reaching beyond the familiar. Yet, unless we overcome these handicaps, we rob Orthodoxy of vitality and strength, creativity and breadth.

Orthodoxy is large enough and great enough to include Rambam and the Ari; the Baal Shem Tov and the Gaon of Vilna; Rabbi Eliyau Benamozegh and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch; Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Rabbi Benzion Uziel; Dona Gracia Nasi and Sarah Schnirer. We draw on the wisdom and inspiration of men and women spanning the generations, from communities throughout the world. The wide variety of Orthodox models deepens our own religiosity and understanding, thereby giving us a living, dynamic, intellectually alive way of life.

If the modern Orthodox community does not have the will or courage to foster diversity, then who will? And if we do not do it now, we are missing a unique challenge of our generation.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

** This essay by Rabbi M. D. Angel originally appeared in Liber Amicorum, a book of essays in honor of Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo, published in Jerusalem, 2006.

]Ed. Note: This important essay expresses my opinion that positive disagreements over Torah interpretation are holy, in the best tradition of Hillel and Shammai. In particular, living in an Ashkenaz culture, we proudly support the Sephardic minyan and learning at our shul. Similarly, I do not agree with everything that I include in my weekly postings, but I present what I consider positive and holy interpretations in this tradition.[

https://www.jewishideas.org/orthodoxy-and-diversity-thoughts-shavuoth

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Bamidbar – The Power of Association

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer *

This week we begin reading the book of Bamidbar. The Parsha opens by telling us that we are still camped in the desert of Sinai. A little over a year after leaving Egypt, we would soon be ready to begin the long-awaited journey to the promised land. At this point, G-d instructs Moshe on how we would camp and how we would travel in the desert. Each tribe was to be identified by a unique flag with its own color and symbol, so everyone should know where they belong.

The tribes were arranged in a specific order, with the Mishkan in the very center of the camp. Moshe, Aharon and the Levi'im would surround the Mishkan on all four sides. Moshe and Aharon in the front, and the three families of Levi'im – Gershon, K'has and Merari, would each be on one of the other sides. The tribes would then surround the Levi'im, with three tribes on each side. There was an area a *mil* wide, an eighteen minute walk, between the Mishkan in the center and the tribes on the outside. The camp was a sight to behold, with close to three million people settled in a clear, organized and dignified manner.

In discussing the arrangement of the tribes, Rabbeinu Bechayei notes that the tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun were in the front of the Mishkan, on the same side as Moshe, Aharon and Aharon's sons. Therefore, he says, these three tribes became known as Torah leaders. Their proximity to these great spiritual giants influenced them to such a degree that their descendants would continue to devote themselves to Torah with extra fervor. Reuven, Shimon and Gad, however, were on the same side of the Mishkan as the family of Kehas, where Korach was camped. They were, therefore negatively influenced and joined in Korach's rebellion more so than did the tribes who were camped on other sides of the Mishkan. (Rabbeinu Bechayei Bamidbar 2:3)

While the influence of neighbors is well known, it is hard to understand in this context. Each of these tribes were made up of over fifty-thousand individual households, and their camps were a quarter of an hour's walk away from the Tabernacle. How much direct contact could the members of these tribes have had with Moshe and Aharon or with Korach? Furthermore, Moshe and Aharon were involved in all elements of communal life for the entire nation. Moshe was constantly teaching everyone, and Aharon was offering all of the sacrifices in the Temple. Weren't there many members of other tribes who had direct contact with them, as well?

Perhaps, Rabbeinu Bechayei is teaching us a deeper lesson. These tribes felt a greater association with those near them, because they were camped near each other. This added association caused them to identify more readily with those close to them. Those near Moshe and Aharon, therefore, were more susceptible to their positive influence and committed themselves more completely to Torah. Whereas, those who identified with Korah were unfortunately more susceptible to his negative influence and to joining in his rebellion.

The potential power of positive association is particularly astounding. Rabbeinu Bechayei tells us that the impact Moshe and Aharon had on the tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun had a long-lasting impact. These tribes were so greatly impacted by this added level of association that they continued to produce many of the Torah leaders of the Jewish people for centuries.

As we go through life, there are many subtle ways in which we associate and identify with those around us. It can be through physical proximity, similar joys, similar jobs and so many other factors. These associations can have a subtle, yet powerful impact on our psyche. As we prepare for the holiday of Shavuos and celebrate the gift of Torah and our place as G-d's nation, it is important to consider who we associate and identify with. Any opportunity we have to associate and identify with noble, religious people will only lift us up and enhance our connection with G-d. We must cherish those connections which raise us emotionally and spiritually. We must find ways to focus on those relationships and ensure that we identify with who we truly want to be.

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

Shavous: Megillas Rus – Jewish Identity

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer *

The Megilla tells us that when Boaz first meets Rus, he sees her collecting in his field. After inquiring as to who she is, Boaz gives Rus a formal speech, before even introducing himself. He simply says to her, "Have you not already heard, my daughter, do not go to gather in another field, and also do not leave from here and so you should cling to my maidens." (Rus 2:7)

The Medrash (Rus Rabbah 4:11) noting this elaborate speech explains that the words Boaz spoke at that moment were Divinely inspired. Hashem was speaking to Rus through Boaz, and intended that Boaz's words should serve as an encouragement for Rus to maintain her commitment to Judaism. The Maharz"u (ibid.) explains that this is the meaning of the opening phrase, "Have you not already heard, my daughter?" Hashem was telling Rus that He was about to remind

her of something she had heard before. He was about to remind her of the commitment made at Sinai to accept the Torah.

Based on this, the Medrash explains each of the three phrases Boaz said. "Do not go to gather in another field" was instructing her to not seek other gods, but rather to stay in G-d's field, in the service of G-d. "Do not leave from here" was an instruction to take strength in G-d's service, as we said at the Song of the Sea, "This is my G-d and I will laud Him." (Shemos 15:2) "So you should cling to my maidens" is an instruction to cling to the righteous, those devoted to G-d.

This Medrash is presenting three concepts as the essence of G-d's encouragement to Rus. He was telling her to stay away from idols, to praise G-d and to cling to the righteous. One can readily understand why refraining from idol worship would be a critical reminder for Rus. The other two points, though, are not quite what we would expect. They are not fundamental mitzvos. They are simply good advice. Why is the Medrash saying that these three concepts were the concepts which G-d inspired Boaz to share with Rus?

I believe this Medrash is teaching us that there is more to being Jewish than simply observing the Torah and mitzvos. Being Jewish means identifying as a Jew and seeing oneself as a servant of G-d. This is the what G-d was encouraging Rus to achieve. He was teaching her how to develop and maintain her identity as a Jew.

The first message is that she must not seek other gods. This is the most basic step of identifying as a Jew. We must know who we are not. We are different from the nations of the world and do not seek the ways of the idol worshippers around us. We do not follow their lead and do not worship as they do.

The second message is that she must praise G-d. This means to take pride in being G-d's servant and to find joy and purpose in her Judaism. To maintain our Jewish identity, it is not enough to know who we are not. We also need to know who we are. We must recognize and express G-d's greatness, and how privileged we are to be a part of His nation. We must recognize G-d's love for us and cherish our personal connection with Him. Being Jewish is a precious gift, which provides us with a unique path to connect with G-d and to understand Him.

Even with this, though, one's Jewish identity is not firmly maintained. Hashem gives Rus a third message. She must cling to the righteous. It is not enough to know who we are not. It is not even enough to know who we are. We also must surround ourselves with good role models. We are all affected by our environment. If we want to maintain our Jewish identity, we need to spend time with Torah personalities.

As we celebrate the holiday of Shavuos and rejoice in our Torah and G-d's relationship with us, we need to reflect upon this message. To truly maintain our identity and all that we are celebrating on Shavuos, we must take pride in our Judaism and in our connection with G-d, and we must find ways to bring righteous, Torah personalities into our lives. For only then can we truly guarantee that we will remain true to our Judaism.

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

On Trust and Leadership, Part 1 *
Why the Book of Numbers is not about numbers

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia **

What's in a name?

The book of BeMidbar suffers of somewhat of an identity crisis. It is easy to determine the identity of the other books of the Torah. Genesis is about the creation and the life of the forefathers, Exodus is about the exodus and the tabernacle, Leviticus deals with the laws of the Levites and the Kohanim, and Deuteronomy, as its names suggest, is the repetition and review of law and history. But what is BeMidbar about? Numbers? Is it really the Book of Census, as it was known in Rabbinic literature, a travelogue, or a collection of unrelated data, laws, and history?

I believe that BeMidbar's story conveys an extremely important message to humanity, which is that the most sophisticated and detailed program could fail, even if it is Divine, without the engagement and commitment of the humans in charge of carrying it out.

Perfect Society, Perfect Hierarchy

BeMidbar starts with the description of a perfect society, with clearly drawn boundaries and set roles. The Israelite camp is presented as a center of holiness surrounded by concentric circles in descending order. The order is as follows: The Holy of Holies at the center; the Holy; the Tabernacle's courtyard; the Levites and Aaron, in descending order: Aaron and family, Kehat, Gereshon, Merari; and finally, the Israelites. After the inner order of the camp has been established, the Torah calls for spiritual and hygienic boundaries: lepers, people who suffer from sexually transmitted diseases, and those who were in contact with a corpse must leave the camp. Their exile is temporary, and each one of them must wait the symbolic seven-days period before rejoining the camp.

The Torah also singles out the deviate woman and the Nazir as two extremes. The deviate woman lets herself be controlled by desire while the Nazir decides to detach himself from society and abstain from wine. Both are conceptually, if not physically, ostracized. The Torah suggests that they are outside the camp because their behavior is not healthy, and that it is preferable to reach a balance between pursuing of spirituality and enjoying life.

Between the two sections, the one which deals with lepers and those who suffer from spiritual contamination, and the one dealing with the Nazir and the deviate woman, there is a paragraph which seems out of place. It speaks about paying back financial obligations, and it also states that an unpaid obligation to another person is considered an offense towards God. According to the theory offered here, not only this paragraph belongs here, but it is an excellent example of how the Torah considers transgression against others to be a religious offense. The Torah declares that in order to maintain the camp clean and holy, it is not enough to send away those we consider unholy because of diseases, but also those whose business ethics are flawed.

Following the clarification of boundaries and the cleansing of the camp, the divine blessing is bestowed upon the people, offerings are brought, the Tabernacle is inaugurated, and the Israelites start their first journey: they traveled, for the first time as an organized camp, by the word of God, delivered through Moshe!

Perfect Society, Imperfect Individuals

Within three days, the people complain for no reason, and then cry for food. Moshe is willing to quit his job, and when he is told by God that everyone is going to get meat, he appears to be incredulous. Two men prophesy without Moshe's permission, Miriam and Aaron speak against Moshe, the scouts start a rebellion… the list goes on and on.

Thus, we see how a perfect plan fails without the commitment of individuals to put aside their pride and sense of entitlement and carry the plan out.

David Brooks writes in *The Social Animal:*

You can siphon money to poor areas, but unless a culture develops self-control, social mobility is unattainable.

You can raise or lower taxes, but without trust and confidence, corporations and institutions will not form, and people will not invest in each other.

You can declare elections, but without responsible citizens, democracy will not flourish. Criminologist James Q. Wilson, who devoted his life to shaping and writing public policy, finally arrived at this fundamental truth: "…at the core, in almost every field of public engagement we seek to encourage people to act morally and ethically, whether we deal with students, people applying for government aid, potential criminals, voters, or elected representatives."

The narrative of BeMidbar teaches us that same idea, as valid today as it was millennia ago in the desert.

The Inverted Nunim

At the end of chapter ten of Numbers (verses 35-46), the following, very famous paragraph, is framed by two inverted נונים:

> *When the ark traveled, Moshe would say: "Rise, YHWH, let your enemies scatter and your adversaries flee You!"*
>
> *When it rested, he would say: "Return, YHWH, the myriads of thousands of Israel!"*

In the synagogue, the first part of this paragraph is recited when the Torah is taken out of the ark, and the second part when the Torah is returned. The paragraph could simply be explained as a battle hymn. The ark used to travel with the Israelites when they went to war (see Num. 14:44 and I Sam. 4:3-4), and this was a prayer for victory in battle and safe return home. However, the inverted letters before and after the paragraph have granted it an enigmatic nature, generating many commentaries and extensive literature (See Torah Shelema by Rabbi M. M. Kasher.)

I believe that the inverted Nunim are a commentary on the Torah, a commentary so ancient that it was recorded on the scroll itself. The idea that those inverted letters are a rabbinic addition is supported by a Midrashic compilation known as [Hebrew omitted]:

> *why did the rabbis decide to place inverted Nunim around this paragraph?*

The answer of the Midrash is that these two verses are not part of the prophecy of Moshe but were rather said by Eldad and Medad, the two elders left behind in the camp (11:26-29). I will return to this answer later, and turn to tractate Shabbat of Talmud Bavli (104:1):

> *The rabbis told R. Yehoshua ben Levi, children came today to Bet HaMidrash and said things, the like of which was unheard of even at the time of Yehoshua bin Noon:… bent nun and straight nun (ן,נ) represent the bent loyal person and the upright loyal person…*

The commentary about the two forms of the letter nun is part of the presentation of the children, who offered symbolic interpretations for all the letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Though their presentation is interesting, it is hardly anything more than wordplay on the names or shapes of the letters, and it is therefore hard to understand why it merited such words of praise from the rabbis. The answer is that this paragraph in Shabbat holds the key to the rabbinic decision to frame the Ark's battle hymns between inverted Nunim.

The children who appear in Bet HaMidrash are anonymous, and their words are described as paralleling and even surpassing information transmitted in the time of Yehoshua. Yehoshua was Moshe's disciple and the first in the chain of transmission of the Torah from one human to another. The children therefore represent an unbroken chain of transmission which could be traced all the way back to Moshe. Unlike the tradition passed on to Yehoshua, which is codified and even rigid, the children's tradition is more emotional and symbolic. In that tradition, the letter nun stands for loyalty. The bent nun, the one which is used in the middle of a word, is analogized to a loyal servant who is also submissive, while the upright, or final nun, is compared to a loyal servant who holds his head up.

The mention of Yehoshua bin Noon in the Talmudic paragraph is alludes to Yehoshua's relationship with Moshe, which was one of deep loyalty:

> *His [Moshe's] servant, Yehoshua bin Noon, was a young man, who would never leave the tent* (Ex. 33:11).

When we put together the two rabbinic traditions, we can conclude that the rabbis chose to mark the paragraph with inverted Nunim to tell us that the concept of loyalty has been turned on its head. The inverted Nunim are road-signs telling us to carefully look at what happens before and after them. Before them, in the first ten chapters of BeMidbar, the Torah discusses the perfect form of government and nation, while after them there is an ongoing trust crisis affecting all layers of Israelite society and causing near-total collapse. Here is a list of the events which follow the Ark's battle hymn, and in which the sense of trust is eroded at all levels of society:

11:1-3: The people complained, apparently for no reason, and are punished by fire.

11:4-9: The riffraff craves meat, as a result the whole nation cries, reminisces about the food they had in Egypt, and complains about the manna.

11:10-15: Moshe rebels against God, saying that he does not want to lead the nation anymore, and claiming that the role has been for him a torture.

11:21-22: Moshe seems to doubt God's ability to deliver meat to the whole nation.

11:26: Two elders, Eldad and Medad, prophesy on their own without being authorized by Moshe. This is either a rebellion by them or God telling Moshe that He is in control.

11:31-34: The Israelites descend like predators on the miraculously delivered quail and are harshly punished.

12:1-15: Miriam and Aaron criticize Moshe. They are rebuked by God, and Miriam contracts leprosy for seven days.

13:1-33: The scouts return from Canaan and dissuade people from going there. The people do not believe that God can help them conquer the Canaanites.

14:1-4: The Israelites cry all night and then decide to appoint a new leader, instead of Moshe, and return to Egypt.

14:10: After Yehoshua and Caleb try to convince the people that it is possible to conquer Canaan, the people attempt to stone them, along with Moshe and Aharon.

14:36-38: The scouts instigate the people again and die in a plague.

14:39-45: The Israelites, remorseful for their rebellion, wage battle against the mountain dwelling nations in defiance of Moshe's advice. The Ark does not accompany them to battle and they suffer a crushing defeat.

15:32-36: A man transgresses Shabbat in an open act of rebellion against Moshe and the laws of the Torah.

16:1-35: Korah accuses Moshe of assuming positions without divine approval, while two hundred and fifty of his followers compete for the position of High Priest by offering unsolicited frankincense.

17:6-7: Following the punishment of Korah and his followers, the Israelites blame Moshe and Aharon for their death.

20:2-5: The Israelites complain about lack of water. They say that Moshe and Aharon took them from Egypt to die in the desert, and that they did not deliver on the promise to bring them to the land of milk and honey.

20:9-13: Moshe hits the rock instead of talking to it, and as a result is told by God that he will not enter the Land of Canaan. It almost seems as if God was looking for a pretext to "fire" Moshe and Aharon.

21:4-9: The Israelites complain about lack of bread and water and say that the manna is rotten. They are attacked by poisonous snakes.

25:1-9: The Israelites are tempted by the Moabite women, descending into promiscuity and idolatry. Zimri openly defies Moshe by going with a Midianite woman into the Tabernacle.

32:1-32: The tribes of Gad and Reuven decide to stay in the other side of the Jordan river.

In total, there are twenty instances of rebellion and loss of trust, and it is to this chain of events that the rabbis were directing our attention with the inverted Nunim.

[watch for continuation in following weeks]

* Rabbi Ovadia has a lengthy analysis of Sefer BeMidbar that he has broken into separate sections for each parsha. Watch his column each week for the full analysis. Because my word processor does not handle Hebrew well (especially going back and forth across word processing software), and because of possible Shemos, I have deleted the Hebrew but left the translations. For the full version, see Rabbi Ovadia's postings at **https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets**

** Torah VeAhava (now SephardicU.com). Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan (Potomac, MD) and faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school). **New: Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets** Hebrew quotes from the Torah, omitted here, are in Rabbi Ovadia's orginial in Sefaria.

Bamidbar: Mishkan in the Middle

By Rabbi Eliezer Weinbach *

When you arrive at your parent's house for the holidays, or invite that uncle over for Shabbat, you may find yourself discussing topics of great social and political import. And you may find yourself to be bamidbar – in the desert – a place devoid of the refreshing waters of agreement. People are not the same, and have vastly divergent life experiences and perspectives, which can lead to a sense that we are fundamentally different from one another. We may begin to wonder if we share anything at all. Following this line of thinking to its end may leave us with the desire to reject someone who disagrees with us.

Let us take a moment to consider Bnei Yisrael in the desert. Their setup, as outlined in parshat Bamidbar, may have something to tell us about how to be in relationship with others in our extended community (Num. 2:2-34).

The headcount reveals hundreds of thousands of people, and HaShem commands them to each stand proudly under their individual banners. The tribe of Reuven under their flag, the tribe of Shimon under their's. Each tribe, individual and unique with their own strengths and blind-spots, has its own encampment. The Torah affirms individual differences.

Yet at the center of it all, right in the middle of the camp, is the Mishkan – the tabernacle. For the inauguration of the Mishkan in next week's parsha, the head of each tribe brought the exact same offering. The Mishkan is the great equalizer for Bnei Yisrael in the desert. Anyone and everyone can show up there and bring a korban. HaShem, and service of HaShem through the rituals set out in the Torah, does not distinguish between the tribe of Reuven and the tribe of Shimon. A Jew is a Jew, and at the end of the day, we walk to shul with our parents and our uncles with whom we disagree and we stand next to them and serve HaShem. Our shuls are special places where we have permission to forget our differences, if only for a brief moment, and live as HaShem views us: a nation united.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Rabbi Eliezer Weinbach, an experimental educator, is pursuing graduate level studies in Jewish education and in the environment.

https://library.yctorah.org/2022/06/bamidbar22/

Chalav and the Power of Permission

By Rabbi Moshe Rube * © 2020

It seems that with every Shavuos that comes around, the same arguments repeat themselves. Jews start dreaming about the cheesecake and blintzes they will feast on and various rabbis raise the alarm that according to halacha, meat remains the only legitimate form of simchas Yom Tov. The opinions fly back and forth, but at the end of the day, everybody does what they wish. I have eaten at many meals of my rabbonim during Shavuos and have experienced dairy meals, meat meals, and of course meals that have faithfully followed the Rama where they serve dairy first, clear the table and then serve meat. With the argument settled and the minhag of eating dairy on Shavuos so well entrenched among the Jewish people, the best reason I can think of for continuing these arguments is that it makes our dairy at our Yom Tov meals taste sweeter knowing there are some rabbis who forbid. "The inclination only desires that which is forbidden" (Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 9:1).

Since people will follow their custom anyway, I seek here not to give a reason why we eat dairy meals. Rather, I offer a meditation as to what our chalav can signify to us on the night we receive the Torah, whether you have it as nosh, or as a part of your meals.

Although we don't usually think about it, milk occupies a special place as the most purely kosher food there is. Unlike plants that we must separate Terumos and Maasros and meat that must be shechted, milk needs neither to be kosher. There never is a time that milk milked from a kosher animal is not kosher. **

This observation may be the pshat of a famous Gemara that states "One who shows his friend the whites of his teeth, is like giving him a cup of milk to drink." I am sure the Gemara knows that people have varied dietary preferences-so why the emphasis on milk? I propose that the Gemara spotlights milk specifically because it signifies heter and freedom from worries about Kashrus.
Now to people who (like me) study or who have studied in Yeshiva, such a conjencture may fill you with utter horror. Why would the Talmud associate joy when we receive a psak lekula? Should we not reflect the cool and collected attitude of Reb Nechunia Ben Hakaneh who prayed before every learning session "That I not declare what is impure, pure and not what is pure, impure"? The truth of the Torah is simply the truth and we should strive to eliminate from ourselves any inclination to enjoy going lekula.

I do not wish to casually cite various "go-to" Talmudic guidelines for psak that seem to encourage us to rule leniently e.g., "Torah Chas Al Mamonan Shel Yisrael" (The Torah takes pity on Israel's money) or "Koach Diheteira Adif" (The power to give permission is stronger). They are not necessarily a basis for making sweeping generalizations about psak.

But one inarguable truth I can state is that it takes more knowledge to permit than to forbid. As a communal Rav, I can testify to the truth on the ground that Jews who wish to keep the Torah tend to forbid more on themselves than they need to. Typically, they spend money and cause themselves stress unnecessarily. It has been my responsibility, more commonly, to assure people that something is permitted more than forbidden. For instance, not seeing an official hechsher on a package in a grocery store (that doesn't need one) can be enough to send someone into a worrisome frenzy and declare Assur (forbidden). It then becomes my distinct pleasure to teach them that not everything requires a hechsher and they can permit many of the items that they forbade on themselves. Although this is frequently over the phone, I can hear their enhanced joy in their actually trying to live a Jewish life when I give them their proverbial cup of milk.

Milk is something the Torah explicitly permits when it calls the Land of Israel "A land flowing with milk and honey". It is not just a plain heter that makes a person smile, it is the heter in the context of the knowledge and confidence that it is valid and based on halachah. This, I believe, was the motivation for Rav Ovadia Yosef's long teshuvos full of every opinion under the sun. As he wrote, Koach Diheteira Adif-I believe that he was reluctant to forbid anything without foraging through the vastness of Torah knowledge.

With all of the above in mind, and with the anticipation of our milk on Shavuos, let me propose a new prayer for Torah teachers, rabbis and poskim to say during the year-and especially on Shavuos, as we behold milk in all its forms.

"May it be your will, God, the God of our forefathers, that we merit to know your Torah and make it our own in all its vastness, beauty and light. May we learn so much of your Torah that whenever a Jew asks us to declare something pure or impure, we may have the knowledge to grant a heter that will cause him the happiness of milk to drink if that is where the truth guides us. And if we must forbid something and cause a Jew loss of money, or a burden, may it never be based on ignorance but on knowledge and necessity.

* Rabbi, Knesseth Israel Congregation, Birmingham, AL. Note: Because Rabbi Rube's new Dvar Torah was not ready in time for my deadline, I am reprinting an earlier Dvar Torah from his archives.

** Excluding rabbinic gezeiros of Chalav Yisrael.

Rav Kook Torah
Yitro/Sahvuot: The Date of Matan Torah

On what day was the Torah revealed to Israel? The majority opinion is that the Torah was given on the sixth day of Sivan. Rabbi Yossi, however, disagreed, arguing that the Torah was given on the seventh of Sivan (Shabbat 86b).

What is the essence of this disagreement? What is the significance of the date of Matan Torah?

Perfecting Creation

Rav Kook explained that the Sages were debating the fundamental goal of the Torah. The sixth and seventh of Sivan correspond to the very first sixth and seventh days in history — the sixth and seventh day of Creation.

Most of the Sages associated the Siniatic revelation with the sixth day of Creation, the day that mankind was created. This connection indicates that the primary objective of the Torah is to complete that act of Creation — the birth of humanity. The goal of Torah is to perfect humanity, to recreate it in a holier, purer form.
Rabbi Yossi, on the other hand, wanted to stress an even higher goal of the Torah. For after the Torah has made its mark on mankind and its ideals have been internalized in the human heart, it will then take root into the innermost soul of the world, uplifting and refining the entire universe.

In terms of this ultimate goal of the Torah, it is fitting that the Torah be revealed to the world on the seventh day, the concluding day of Creation. Through the seventh day, the Torah is linked to the true culmination of Creation — the Sabbath, the day of ultimate perfection and rest.

(Silver from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. IV on Shabbat 86b (9:17).)

http://www.ravkooktorah.org/YITRO61.htm

Egalitarian Society, Jewish-Style (Bemidbar 5780)

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

The parsha of Bamidbar is generally read on the Shabbat before Shavuot, z'man matan torateinu, "the time of the giving of our law," the revelation at Sinai. So the Sages, believing that nothing is coincidental, searched for some connection between the two.

To find one is not easy. There is nothing in the parsha about the giving of the Torah. Instead it is about a census of the Israelites. Nor is its setting helpful. We are told at the beginning that the events about to be described took place in "the wilderness of Sinai," whereas when the Torah speaks about the great revelation, it talks about "Mount Sinai." One is a general region, the other a specific mountain within that region. Nor are the Israelites at this stage walking towards Mount Sinai. To the contrary, they are preparing to leave. They are about to begin the second part of their journey, from Sinai to the Promised Land.

The Sages did, nonetheless, make a connection, and it is a surprising one:

> *"And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Wilderness" (Numbers 1:1). Why the Sinai Wilderness? From here the Sages taught that the Torah was given through three things: fire, water, and wilderness. How do we know it was given through fire? From Exodus 19:18: "And Mount Sinai was all in smoke as God had come down upon it in fire." How do we know it was given through water? As it says in Judges 5:4, "The heavens dripped and the clouds dripped water [at Sinai]." How do we know it was given through wilderness? [As it says above,] "And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Wilderness." And why was the Torah given through these three things? Just as [fire, water, and wilderness] are free to all the inhabitants of the world, so too are the words of Torah free to them, as it says in Isaiah 55:1, "Oh, all who are thirsty, come for water… even if you have no money."[1]*

The Midrash takes three words associated with Sinai – fire (that was blazing on the mountain just before the revelation), water (based on a phrase in the Song of Deborah) and wilderness (as at the beginning of our parsha, and also in Exodus 19:1, 2), and it connects them by saying that "they are free to all the inhabitants of the world."

This is not the association most of us would make. Fire is associated with heat, warmth, energy. Water is associated with quenching thirst and making things grow. Wilderness is the space between: neither starting point nor destination, the

place where you need signposts and a sense of direction. All three would therefore make good metaphors for the Torah. It warms. It energises. It satisfies spiritual thirst. It gives direction. Yet that is not the approach taken by the Sages. What mattered to them is that all three are free.

Staying for a moment with the comparison of Torah and the wilderness, there were surely other significant analogies that might have been made. The wilderness is a place of silence where you can hear the voice of God. The wilderness is a place away from the distractions of towns and cities, fields and farms, where you can focus on the presence of God. The wilderness is a place where you realise how vulnerable you are: you feel like sheep in need of a shepherd. The wilderness is a place where it is easy to get lost, and you need some equivalent of a Google-maps-of-the-soul. The wilderness is a place where you feel your isolation and you reach out to a force beyond you. Even the Hebrew name for wilderness, midbar, comes from the same root as "word" (davar) and "to speak" (d-b-r). Yet these were not the connections the Sages of the Midrash made. Why not?

The Sages understood that something profound was born at Mount Sinai, and this has distinguished Jewish life ever since. It was the democratisation of knowledge. Literacy and knowledge of the law was no longer to be confined to a priestly elite. For the first time in history everyone was to have access to knowledge, education and literacy. "The law that Moses gave us is the possession of the assembly of Jacob" (Deut. 33:4) – the whole assembly, not a privileged group within it.

The symbol of this was the revelation at Mount Sinai, the only time in history when God revealed Himself not only to a Prophet but to an entire people, who three times signalled their consent to the commands and the covenant. In the penultimate command that Moses gave to the people, known as Hakhel, he gave the following instruction:

> *"At the end of every seven years, in the Sabbatical year, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns—so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."* Deut. 31:10-13

Again, the whole people, not an elite or subset within it. This is echoed in the famous verse from Isaiah 54:13, "And all your children shall be learned of the Lord and great shall be the peace of your children." This was and remains the unique feature of the Torah as the written constitution of the Jewish people as a nation under the sovereignty of God. Everyone is expected not merely to keep the law but to know it. Jews became a nation of constitutional lawyers.

There were two further key moments in the history of this development. The first was when Ezra and Nehemiah gathered the people, after the Babylonian exile, to the Water Gate in Jerusalem, on Rosh Hashanah, and read the Torah to them, placing Levites throughout the crowd to explain to people what was being said and what it meant, a defining moment in Jewish history that took the form not of a battle but of a massive adult education programme (Neh. 8). Ezra and Nehemiah realised that the most significant battles in ensuring the Jewish future were cultural, not military. This was one of the most transformative insights in history.

The second was the extraordinary creation, in the first century, of the world's first system of universal compulsory education. Here is how the Talmud describes the process, culminating in the work of Joshua ben Gamla, a High Priest in the last days of the Second Temple:

> *Truly the name of that man is to be blessed, namely Joshua ben Gamla, for but for him the Torah would have been forgotten from Israel. For at first if a child had a father, his father taught him, and if he had no father he did not learn at all . . . They therefore ordained that teachers should be appointed in each prefecture, and that boys should enter school at the age of sixteen or seventeen. [They did so] but if the teacher punished them they used to rebel and leave the school. Eventually, Joshua b. Gamla came and ordained that teachers of young children should be appointed in each district and each town, and that children should enter school at the age of six or seven.[2]*

Universal compulsory education did not exist in England – at that time the world's leading imperial power – until 1870, a difference of 18 centuries. At roughly the same time as Joshua ben Gamla, in the first century C.E., Josephus could write:

Should any one of our nation be asked about our laws, he will repeat them as readily as his own name. The result of our thorough education in our laws from the very dawn of intelligence is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls.[3]

We now understand the connection the Sages made between the wilderness and the giving of the Torah: it was open to everyone, and it was free. Neither lack of money nor of aristocratic birth could stop you from learning Torah and acquiring distinction in a community in which scholarship was considered the highest achievement.

> *With three crowns was Israel crowned: the crown of Torah, the crown of Priesthood and the crown of Kingship. The crown of Priesthood was conferred on Aaron … The crown of kingship was conferred on David … But the crown of Torah is for all Israel … Whoever desires it, let them come and take it.[4]*

I believe that this is one of Judaism's most profound ideas: whatever you seek to create in the world, start with education. If you want to create a just and compassionate society, start with education. If you want to create a society of equal dignity, ensure that education is free and equal to all. That is the message the Sages took from the fact that we read Bamidbar before Shavuot, the festival that recalls that when God gave our ancestors the Torah, He gave it to all of them equally.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7.

[2] Baba Batra, 21a.

[3] Contra Apionem, ii, 177-78.

[4] Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah, 3:1./

The Dangers of Deconstruction: An Essay on Parshat Bamidbar

By Adin Even-Israel (Steinsaltz) * © Chabad 2022

Parshat Bamidbar deals with, among other things, the service of the Kehatites. An important part of the Torah's description of their service is the warning to Aaron and his sons to take care to cover the vessels of the Tabernacle before the Kehatites draw near to carry them. The Kehatites, despite their important role as bearers of the sacred vessels, are not allowed to cover them:

> *Do not let the tribe of the Kehati families be cut off from among the Levites. This is what you must do, so that they survive and not die when they come into the Holy of Holies. Aaron and his sons shall go in and assign each of them to his service and to his burden. They will then not come and see the sacred [objects] being covered, and they will not die*.1

Regardless of whether "cut off" here means death by the hand of G d or by the laws of man, regardless of whether this is an obligation, a prohibition, or a warning, it is clear that, for the Kehatites, witnessing the "covering of the sacred" involves mortal danger.

To bring the matter into sharper focus, let us first note something that may seem obvious at first: The Levites generally, and the Kehatites, from whom the Priests emerged, in particular, are not ordinary people who get out of bed each morning and go to work. They are people who are dedicated to the service of G d – "They are wholly given unto Me from among the People of Israel."2 Yet despite the fact that the Levites are an eminent family in Israel, a family dedicated to God's service and solely responsible for carrying the sacred vessels, they are forbidden to witness the "covering of the sacred." Only a small group of Priests is permitted to cover the sacred objects; anyone else who does so puts himself in mortal

danger.

Shattering the sacred

Every feature of the Temple was also included in the Tabernacle. In the Temple, there was an Outer Altar and an Inner Altar, and in the Tabernacle there were two altars as well. In the Temple there was a Sanctuary and a Holy of Holies, and only those who were on a certain level of sanctity and purity were allowed to enter, and so it was in the Tabernacle. Nevertheless, there is an essential difference between the Tabernacle and the Temple.

In the Tabernacle, despite the sanctity of the Holy of Holies, when the trumpets were sounded everything was moved. And when everything was moved, the place that previously had been the Holy of Holies ceased to be the Holy of Holies, and everyone could then walk on that place with impunity. Men and women, zavim and zavot, menstruant women and women who recently gave birth – they all are permitted to tread on this place.

What is more, in the Temple nothing would move from its place. The Ark of the Covenant was kept in a secluded place, closed off by a curtain, and not everyone could even look upon it. In the Tabernacle, by contrast, when the trumpets were sounded and it was time to move on, the Levites would take the Ark of the Covenant upon their shoulders and go. The Incense Altar, whose corners were sprinkled only once a year, was carried by four strong Levites, and the same goes for the Menorah and all the other vessels of the Sanctuary. Ten minutes earlier, the Ark of the Covenant was something that no one was allowed to hold; to touch its poles was forbidden, and even to look at it was impossible. Now, suddenly, these Levites must take it upon their shoulders and go. Before, the Ark was a place where the Shechina dwelled, and now it is taken away. The Talmud relates that the boards of the Tabernacle were often thrown from wagon to wagon.3 The Levites removed the boards as one would dismantle any other building.

The transition from relating to the Tabernacle as G d's holy Sanctuary, to dismantling it and transferring it elsewhere is not simple, and it even involves danger. The very heart of the difficulty, the most dangerous stage is of course at the point of transition, and that is why the sacred vessels must be covered when the Levites come to take them: "They will then not come and see the sacred objects being covered, and they will not die." Only the Priests, who are G d's actual servants, and not servants of servants, may enter within, and they alone have the authority and permission to go in and cover the sacred. Others lack the authority and permission to do so; for them, such an act is fraught with danger. A Levite may not watch the Priest draw near and wrap the vessels in cloth. The concern is that he will not be able to bear the difficulty of the scene, and therefore he may not be present at this stage. Only after the covers have been placed upon the sacred vessels may the Levites draw near and carry them.

Dismantling the sacred

As long as one stands at a distance from the sacred, as long as one does not touch it and does not deal with it, and it remains in its place in its existing condition, one can see the sacred and stand in awe of it. But what happens when one has to dismantle the sacred? How does one switch from the stage where everything is sanctified to the stage where the sacred must be carried on one's shoulder?

In I Samuel, we read that when the people of Beth-Shemesh gazed upon the Ark, a great plague broke out among the people. Our sages explain that the plague broke out because the people showed disrespect to the Ark.4 But why did they do this? Where did this disrespect come from?

As long as the Ark of the Covenant sat in the Tabernacle in Shiloh, no one dared touch it, and even the Philistines showed it reverence, until they could no longer maintain this reverence and eventually returned the Ark to the People of Israel. But the people of Beth-Shemesh looked at the Ark and said to it disdainfully, "Who angered you, so that you became angry and [therefore] did not save yourself from captivity? And now who appeased you, so that you became reconciled and came of your own accord?"5 The people accused the Ark of ruining their perfect world, where everything was simple and clear. Until now, they knew where everything stood, but the Ark came and spoiled the order of things. For the people of Beth-Shemesh, it was no longer possible to relate to the Ark as before; it was no longer the same sacred vessel.

The difficulty was coming to grips with the fact that the sacred vessel that was captured by the Philistines and moved from place to place was still the same sacred vessel that it was originally. It was hard to believe that just as it was sacred in the Holy of Holies, it is still sacred even now, and will continue to be so tomorrow as well, when it will be established in a new

place. How could they absorb this truth? How could they witness the sacred vessels being taken in this fashion again and again?

In this parshah we have, in effect, a general acknowledgment that not every mind can bear. Not everyone can deal with the fact that what was once sacred is now voided of its sanctity; that something that could not be seen or touched or related to is now freely handled by the Levites.

The essence of study

The truth is that this fundamental problem is not limited to the Tabernacle; it applies to the world of learning as well – to study in general and to the study of Talmud in particular.

There is an essential difference between one who studies Kitzur Shulchan Aruch and one who is considered a true Torah scholar. If someone knows an entire tractate by heart, it can certainly be said that he is well versed in that tractate. But one who asks a novel question, pointing out an objection or a refutation that no one had ever thought of before, even though everyone has seen the page of Talmud in question, so that now neither Rashi nor Tosafot can be understood – he is considered a tremendous scholar.

Why is this so? Instead of praising him for his actions, we should take him to task for them – this scholar took something whole, something complete, and ruined it! He took a subject that was previously easily understood, and he shattered it. Why, then, is he called a scholar? What is the virtue in this? When one studies a page of Talmud with the commentaries of Rashi, Tosafot, and other early commentators, one begins to wonder: What are they doing with my page? Before Rashi and Tosafot, there was a simple, smooth page of Talmud; the commentators then enter the equation and tear it to pieces! What is more, the attitude is that the stronger and sharper one's questions, the more praise one deserves.

Almost everyone has some kind of desire to destroy or ridicule something; there are people who have a special talent for destruction. One always has qualms about whether or not to destroy something, but when one knows that in destroying he is performing a mitzvah, and that he may enjoy it – he does it wholeheartedly. Just as this evil inclination exists regarding the physical, it exists regarding the spiritual as well. When a person is told to critique someone, he will usually waste no time in tearing him to pieces.

This is essentially how traditional Torah study works. We demonstrate that the first Tanna did not understand the last Tanna, and that the latter does not know what the former is talking about. There was a period when the "chilukim" method was prevalent, where the objective was to show that the questioner and answerer did not understand each other, and neither of them understood the Mishnah. This is how talmudic discussions were reconstructed. Thus, a person's level of scholarship was judged not by how much he studies and how much he knows but by his ability to dismantle the Talmud into its smallest elements, so as to reconstruct it.

The study of Talmud and Torah study in general is essentially a matter of breaking things down into their composite parts. The greater one's ability to break things down, the greater the depth of one's learning. If one studies only Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, he will know all the information that is written in the book, but not more than that. For such a person, nothing exists outside the Kitzur. But what happens when he begins to study Talmud or Arba'a Turim? What happens when he studies the full Shulchan Aruch with all the commentaries? It becomes clear that everything that is presented so clearly and simply in the Kitzur is not at all simple: There are suddenly countless conflicting opinions, and it becomes difficult even to keep track of all of them. This is not limited to minor differences of opinion. Some differences range from one end of the spectrum to the other. For example, there is a difference between minhag Sepharad, minhag Ashkenaz, and minhag Sepharadim on the question of whether one counts the weeks or the days first in Sefirat HaOmer. In Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, these matters are treated very simply: This is what one must do, this is what happens in every case of error, and that is all. In this simplified world, one knows what is forbidden and what is permitted, what is ideal and what is not ideal. However, the more one studies in depth, the more one begins to break things down and take them apart.

The story is told of a new student at a certain yeshivah who attended the lectures of the rosh yeshivah. The rosh yeshivah would address Rashi's commentary, saying, "I don't understand Rashi!" and explain why his commentary was puzzling. Then he would turn to Tosafot and say that he doesn't understand Tosafot. Then he would turn to the Talmud and say that he doesn't understand the Talmud, and so forth. After a while, the new student wrote home: "Thank G d, I already don't understand ten pages of Talmud!"

When one begins to study a page of Talmud, he believes that he knows everything, or almost everything, and that all he needs to do is to fill in a gap or two here or there. When he gets further into the subject, if he really delves into it, he discovers that he understands neither Rashi, nor Tosafot, nor the Talmud, nor the Rishonim, nor the Acharonim; and the more he delves into it, the less he understands. As he discovers more and more questions and peculiarities, the effect is cumulative: Things become increasingly complex.

Torah study is, in a sense, a kind of battlefield. One takes a page of Talmud, cuts it into pieces, and reduces it to dust and ashes. One takes a halachah, which he knows exactly how to implement in practice, and begins to demonstrate that it is built on compromises – between the Shach and the Taz or between Rava and Rabba. It is not a matter of merely sharpening the mind, where one looks for problems for no reason; these problems can actually be found everywhere, in every subject of Torah study. And for one who deals with matters of faith, the matter becomes even more complex than this.

When people explain to children that a man with a long white beard sits in heaven, holding a stick in one hand and a candy in the other, this may be an unsophisticated conception of the world, but it is simple and clear. After one begins to study, and the more one learns, the world does not become simpler and smoother. On the contrary, in a certain sense it becomes more and more complicated, more and more complex. What this means is that study entails a kind of traumatic process, a process of breaking things apart.

Various levels

As we see in the parshah, not everyone can bear the process of dismantling the sacred. There are various levels in this notion: Anyone who is tahor may touch the boards of the Tabernacle, but not everyone can perform the dismantling and the assembling, the carrying and the dragging. Most people are not allowed to participate in this process of changing from sacred to profane and back again. They do not touch the dismantled Sanctuary; for them, there is only a complete Tabernacle. Anyone of Israel may visit the Sanctuary, and when a person wanted to eat meat, he would bring his animal to the Tabernacle forecourt to offer it as a peace offering. But when it came to dismantling, carrying, or assembling the Tabernacle, he is told that he has no part in this work; for him, the Tabernacle may only be seen in its complete form.

This point can also be observed in the formation in which the camps would travel in the wilderness. Whether they would travel in square formation or in a straight line,6 the Tabernacle was always in the center, surrounded by the Levite camp. The various Levite families were likewise on different levels: Some would handle the outer boards; some would enter the interior; some would handle the hangings of the forecourt; some would handle the boards and the sockets; and some would handle even the sacred vessels. But even those who handled the sacred vessels could not draw near and cover them. Although the Levite knows what he is carrying, he does not actually see it.

Similarly, in Torah study, some people can only tackle the simplest types of questions, while others can ask deeper, more incisive questions. Sometimes, when a student begins to cross the boundary of his spiritual limitations, we advise him not to push further: There are questions that even an outstanding scholar should not ask, for he would not be able to bear the dismantling of the sacred and its subsequent reassembly. For this reason, every student must assess himself and determine his personal spiritual level.

Someone once remarked that in order to attain the proper fear of heaven, one must study Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed from the end to the beginning, so as to begin with the answers and end with the questions. The meaning of this strange statement is that sometimes people begin with the questions and do not have the strength to continue to the answers, so they remain with the questions and never emerge from them.

Everyone must ask questions in order to learn. Even a small child must be encouraged to ask questions, for this is the only way he will understand. However, the distinction is in the type of questions one may ask. Some people can ask only very simple questions, and one must accordingly supply them with simple explanations. Other people can take apart deeper matters. The ordinary person's problem is not that he is unable to take the Tabernacle apart and break it down, but that he cannot always reassemble it.

Demolishing in order to build

What happens later, when one wants to relocate the holy? How does the new location suddenly become holy? How does this place become the Holy of Holies? How can one be exposed to all the questions and contradictions, and after all that, still relate to the subject with the proper awe and fear? This level of spirituality is not easy to attain. It is a problem that is inherent in Torah study, in faith, and in Judaism: How can one question, take apart, demolish, and rebuild, and at the same time preserve the sense that one is in the realm of holiness?

Only those who can bear it – the sons of Aaron, the Priests – may enter the inner Sanctuary and dismantle it. Only they can they see "the sacred [objects] being covered" each time, because only Aaron was on such a level that he remained whole after the shattering of the sacred.

We read in Psalms: "With the wholehearted, You act wholeheartedly…and with the perverse You are wily."7 This notion can be applied to such a person: On the one hand, he can be wholehearted and guileless, but on the other hand, he can be wily as well. The Midrash describes how Aaron would make peace between people: He would go to two people who had quarreled, whether it was a husband and his wife or a man and his friend, and shamelessly lie to both of them. He would approach one, saying, "Your friend so-and-so is now weeping bitterly"; then he would approach the other and tell him the same thing. When the two would next meet, it would be in a spirit of love and brotherhood.8 Aaron could be wily "with the perverse" and, in spite of this, remain wholehearted – as the Priest is described in Malachi, "a messenger of the L rd of Hosts."9

The hallmark of the Priest is that while he has the ability to cover the sacred, he is still afraid to approach the Altar after doing so. Aaron is afraid, "for who is he that would risk his life to approach Me?"10 Hence, he is the one who may cover the sacred, handle the vessels, and move them from place to place. Some people may only see the vessels, others may disassemble them, but only a select few may see the removal of the essence of the sacred. Only one who serves G d wholeheartedly may do this, one who has nothing else but the worship of G d. Outsiders "who attach themselves to G d, to serve him"11 are shielded from this experience. Only one who does inner, hidden service, totally committed to serving G d, may enter the Sanctuary and cover the sacred.

It could be that one who disassembles the Tabernacle might be able to reassemble it in a different form, such that it is no longer the Tabernacle. For this reason, there are questions that not everyone may ask – not because they have no answers, but because after one has struggled with them, it will be impossible to build the Sanctuary properly on its site, and then one risks remaining in a void. Not to mention the two matters in the same breath, but an example of something similar is found in the laws of idolatry. For an idolater to nullify an idol, it suffices to spit at it, throw something at it, or chip one of its fingers. The assumption is that after treating it this way, he will never again regard it as an object of worship. A Jew, however, cannot nullify an idol. No matter what he does, it will always remain an idol.

When the Tabernacle is dismantled, it does not wander randomly; it must follow a certain course. It is dismantled and reassembled in order to ultimately reach the Temple – "the place You made to dwell in."12 To get there takes centuries. The path is not straight – it is long and winding, but it is the only way to make progress.

In the Tabernacle, as it is so often in our lives, we dismantle in order to build. Something is uprooted from its place in order to be rebuilt more fruitfully in a new place.

The prohibition on destroying holy vessels – "You shall break down their altars…You shall not do so to G d your L rd"13 – does not apply to this process. We are commanded to dismantle the Tabernacle time and again, so that we can rebuild it elsewhere. This demolition is an extension of G d's will – "at G d's command they encamped, and at God's command they journeyed"14 – and it is always a constructive act, as the Talmud says, "The destruction of the old is building."15

Thus, the Tabernacle constantly moves forward, toward the chosen place, ever advancing to the eternal house of G d.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Num. 4:18–20.

2. Num. 8:16.

3. Shabbat 96a.

4. Sota 35a–b.

5. Rashi, Sota 35b.

6. See Y. Eiruvin 5:1.

7. Psalms 18:26–27.

8. Kalla Rabbati.

9. Malachi 2:7.

10. Jer. 30:21.

11. Is. 56:6.

12. Ex. 15:17.

13. Deut. 12:3–4.

14. Num. 9:20.

15. Nedarim 40a.

* Rabbi Adin Even-Israel, z”l, (Steinsaltz) (1937-2020), one of the leading rabbis of this century and author of many books, was best known for his monumental translation of and commentary on the Talmud.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5132047/jewish/The-Dangers-of-Deconstruction.htm

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Bemidbar: The Torah Number

Insights from the Lubavitch Rebbe *

> *On the first day of Sivan 2448, the third month after Nisan, in which the Israelites had left the land of Egypt they came to the Sinai Desert, where G-d told them He would give them the Torah. The anticipation they felt on this day over receiving the Torah is to be re-experienced daily, for we are to relate to the Torah as if G-d gives it anew every day.* (Exodus 19:1)

In the Third Month

The Torah was given specifically in the third month, for the number three symbolizes the threefold unity the Torah creates.

"One" obviously represents unity — there is no separate entity to dissent or disagree — but it is an inherent unity, not a created one. The only true unity of this sort is G-d's; He was, is, and will be one, for there is in truth nothing other than Him.

"Two" signifies the duality, discord, and separation we experience within G-d's world, the constant dichotomy of body and soul, physical and spiritual, and good and evil.

"Three" introduces a third element that reconciles and unites these discordant concepts. It does not choose one way or the other, for that would be returning to one, the duality of two combatants no longer existing. Rather, it blends the two; it allows each its own individuality and yet enables them at the same time to fuse into a greater whole.

The Torah was given, says Maimonides, to bring peace into the world. Through the Torah, G-d allows His infinite wisdom

to be distilled into a form accessible by finite creatures. He thus gave humanity the capacity to bring G-dliness into the world, to continue to exist as finite human beings and still attain a level of Divine consciousness. The Torah does not superimpose one reality in place of the other, but rather melds the two into a G-dly and meaningful existence in the context of this world.

* — from the *Kehot Chumash*

Gut Shabbos,

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Volume 28, Issue 34 **Shabbat Parashat Bemidbar - Shavuot Issue Attached!** **5782 B"H**

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"And these are the names of the men that shall stand with you: of Reuven, Elizur the son of Shedeur. Of Shimon, Shelimuiel the son of Zurishaddai. Of Judah, Nachshon the son of Aminadav…" (Numbers 1:5-7)

For as long as I can remember, Orthodox Judaism has been perceived by much of the world — even the Orthodox world — as a conservative, sheltered, old-fashioned way of life unwilling to take risks in the face of new challenges, preferring to retreat into its own shell like a turtle.

A Midrashic comment on this week's portion of Bamidbar makes the point that a conservative, risk-free existence is not a genuine Torah value. Certainly standing by on the sidelines is hardly a characteristic to be found in the person of Nachshon, prince of the tribe of Judah, who jumped into the Reed Sea in advance of the Egyptians. It was only after his demonstration of faith that the Almighty went the next step and split the Reed Sea.

The Midrash (also recorded in B.T. Bava Batra 91a) points out that this courageous Nachshon had four sons, including Elimelech, husband of Naomi, and Shalmon, father of Boaz; hence Nachshon was father and grand-father of two major personalities in the Scroll of Ruth, which we will be reading shortly on Shavuot.

In presenting such a genealogy, the Midrash stresses not only the characteristics of risk-taking by the descendants of Nachshon, but also what kind of risks are favored by the Torah and what kind are not. The fact is that courage and risk-taking, or the lack of it, may be seen as an underlying theme of the whole book of Bamidbar, records the history of the Israelites' forty years of wandering in the desert. When the spies return with a frightening report about the Promised Land and the ability to conquer it (Num. 13-14), the Israelites demonstrate a total lack of resolve, fortitude and faith. They wail, they tremble, they plead not to go on with the mission. They are not prepared to take the risk of war even for the conquest of the Promised Land.

Nachshon at the shore of the Reed Sea shines as the antithesis of a cowardly "desert generation." Because of his fearless daring, the people were saved. Indeed, the Gaon of Vilna points out that the Torah first describes the Israelites as having gone "into the midst of the sea on the dry land" (Ex. 14:22), and later "on dry land in the midst of the sea" (Ex. 14:29). The initial description refers to Nachshon and his followers who risked their lives by jumping into the raging waters. God made a miracle for them, the waters splitting into dry land and serving as a wall, homa, on the right and the left. The latter description refers to the rest of the Israelites who only entered after the dry land appeared; for them the waters also became a wall, but this time written without the letter vuv, which forms the alternate reading of hema or anger!

Nachshon's remarkable ability to take risks was transmitted to his son Elimelech and grandson Boaz. Hence, the Scroll of Ruth closes with the names of ten generations from Peretz (son of Judah) to King David, and Nachshon appears right in the center, the pivotal figure between the age of the patriarchs and the generation of monarchy-messiah. But while Nachshon and Boaz are to be praised for their risk-taking, Elimelech can only be reviled for his.

When a terrible famine descends upon Bethlehem, the home of Elimelech, he packs up and decides to start a new life in the land of Moab. Undoubtedly, this demonstrates courage on the part of Elimelech, the ability to risk the unknown in a strange environment.

But his motivation was greed. He refused to share his bounty with his starving kinsmen, and he was willing to leave his homeland and his ancestral roots for the sake of his wealth. Hence, tragedy strikes. Elimelech dies, and his sons, inevitably, marry Moabite women. His progeny die as well, causing Elimelech to have reaped as his harvest only oblivion – from a Jewish point of view.

In contrast, Boaz does not leave Bethlehem during the famine. And when the challenge arises to do an act of loving-kindness for Naomi and redeem Elimelech's land, as well as to marry the stranger — Ruth, a convert — Boaz assumes the financial obligation and the social risk involved in the marriage. The descendant from this union turns out to be none other than King David, from whom the messianic line emerges.

Elimelech's risk was based upon greed, and forsaking his tradition; it ends in his death and destruction. Boaz's risk was based upon loving-kindness, and results in redemption. The Elimelech-Boaz dialectic is a perennial theme in the Jewish world. Risk is positive, and even mandatory, from a Jewish perspective. The question we have to ask ourselves is the motivation, and that determines the result.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

"Banners In The Desert"

In our Sidra, the first of the Fourth Book of Moses, we read of the peregrinations of Israel in the desert. The people was to be divided according to its tribe and to march through the wilderness in a set pattern and order. Each tribe, in addition, was to have its own banner, or flag. This banner or degel was to differentiate it from all the other tribes of Israel.

What is the origin of this interesting commandment? Our sacred tradition gives us an amazing answer. That is, that G-d did not command the Israelites concerning the degalim on His own initiative. Rather, he merely acceded to the request of the Jews who insisted upon the banners in the desert. Nitavu Yisrael she-yihu lahem degalim k'malekhei ha-sharet--the Israelites desired that they have banners just like the ministering angels.

What a remarkable statement! Are we to imagine that the Israelites conceived of the angels as tin soldiers--and envied them? Do angels really parade as if they were in an elementary school play? In order to understand the profound symbol of the banners in the desert and their relation to angels, we must understand that there are two words for a banner or flag in Hebrew, and each has a different connotation. Those words are degel and nes. Nes is an external symbol, a sign to others; it is meant for outsiders. Thus, Isaiah speaks of the Messiah's function towards the rest of the world at the end of the day; ve'nissa nes la-goyim me'rachok--"He shall raise a nes for the nations from the distance." The nes is meant for other nations; it is for the distant, for the outsider. Degel on the other hand is a symbol of the fulfillment of one's own purpose, his own destiny, the meaning of his own life for himself.

Nes implies a communication with others; you identify yourself thereby to others. Degel implies communion with yourself; you identify yourself to yourself--it is a symbol of self-identity. Nes will cause people to rally. Degel will rally people to a cause. Nes is appropriate to the harim--the mountains, with which it is often associated in the Bible. For you are on top of the mountain when you preach down to

others. The degel is generally associated with midbar, the desert. When you are in a wasteland, there you must first find yourself and discover who you are and what you stand for.

In Jewish tradition, an angel is created for one single purpose, for one solitary shelichut. The angel knows what it is he was created for, and he proceeds to do it. Therefore, the degel is indeed symbolic of the malakh. The degel symbolizes a single-minded purpose--and an angel lives for just that. Hence, nitavu Yisrael she-yihu lahem degalim k'malakhei ha-sharet means that the Israelites wanted, like the angels, to know the great purpose for which each of them was brought into the world. Every Jew wanted to know what he stands for, what function he is to serve in the grand drama of creation.

Purpose does not mean only a career, a profession, a matter of occupation ambitions. One does not have a noble purpose in life by selling real estate, or securities or textiles, or diamonds. These are only the means to an end. And the end, the goal, the purpose--that is the degel.

Like the ministering angel, each of us must consider life as a mission, a shelichut. Each of us must consider himself an ambassador of G-d who must report back to the Almighty at the end of his earthly pilgrimage, who will then judge whether or not we have carried out our task faithfully.

Of course it is difficult for everyone to know what single great purpose he is to serve in life. Some people, perhaps the greatest number, are helplessly lost, with no idea of what they are doing in the world. They are like driftwood on the wild waves of a stormy ocean. These are people who lack identity, who seemingly have no purpose, no degel. It is about such people that the Russian theologian, Nicholas Berdyaev, said that they have not only lost the way, but they have also lost the address. They do not know where they are going, and in fact they do not know if one is supposed to go any place at all in life. They live in a vast midbar without the benefit of degalim.

Many areas of modern life are such bannerless deserts. Television is one such notable example. It was most refreshing to hear Mr. Newton Minnow, who was recently appointed as the Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, lecture the broadcasters about their responsibilities. It was a speech which will long be remembered by thoughtful people. He reproached them for having no purpose other than that of exploiting the airwaves for financial gain. The words he used to describe the present situation are most appropriate: "a vast wasteland." In Hebrew, that is--midbar! What Mr. Minnow was trying to do--vainly, I fear--was to give them degalim, banners, a sense of purpose, a set of high goals, in this wasteland. It will be a real pity if the vested interests of industry and politics manage to destroy his plan and return the control of the TV airwaves to those who regard it as nothing more than another source of income.

Most of us, however, and most decent people, are not in that category of those who are completely lost. We know in general where we belong, what our general goals are, what camp we belong to. However, we do not know, each of us, his individual purpose in life. We know that as human beings it is our duty to reflect the Divine Image in which we were created, by being

decent, compassionate, kind. We know that as Jews, more specifically, we are obligated to the prophetic challenge: atem edai, ne'um ha-Shem, "Ye are my witnesses, are the words of the Lord." Our task as Jews is to be the witness to the presence of G-d in human history. And, as the sainted author of the Sefat Emet, put it, how are we witness?--By living according to "the words of the Lord," that is, Torah. But if you ask such a person: what specifically is your task, your purpose in life, your specific function in the Divine economy of creation, he does not know.

Some individuals, a minority, are truly blessed. They have matured spiritually, and have discovered what it is exactly for which they were created; they know their purpose in life. How fortunate they are!

These last two types--those who know the general trend of their being, and those who know the specific purpose for which they were brought into the world, are represented in our Sidra by the words ish al machnehu v'ish al diglo, "every man according to his camp, and every man according to his banner." These represent the two types we have mentioned. (See Sefat Emet.)
Ish al machnehu represents those who know the general camp with which they are identified. They have identified themselves with a group. Ish al diglo are those who know specifically their degel or purpose in life. They have identified themselves also within the group. Ish al machnehu may be in the right camp, but he tends to fritter away his energies and his resources on the wrong task, sometimes on trivialities. Such a person is in the right machaneh, the right group and the right environment, but he has never managed to find himself.

The story is told of the sainted Chafetz Chayim who, in a time of great and grave community crisis, noticed one of the wealthiest men in the town staying long after the hour of services in order to recite the Psalms. The gentile and saintly Chafetz Chayim approached him with the following rebuke. He told him that he had no right to spend his time reciting the Psalms when G-d had blessed him with the wherewithal to alleviate the grave crisis which had struck the community. "Your business," he said, "is to organize campaigns for charity and disburse it yourself, not to spend all your time in reciting the Tehillim." And he told him the following parable, "in the army of Czar Nicholas there are many divisions. If a soldier who has been trained for the cavalry and is serving there at present, were one fine day to decide that he is going to join the artillery, he may be serving the same Czar and fighting for the same cause, and meaning well all along. But what probably will happen is that his superiors will court martial him and put him against the wall to face the firing squad. His purpose was determined by the Czar to be cavalry, not artillery. You cannot mix purposes by yourself." Ish al machnehu is not sufficient. We must strive for ish al diglo.

This latter class, those who know what their place and purpose is in life, they have indeed achieved the angelic distinction of degel. In the Song of Songs we read: diglo alai ahava, "His banner above me is love." The word ahavah, love, is numerically equivalent to echad--"one" (See Sefat Emet). The only way to discover the degel of echad, the single-minded application to a great cause, your single greatest purpose in life, that for which you were created, is to experiment with every noble purpose, every sacred task, every lofty cause, until you discover that which you can do best and that with which you can fall in love. You must have a deep loyalty and a profound affection for what you recognize as your purpose in life. The banner of echad must participate in ahavah.

Is there any need to enumerate the hundreds of great purposes which beckon to each and every one of us? There is Israel, education--both your own scholarship and assisting others, there is rescue work, there is cancer, there is heart work, there is Hebrah Kadisha, there is Shabbat, there is Free Loan Society, there is the ability to make others happy through word or song, there is helping the retarted children...there is indeed no lack of degalim!

About eight hundred years ago Rabbi Judah, the author of Sefer Chassidim told us that the truly pious man will never neglect any one of the 613 mitzvot. Indeed, to have a great cause never means to renege or to be negligent of any of the obligations to which all Jews are committed. However, the truly pious man will choose one mitzvah above all others which will become his symbol, his purpose, his degel. Perhaps that is why we refer to a young man who has attained religious maturity as a bar mitzvah; by right, we should call him a bar mitzvot, since on this thirteenth birthday he becomes responsible for the observance of all the commandments. But on this day we tell him that with his assumption of responsibility for all the commandments, he is at the same time urged to find one area of virtue, or goodness, of religious creativity which will define his own purpose in creation.
It is significant that we read the portion of degalim on the Saturday before Shabuot. On

Shabuot we each realize what is our machaneh, our camp. It is that of Torah, but the Sidra of degalim reminds us: that it is not enough merely to be a man of Torah. We must also each know our individual purpose, we are each challenged to find and execute his shelichut. The Sidra addresses each of us: What do you stand for? Where and what is your banner in the desert of life?

Happy is the man who can answer clearly and lucidly. Blessed is his life for his mission, his shelichut is triumphant. His existence is meaningful and worthy. In the words of King David: neran'nah bi-yeshuatekha u-veshem Elokenu nidgol-- "We shall sing over Thy victory and raise our banners in the name of our G-d." Yemalei ha-Shem kol mishaletekha, "May G-d fulfill all your requests."

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The Hidden Message Telegraphed by the Word "Se'oo"

In the beginning of Parshas Bamidbar, Klal Yisrael received the mitzvah of counting the nation. That is why the Book of Bamidbar is called "Chomesh HaPekudim" – the "Book of Numbers", because it both begins (Parshas Bamidbar) and ends (Parshas Pinchas) with a census of Bnei Yisrael. The terminology used by the Torah regarding taking the census taking is "Se'oo es rosh kol adas Bnei Yisrael…" [Bamidbar 1:2] (Count (literally – "lift up") the heads of the entire congregation of the Children of Israel…).

The Ramban quotes the Medrash in Bamidbar Rabbah which questions the implication of the expression Se'oo. The Torah does not say "Romemu es rosh," or "Gadlu es rosh" which are essentially similar verbs. Rather, it uses the term "Se'oo es rosh". This implies, the Medrash says, that if Klal Yisrael behaves properly, they will be on top of the world as it says (in Yosef's interpreting the dream of the Wine Butler) "Yisa Pharaoh es roshecha…" (Pharaoh will 'lift your head') and return you to your original position [Bereshis 40:13]. This verb also implies that if Lo Yis'oo – if Klal Yisrael does not keep the mitzvos, they will all die. This too is implied by the expression used when Yosef interpreted the dream of the Baker – "Yisa Pharaoh es roshcha… (Pharaoh will 'lift your head') and will hang you on the tree. [Bereshis 40:19]

In other words, the word Se'oo can mean the highest of the high or the lowest of the low. Just like the same verb used in conjunction with the Wine Butler and the Baker had diametrically opposite meanings, so too—the Medrash says—the Ribono shel Olam is hinting to Moshe Rabbeinu: Moshe, you should understand that by Klal Yisrael it is "either/or". There is an expression in Yiddish which is not readily translatable: "Odder gor; odder gornisht". It means either "gor" (wow!) or "gornisht" (nothing). This is the trajectory of the Jewish people. If we do what we are supposed to do, then our fate will be to receive unimaginable blessing; but on the other hand, if we do not, we fall – literally – to the bottom.

A famous Gemara [Kesubos 66] relates an incident with Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai riding on a donkey on the outskirts of Jerusalem. His students were walking behind him. He saw a young Jewish girl who was gathering undigested barley kernels from amongst cattle dung. She was so desperate because of the famine ravishing the city that she was forced to seek a small bit of food in this extremely degrading fashion.

When she saw Rav Yochanan approach, she begged him to provide her with a handout. He asked her "My daughter – who is your father?" She identified herself as the daughter of Nakdimen ben Gurion. Nakdimen ben Gurion was (l'havidil) the Warren Buffet of his generation. He was extremely wealthy. Rabbi Yochanan asked her "My daughter, what happened to the wealth of your father?" She told him "This is what they say in Yerushalayim: "If you do not make proper use of your money, your money will be taken away from you." Rav Yochanan (knowing she had a wealthy father-in-law as well) asked "What happened to your father-in-law's money?" She responded, "He too lost it all."

She commented, "Rebbi, do you remember when you signed my Kesuba document? Do you remember how much money the document recorded that I was bringing into the marriage?" Rav Yochanan turned to his students and said, "I remember that her marriage contract said she was bringing in thousands and thousands of gold dinarim from her father's house, besides the wealth of her (rich) father-in-law." At that point Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai broke down and cried: "Happy are you O Israel – when you do the Will of the Almighty, no nation can touch you; and when you do not keep the mitzvos and you do not act properly, you are handed over into the hands of a lowly nation – and not only into the hands of a lowly nation, but to the hands of the animals of a lowly nation."

The question is, why did he preface his remark with "Happy are you O Israel" (Ashreichem Yisrael)? The Maharsha explains: We get our success or failure directly from the Ribono shel Olam. When the Ribono shel Olam is in charge, He can put us on the top of the world when we are doing what we are supposed to be doing. We are not under a 'Sar' (Officer) or some kind of a Malach (Angel) like the Nations of the World. We get what we get directly from the Hand of the Ribono shel Olam. When we do what we are supposed to do, the Almighty takes care of us like no human being can. But, when we don't, then – oh boy! – This is what happens to Klal Yisrael.

This succinctly is a history of the Jewish people. We have had periods of extreme success and extreme wealth. We have had periods, unfortunately, when the opposite has been true. This is what the Ramban means when he quotes the Medrash "Se'oo es rosh kol adas Benei Yisrael." The Almighty was hinting to Moshe – let them know: Odder gor; odder gornisht! They can be wildly successful, as in "Yissa Pharaoh es roshecha" of the Wine Butler. But, if they don't, then that which happens in the Tochacha of last week's parsha and the Tochacha of Parshas Ki Savo is what will happen to them as well.

A Subtle Name Change Hints at a Reward for Keeping Silent

The Chida, in his sefer Chomas Anach, comments on the name of the Prince of the Tribe of Gad: Elyasaf ben Re'u'el [Bamidbar 2:14]. You may notice that the first time his name is mentioned in the parsha [Bamidbar 1:14] he is referred to as Elyasaf ben De'u'el (with a daled rather than a reish). Why the change? Did his father have an alias? Was his name De'u'el or Re'u'el?

The Chida brings an interesting idea in the name of the sefer Imrei Noam. His name was De'u'el, and that is how he is referred to originally. The reason he is later called Re'u'el is because the Tribe of Gad could have had a complaint to the Ribono shel Olam: Why am I not the head of the Camp?

(There were four "camps" consisting of three tribes each, positioned in the four directions around the middle camp which included the Levi'im and the Mishkan. Each camp had a "leader" from one of the three tribes encamped in that direction. The Tribe of Gad encamped in the southern side and was subordinate to the Tribe of Reuven, whose Prince was the chief leader of that camp.)

Gad's argument was as follows: I realize I am not Reuven (who was the camp leader at the southern side) and I realize I am not Yehudah (who was the leader of the camps on the eastern side) and I am not Ephraim (who was leader of the western camp). But who is Dan that he should be leader of the camps on the northern side? Dan was merely the first born of Bilhah, one of the hand-maidens? I, too, am first born of Zilpah, also one of the hand-maidens! Why give Dan the honor of being the head of an entire camp? Why not give that honor to me?

He could have put forth that objection, but he did not say anything. As a reward for accepting this lack of honor – Gad received a reward that no other tribe received: Moshe Rabbeinu is buried in the portion of land inherited by the Tribe of Gad. Who is Moshe Rabbeinu? He is the friend of the Ribono shel Olam. He is Reah (friend) Kel (of G-d). Thus, the name De'u'el was changed to Re'u'el (alluding to 'friend of G-d').

The Tribe of Gad stifled whatever resentment they might have had for not being given the honor of leading one of the Camp configurations. They had a justifiable claim to

advance, but they kept quiet about it. The Ribono shel Olam rewards such behavior. The Prince of the Tribe of Gad is referred to as Elyasaf son of Re'u'el, which hints at this reward: "You will merit to have the burial location of Moshe Rabbeinu, the 'friend of G-d' within your territory."

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel
Encyclopedia of Jewish Values*

The Unique Jewish Concept of Family

When a census is taken in almost every country in the world today, every person in each household is usually counted and reported individually. Yet, when God commands Moshe to count the people in the second verse of our Parsha, God stresses that they must be counted as families. Why? This requirement is again mentioned in verse 18, and then each tribe is dutifully counted, repeatedly in the Parsha, by Moshe as a family, "*Lemishpechotam*". What is so important in keeping the Jewish family together, even in counting people, especially when only males above the age of twenty were actually counted? What is unique about the Jewish concept of family that is alluded to at the beginning of the Torah can continues throughout the wilderness and even to today?

The Family Concept Begins At The Very Start Of The Torah

God's original plan for family for all the world's people can be found in the Torah, but is only alluded to in the verses. By following and analyzing the key words for family, in the Torah, we will be able to piece together God's original plan for humankind regarding families, how and why it changed, and then God's new plan, which is still in effect today.

It seems to this author that God's original plan for humanity was for the entire human race, i.e., for all human beings, to unite as one family. This is based on the name Adam called his wife. The Midrash explains that Adam was given special wisdom, even greater than that of the angels, to capture the essence of each animal in its name (Midrash Beraishit 17:4, Pesikta Rabbati 14:8). So, too, when Adam named his wife Chava-Eve, as the "mother of all human beings" (Genesis 3:21), he also captured her essence. Adam understood that God's intention was that his wife would be mother to every future human being, thus uniting all human beings as one very large family, born from one mother and one father (or their offspring).

Why did this original plan by God not come to fruition? Since man has free will, in the second generation of mankind, Cain did not listen to God's warning to him, who became furious after God preferred Abel's offering to Cain's, who became jealous, and Cain then killed his brother (Genesis 4:5-8). That one act not only killed off billions of Abel's future potential offspring, but also broke apart forever that very first family unit of parents and children. The loss of that family value can be seen in the verses themselves. The Torah says that Cain talked to Abel his brother before killing Abel his brother, even though we already know that Abel was Cain's brother. The Torah chooses to stress that Cain was killing not just another human being, but his brother, as he also killed brotherhood.

This pattern of a failed united family continued in subsequent generations. Eventually, the Torah tells us that the sons of the powerful judges misused their power to take (against their will?) the daughters of mankind. This was the ultimate act of desecration of the family unit, and it was right then and there that God decided that the vision and experiment had failed completely, and that the human race and world had to be destroyed and He would begin again (Genesis 6:2-7).

God chose one family, the family of Noah, to save from destruction, and begin again with the concept of family. The Torah says that God saved Noah, his wife, their three children and their wives AS a family. God tells Noah to come to the Ark with his home, i.e., family. Then the Torah records that the people who came to the Ark were Noah, his sons, his wife, and his daughters in law (Genesis 7:1, 7). No names are mentioned because the key was to preserve all 8 people as one united family unit. But the Torah goes beyond this to stress the family concept. Most people assume that each of the two animals from each species (pure species had seven of each animal) were randomly selected. But in an amazing verse, the Torah describes that the animals entered the Ark as spouses (Genesis 7:2).Were these animals formally married? Of course not. Why the language of family, then, by animals? The Midrash\ (Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 23) says that these were no ordinary animals, and were not selected by Noah, nor did they come to the Ark by themselves. The angels selected them apparently because of their superior moral qualities.

When the water from the Flood subsided and they left Ark, the Torah says that (only) the animals left as families (Genesis 8:19). The commentaries agree (Commentaries to Genesis 8:19: Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Daat Zekainim, Rosh, Tur (longer commentary) that all the animals in the Ark were special because they were monogamous. Then, in the very first story following the Flood, Noah's family unity was utterly broken, after Noah's grandson Canaan shamed his drunken grandfather, while Shem and Yafet attempted to preserve their father's dignity (9:18-24).

The Third Plan To Create World Family – The Jewish People

Ten generations after Noach (which united briefly to defy God by building the Tower, but not as a family), God decides to try a totally different approach to creating a lasting concept of family in the world. It would again begin with one person and one family (like Noah). However, this family would grow into a nation by itself – a united nation of different small families, united as one large family. Eventually, this united family-nation would serve as a role model for other nations in the world, who would, of their own accord eventually unite as well as nation-families.

Whom did God choose to begin this third attempt at family unity? Abraham. In His first words to Abraham, God promises to make Abraham's family into a nation, and eventually all the families of the world (the other nations) will be blessed through Abraham (Genesis 12:1-4). Why was Abraham specifically chosen of all people? While the Torah does not answer this question directly, it does give a reason: although there had been several righteous people in the past, the Torah explains that Abraham was the first who felt the need to transmit his values of justice and righteousness to his children, and eventually to all his descendants (Genesis 18:19). In fact, when the Torah says that Abraham was blessed with "everything," Rashi explains that this was actually referring to Abraham becoming a father to Isaac, since the numerical value of "*Hakol*-everything" is identical in Hebrew to *Ben*-son" (Genesis 24:1 with Rashi commentary). To Abraham, starting a Jewish family was everything in life.

But all was not smooth in implementing God's new concept through Abraham. Why are the Jews in the Torah called Israelites or Children of Israel in the Torah, and not Abrahamites or Children of Abraham? This is because, despite Abraham's proper intentions to build a united family, he failed in this part of the mission. While Isaac did indeed continue Abraham's traditions and values (Genesis 21:12). Abraham's other son, Yishmael, was evil and did not live a life based on Abraham's values (Genesis 16:12). When Yishmael became a bad influence on Isaac, at Sarah's insistence (with God's approval), Ishmael and his mother Hagar were forced to leave Abraham's home. While Ishmael's descendants would also attain the status of nationhood, the intended united family never materialized with Abraham and his children (Genesis 21:9-13).

Sadly, this pattern continued in the second generation of Jews as well. Although, unlike the first generation, both twins born to the same parents, Isaac and Rebecca, these brothers, too, never got along, and, at one point, Esau wanted to kill his brother Jacob because he thought that Jacob had stolen his father's blessing (Genesis 27:41). At the request of his parents, Jacob runs away to begin his own family with a wife from the "old country," just as Isaac had done. Eisav and Yaakov eventually reconciled, but the damage had been done. The plan for a united Jewish family did not materialize in this second generation either.

In the third generation of Jews and Jewish family, this pattern – the lack of a united Jewish family – continued as well – almost. The children of Jacob hated their brother Joseph and were jealous of him when they perceived that he was favored but their father Jacob (Genesis 37:4, 11). They almost killed Joseph, relegating the concept of a united Jewish family again to

oblivion. Instead, they sold Joseph who went down to Egypt as a slave. Twenty-two years later, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to get food during a famine. It was then, for the very first time (except for one technical time earlier), that the term *Bnai Yisrael*-children of Israel (The Jewish Nation) is written in the Torah. This traditional name in the Torah describing the Jewish people as a nation, hundreds of times in the text, signifies the children of Israel or children of Jacob. It was at this moment, says Rashi, that the brothers began to think about the terrible action they had taken towards their brother, and they felt regret (Genesis 42:3-5 and Rashi commentary). They felt unity. Only after this united family actually came together following Joseph reconciliation with his brothers during Jacob's lifetime, did the Jews become a people. The idea of family is so central to Judaism that the name of the nation itself is the name of the first united family of Jews (Children of Jacob-Israel). Judaism is the only major religion in the world whose name is derived from a family. Thus, when Jacob eventually went down to Egypt, the entire Jewish family reunited with 70 souls that formed the Jewish people (Genesis 46:8).

A United Family – A Pre-Condition For Leaving Egypt

The Torah continues this theme in Exodus in the very first verse (Exodus 1:1), describing how the Jews came to Egypt as a united family (the word *Bayit*-house is used in the Torah repeatedly to symbolize the Jewish family, as noted in the Talmud (Nedarim 52a)). In Egypt, too, the Jews were counted by family (Exodus 6:14-19). But then, through the slavery, something changed. The unity of the family gradually became dismantled. From Rashi's description (Rashi commentary on Exodus 2:1) of how one of the most prominent Jewish families separated from each other to avoid having a baby who would be killed by Pharaoh, we can imagine that many or most other families also separated at that time for similar reasons. It was only because of their daughter Miriam's plea to her parents, says Rashi, that Amram and Yocheved, her parents, reunited. Thus, as Amram and Yocheved return to each other, this act becomes the symbol of the reunification of the Jewish family for the nation, as is highlighted in the verse, "a man from the (*Bayit*) family of Levi took the daughter of Levi." The result of this small family unity is the birth of Moses (Exodus 2:1-2), the beginning of the redemption. It is clear, then, that the redemption of the Jewish people could not occur until the nation was again reunited as families.

Later, when Pharaoh was almost relented and was willing to send out the Jews after the seventh plague of hail, Pharaoh asked Moses which of the Jews specifically would depart. Both Moses and Pharaoh understood the importance of a united family for Jews. Moses, therefore, said we will leave as a united family, with our children, our elders, our boys, and girls (Exodus 10:9). But since Pharaoh also understood very well that a family event would serve to strengthen the Jews as a people, he responded that only the adults, and not the children, could leave (Exodus 10:10-11). Moses refused this offer as inadequate, and the status quo continued.

The idea of a united Jewish family had to be translated into Jewish action, for the people to prove to themselves and God that they were truly united as families. Only then could they leave Egypt as a united nation. Thus, for the Jews to leave Egypt, they had to perform one Mitzvah-commandment, that of sacrificing and eating the Paschal lamb. The Torah is clear in the structure of performing this Mitzvah -- it had to be by family, stressing one lamb for each family eaten as a family. And if one family was too small, then two families (the extended family who usually lived next door, i.e. the grandparents our cousins) had to combine to eat it (Exodus 12:3-4). The symbol of putting the blood of the sacrifice on the doorposts (Exodus 12:13 & 12:23) once again demonstrated the unity of the Jewish home (*Bayit*), the Jewish family (the blood was on the inside, not inside, as a reminder to the inhabitants and God, not the Egyptians). Therefore, it is clear that as a prerequisite to leaving Egypt and truly become a people, the Jews first had to be united as a Jewish family.

Now we can understand why God mandated a continued united family in the desert in our Parsha in the counting, which has helped preserve the Jewish people and the Jewish family until today.

*** This column has been adapted from a series of volumes written by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel "*The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values*" available from Urim and Amazon. For the full article or to review all the footnotes in the original, contact the author at nachum@jewishdestiny.com**

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

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.

Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah via the Internet

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From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks, z"l
Torah: Our Greatest Gift

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.

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Shavuot

There is hardly an example of human tragedy, which is not a part of the story of Ruth. Famine, exile, bereavement, widowhood, loneliness and poverty all occur to Naomi and Ruth. But there is one aspect of human life, not at all a tragic one, which I think is the central theme of the story and which I would like to discuss as a worthy example of "the person in the parsha."

I refer to the act of personal choice, of making a decision. We have all had numerous occasions to choose between two courses of action, between seemingly equally beneficial options for our future. Sometimes these have been of momentous importance, and other times, as trivial as deciding between chocolate and vanilla ice cream.

For me, the phenomenon of choice defines the human condition. Only humans choose. Choice and decision distinguish us from the rest of the animal world.

It has been claimed that what makes human beings distinct is our capacity to think and speak; homo sapiens. Others maintain that it is our ability to use tools which distinguishes us; homo faber. And others even go so far as to claim that it is our ability to play which renders us unique; homo ludens.

But if the popular philosophical movement of existentialism taught us anything about the special nature of the human person, it is that we are creatures who choose. We are "condemned" to make choices.

Nevertheless, the responsibility of making decisions is something we try to avoid. In the catchy phrase of Erich Fromm's book, we wish to "escape from freedom." We wish to escape, but we have no choice but to choose.

Ruth is a perfect example of someone who faced the choices in her life and made some very painful ones. They turned out to be part of her heroic destiny and proved to be of singular importance to the Jewish people and to all humanity.

Rabbinic legend tells us that Ruth and her sister-in-law, Orpah, were Moabite princesses. They could have married anyone in their society, but they chose to marry the Jewish "greenhorns," albeit noble "greenhorns," and thus made a choice which distinguished them from their sister princesses. They both bucked the tide and married members of the minority in their land. But they exercised choice, and that begins the story.

Their husbands, Machlon and Kilyon, then died, confronting them with yet another crucial life decision. Would they remarry? Would they now conform to their peers and marry Moabite men, or would they continue to irrationally seek Jewish mates – even if that meant choosing to leave their homeland? Choice, painful choice.

It has been said that all important decisions are made on the basis of insufficient data. Of course this is true, because when there is truly adequate information, choices are obvious and apparent, and the decision-making process is of little consequence.

But if it is true that all important decisions depend upon insufficient data, then all heroic decisions are made on the basis of contrary data. The realistic data which lay before Ruth and Orpah certainly would have justified very different choices for them. The data would argue, "stay home;" remain within a familiar culture; marry someone who is socially and religiously compatible with you. Do not marry a stranger, and certainly do not enter voluntary exile in the attempt to find a mate equal to your first love in a distant and alien environment.

This was essentially Naomi's argument to both women. She urged them to consider the data and to make "realistic" choices.

Orpah initially persisted in her choice. But then, her rational, practical nature

understandably prevailed. She chose to return home.

Ruth, on the other hand, persisted beyond that point. And she chose, consciously and courageously, another nation, another people, and another god. What an awesome choice! What a dazzling, truly unpredictable decision!

Moment by moment, each of us faces a range of options and choices. We struggle to base our decisions upon sufficient data, although disappointingly, such data is usually not forthcoming.

In the absence of sufficient data, our choices must sometimes be “leaps of faith.” Occasionally, they must be based upon an inner voice, the voice of our conscience, or perhaps the voice of our dreams.

Ruth provides a model for those of us who, when we reach a crossroads in our lives, understand that our decisions cannot just be based upon lists of pros and cons, upon rationally weighing advantages versus disadvantages. Rather, we look within, or look Above, for guidance, recognizing that we have no guarantees that these voices are authentic.

The lesson of Ruth, the person and the book, is that such choices, guided by intuition and inspiration, if not by certainty and information, result in significance to the person, and can determine the course of history: Ruth was the ancestress of King David.

Like the poet Robert Frost, we may look back with regret at “the road not taken,” but alternatively, we may find that the “less travelled road” is the most meaningful one of all.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm’s Derashot Ledorot

“A Previous Engagement”

One of the most significant phrases in modern life is: “I have a previous engagement.” Countless people have been saved from tedious meetings, wearisome conventions, and boring speeches by that pleasant, precious, and most effective device, "I have a previous engagement.” It is the kind of disclaimer and escape that is never a complete untruth, and which allows both parties to retreat gracefully and graciously from what otherwise might be an embarrassing encounter.

Yet that same phrase is no doubt the most overworked and abused excuse in the lexicon of our times. Who knows how many worthy endeavors have been frustrated and lofty enterprises undermined because people lamely pleaded: "I have a previous engagement." It is painful to the point of being tragic when this phrase is bandied about by Jews as a means of avoiding their Judaism; when it is misused by those of our co-religionists who wish thereby to circumvent the moral and spiritual obligations that Torah places upon all of us. We stifle our own spirits when, with an air of injured innocence, we dismiss Torah and Mitzvot by waving the magic wand: "I am so sorry, I have a previous engagement.”

The teaching of Shavuot is, in a manner of speaking, that no Jew may accept a previous engagement before coming to Torah; or, better, that Torah constitutes the "previous engagement" of every Jew! This primacy of Torah, this acceptance of it as our prime commitment and first allegiance, is of the essence of our faith. It is not enough to love Judaism, to support it, even to practice it. It must be our primary allegiance, our priority, our precommitment.

The famed Rabbi of Gur, in his "Sefat Emet," saw a reflection of this teaching in the very name we give this holiday. The name Shavuot stands for "weeks," because the holiday always falls seven weeks after Passover. But, by a slight change of one vowel, the Rabbi of Gur reads not "Shavuot," weeks, but "Shevuot," oaths. It is a festival when we recall an ancient shevuah, an ancient vow that made us the covenanted people that we are.

He explains the nature of this oath by referring to an interesting discussion in the Talmud. The Talmud declares that an oath that is superfluous is invalid. For instance, if I swear to rest every afternoon, that is a valid oath. If afterwards I again make the same vow, then the second time I am considered to have pronounced an invalid oath -- for I am already under oath to rest, and therefore the second oath is superfluous. Similarly, the Talmud declares, if a man swears to perform a mitzvah such as to fast on Yom Kippur or to make the Kiddush on Shabbat, that oath is invalid. The reason is, every Jew is mushba ve’omed me’har sinai, already under prior oath from the time of revelation of Sinai to observe all the necessary mitzvot. Hence, any new oath to observe a mitzvah is unnecessary and invalid.

This, then, is what Shavuot or "Shevuot" tells us: that each of us is mushba ve’omed me’har sinai. We are born under prior oath, we come into this world already endowed with a previous engagement. Our spirits and loyalties and allegiances are already engaged. We may accept any assignment or duties, provided that they do not conflict with the teachings of Torah. We can be businessmen or society people, scientists or philosophers, sportsmen or athletes — on the sole condition that these endeavors do not in any way contradict our fealty to our faith, our loyalty to the Almighty. For that is our previous engagement: we are mushba ve’omed me’har sinai.

Indeed, we may take that word "engagement" quite literally in its domestic or marital sense. We are engaged or affianced to the Almighty! When we read in the Torah that Torah tzivah lanu Mosheh morashah kehillat Yaakov, that Moses gave us the Torah as an inheritance (morashah) for the congregation of Jacob, the Rabbis declared that one should read not only morashah, inheritance, but also me’orasah, engaged or betrothed. Israel and God are, as it were, an engaged couple! And just as bride and groom, husband and wife, know that each has first claim on the affections and devotions of the other, so Israel’s first loyalty and first love is to God; He and His Torah are our previous "engagement." No wonder we speak of marital "vows" and of "pledging" our troth. The vows we took at Sinai are of the most intimate kind; our previous "engagement" is more than a casual encounter -- it is of the intense, delicate, and profound sort.

The survival of Jews and Judaism in this country has become a favorite topic of conversation. Lecturers speak about it and magazines write about it. Will the American Jews vanish, Heaven forbid? The answer, it is true, depends on many factors: education, intermarriage, the synagogue, birth rates, the effect of Israel, But these in turn turn on the more fundamental question: what is our first loyalty? How seriously do we take our dedication to Judaism? For Judaism, if it is to be meaningful, cannot be taken in small doses like a diet supplement. It may not be conceived of as an injection, a kind of medicine to take in moments when our soul is ill, even if we follow the usual legend on the medicine bottle, "shake well before using." Either Judaism means everything to us, or it will mean nothing to us. If the Torah is going to be a "real" thing for us, then we must realize that from the moment of birth, nay, from the moment of conception, each of us is mushba ve’omed me’har sinai — under prior oath. By virtue of being born Jewish, we are born into a previous engagement with Judaism.

The Prophet declares: ani hu rishon v’ani hu aharon. The Almighty cries out, "I am the first, and I am the last." A Hasidic interpretation, filled with humor and sarcasm and profound perception, reads that verse not as a proclamation, but as a complaint, as a lament. The Almighty regretfully protests that there are times that He is the First, and there are times that He is the Last. What happens when recession threatens and a man feels that business is not going too well? He begins to cut back his expenses, to trim his budget. And what is the first thing that suffers? -- charity, philanthropy, the synagogue, education! "I am the first" ... And when a man finds himself in trouble, in crisis, he turns to all kinds of people to help him. He goes to a doctor, then to a bigger doctor, then to a specialist, then to a world famous expert. And, finally, if that too does not help, as a last resort, he turns to God in prayer. "I am the last" . . .

This is precisely what happens when Judaism is not our previous engagement. What Shavuot demands of us is that religion become utterly serious for us, not the first thing to turn from and the last thing to turn to. For the test of the authentic Jew is: what is his prior commitment? All the various activities in

which we are engaged, from entertainment and luxury to pursuit of profit and fashion, are not necessarily unjustifiable. But the question is: which takes priority in our lives? In case of a conflict, which comes first? Which do we hold to be superior, and which is the judge of the other values? This, and this alone, is how we can determine whether we are being truly Jewish.

A marvelous restatement of the same theme, in a manner worth remembering, is given to us by the author of "Benei Yisaskhor" based upon an insight provided by the famous R. Loewe, the "Maharal of Prague." It is remarkable, for one thing, that Shavuot is the only holiday mentioned in the Torah for which no clear date -- precise month and day -- is given. We are merely told that it is to be celebrated seven weeks after the Passover. Secondly, the study of Torah is one of those few mitzvot for which no specific time has been set aside. Would it not have been better had we been told to study Torah during specific times of the day and night? Finally, the verse in the Books of Joshua which inform us of the fact that Torah study has no set time, reads: ve-hagita bo yomam va'layla, and you shall meditate in it by day and by night." But according to the Jewish system, night precedes day; should not, then, the verse have read, "by night and by day," instead of yomam va-lailah? They answer that Torah is different, because Torah is le'maalah min ha-zeman -- beyond time. Torah is not subsumed under the usual temporal categories. Torah, according to the Talmud, was created a long time before the world, and will continue to exist after the world is gone. Because Torah transcends time, therefore, no enterprise, no endeavor, no value can be placed before it. That which is above time is before all else; none may plead "I have a previous engagement" when it comes to timeless Torah.

This means that if we take our Judaism seriously it must be the ultimate value to which everything else must yield and to which it must lead. It means that religion cannot be seen merely as a tool for the survival of a nation, or as part of a civilization, or an aspect of a culture, or a psychological crutch. If indeed Torah has the prior oath of all of Israel, that means that all values must bend to it. Therefore, for instance, the State of Israel must serve to enhance that ancient oath we took at Sinai. One need not protest his loyalty to the State of Israel and his conviction of its vast and enormous historical importance in order to approve wholeheartedly what a distinguished Ambassador of the State of Israel said in this synagogue several days ago: that the State of Israel is not an end in itself but only a means, a means to geulah, to redemption. And I will go one step further: what, in turn, is the purpose of geulah? -- that too is a means, and its ultimate goal is that freedom which allows Jews to be true to themselves by living an exquisitely moral life with Torah, and thus fulfilling our historic mission of teaching the word of God to all mankind.

It is more than just a happy coincidence that we recite Yizkor on Shavuot, the festival of mushba ve'omed me'har sinai. On this day when we remember parents and grandparents, we realize that we have not been created new, but we are, rather, a link in a long and venerable chain. This chain is one that goes back to the beginnings of our people. Each link, each generation has the sacred function of transmitting to the next that shevuah, that holy vow, first taken by our great-grandparents at Mt. Sinai.

Yizkor is then, not only a sentimental recollection; it is also an inspiring reminder of the vows we exchanged with Almighty God at the foot of that desert mountain. It is a challenge to recapture that exciting sense of commitment as we look back through the dim recesses of the corridors of history to that bright moment when God and Israel pledged their troth to each other; when He vowed that He would be our God, and we swore that we will be His people. All else is secondary to that, for God is our previous engagement, even as we continue to cherish the hope that we will always be -- His first love.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel
Encyclopedia of Jewish Values*

Deeper Understanding of the Ideas of the Holiday

In order to understand the underlying ideas and deeper concepts of the holiday or Shavuot, it is important to first explore how this holiday is different from the other major festivals in Judaism. There are three major holiday festivals in the Jewish calendar outlined in the Torah (Exodus 23:14-16, Deuteronomy 16:16) -- Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot when all Jews went to the Temple to sacrifice and pray. Sukkot and Pesach are similar in so many respects – holiday length, date of the Jewish month, etc. Shavuot, on the other hand, is different from these two holidays in various ways. If we can pinpoint, both general and specifically, how it is different and why, it may help us discover the principles and concepts that are unique to Shavuot.

Questions How And Why Shavuot Is Different From Pesach And Sukkot - As mentioned above, there are numerous aspects of Shavuot which make it different from its two companion holidays, Pesach, and Sukkot. In addition to the obvious differences, there are various Jewish laws that apply only to Shavuot, which also need to be explored. What are the specific differences and questions about this unique holiday?

In the Torah, both Pesach and Shavuot are seven-day holidays (Exodus 23:15, Leviticus 23:34). Shavuot, on the other and, lasts only one day (Numbers 28:26). (The Rabbis added an extra day to each holiday in the Diaspora, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this discussion). Why is this so?

Both Pesach and Shavuot fall out on the 15th of the Jewish month (Nisan and Tishrei, respectively), when the moon is full, at its zenith. Shavuot, on the other hand, falls out on the 6th of the month of Sivan (the 51st day after the beginning of Pesach) (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 494:1, Midrash Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 40), when the moon is a little larger than half full, still rising each night. What is the significance of this?

While the dates of Peach and Shavuot are clearly delineated in the Torah, the date of Shavuot is never mentioned, neither in the Torah nor in the Code of Jewish law. Rather, Shavuot's celebration is written as 50 days after the beginning of the counting of the Omer on Pesach, and the 6th day of Sivan is inferred but not mentioned specifically (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 494:1). Every other holiday in Jewish history, both in the Torah and those established by the Rabbis, has a specific date – except Shavuot. Why?

One need not be an advanced mathematician to conclude that the Torah had to be given on Shavuot. Fifty days after the start of the Counting the Omer coincides exactly with the end of the preparation of the Jewish people for the Revelation at Mount Sinai and with God speaking the words of the Ten Commandments, in chapters 19-20 of Exodus. Clearly, the holiday of Shavuot celebrates Revelation, the giving of the Ten Commandments to the entire Jewish nation, as mentioned in prayer and Talmud ("Zeman Matan Torateinu" recited in every Shmoneh Esreh prayer on Shavuot, Shabbat 86b). And, yet the Torah makes no connection between the central event of Revelation that occurred on Shavuot and the holiday itself, leaving the impression that it is just an agricultural holiday of the first fruits and the cutting of wheat. Why doesn't the Torah make this obvious connection between the historical event of the holiday and the holiday itself?

The other Festivals are called by their names, i.e., reflecting an event that occurred at a specific time in history and the impact of that event, which remains until today. On the night of Pesach (Passover), the 15th of Nisan, God passed over the Jewish homes while killing the firstborn Egyptians (Exodus 12:27), leading to the Exodus the next day. This occurs on the specific date that Pesach is observed. Sukkot refers to the huts that God set up for the Jewish people or the Divine protection of that magical cloud. In either case, the holiday of Sukkot celebrates this protection by God of the Jewish people (Leviticus 23:42-43) Since it is impossible to travel in the intense heat of the desert for forty years without shade (and food and water), the miracles that transpired during these forty years are represented by this holiday. Thus, both Pesach and Sukkot celebrate actual events that occurred, and the holidays are named for that event. But what is the derivation of the holiday of Shavuot, which translates to "weeks"? Does it refer to the Jews

counting the seven weeks between Pesach and Shavuot? Based on the holiday's name, which historical event does it reflect? Shavuot describes something that the Jews, not God, did. Therefore, why this name and what is it celebrating historically?

Every other holiday on the Jewish calendar (not only Pesach and Sukkot, but even Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and the Rabbincally established holidays such as Purim and Chanukah) have at least one specific Mitzvah connected to the holiday, at least one ritual performed because of the specialness of the day. Pesach has Matzah and the Seder, Sukkot has the Sukkah and the Four Species, Rosh Hashana has the Shofar, Yom Kippur the fasting, Purim, the Megillah and Mishloach Manot (sending food gifts), and Chanukah has the lighting of the candles. But Shavuot is bereft of any Mitzvot-commandments beyond that it has the same laws of every other Yom Tov holiday. There is no Shavuot ritual at all in the Torah! Why is it the only Jewish holiday without its own Mitzvah?

The final two questions do not emanate from the laws and customs of the holiday, but from logic or lack of logic that the Rabbis seem to have used in instituting words of the Shavuot prayers and one yearly custom involving the Torah. Why is it that we say in the prayers (as mentioned above) that Shavuot is the day the Jewish people received the Torah or the Ten Commandments? In actuality, this was not correct. While it is true that God spoke the words of the Ten Commandments (with the involvement of Moshe) on this day (Shabbat 86b), the actual Ten Commandments were not received on this day, the words Jews recite in the prayers of Shavuot. In fact, when Moshe brought the Tablets down 40 days later, he smashed them to pieces when he saw the people worshipping the Golden Calf – before the Jewish people ever received the Ten commandments -- and then the Second Tablets of the Ten Commandments were only actually obtained 80 days later, a full 120 days after Shavuot, on Yom Kippur! Why not celebrate Yom Kippur with the words we recite on Shavuot – Zeman Matan Torateinu-the time we received the Torah, which is a more accurate statement (because that is the day when the Jewish people actually received the Tablets)?

If Shavuot was indeed to be the holiday of receiving the Torah by the Jewish people, why didn't the Rabbis set up the Torah reading calendar to end exactly on Shavuot and have Simchat Torah, the celebration of the completion of the Torah, on the same day the Torah was given? Would that not have been a more logical day for Simchat Torah then the day after Sukkot on Shmini Atzeret, when there seems to be no clear connection between rejoicing with the Torah and the holiday by that name?

Eight questions, some simplistic and some technical, but all highlight how this holiday of Shavuot is far different from all the other Jewish holidays. What are the underlying concepts of this holiday that make it so different?

Caution Not To Turn Shavuot Into Mother's Day - On every other Jewish holiday, when there are one or two Mitzvot-Commandments specific to that holiday, great effort is often exerted by Jews to perfectly perform the Mitzvah on that day, sometimes at great expense, usually with great fervor and exactitude in following Jewish law. When that holiday passes, however, the Mitzvah or Mitzvah object is then put in "mothballs," forgotten until about one year later, few days before the holiday is once again celebrated. On Shavuot, the event that is celebrated is the giving of the Torah. The logical Mitzvah to commemorate this momentous event should have been a day dedicated completely to Torah learning. If this had been the practice, then following the pattern of other holidays, after Shavuot passes, we would expect Jews all over the world to stop learning Torah until the following Shavuot, when they would once again learn with great concentration and zeal. Thus, Shavuot's Mitzvah, Torah learning, would cease at the end of the holiday. But it is a fundamental Jewish concept know that Torah learning is not a once-a-year Mitzvah, but, rather, it is a commandment that should be fulfilled each and every day of the year (Joshua 1:8) - an activity that a Jew should be engaged in every free moment of his or her life (Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:4). Thus, Torah learning should be a Jew's focus every day of the year, an act that is equal to all other commandments combined (Shabbat 127a).

When the Western world celebrates Mother's Day each year, millions of children pay special honor to their mothers primarily on that particular day, and then frequently pay little or no honor to them the rest of the year without feeling any pangs of guilt because, after all, they gave honor to Mom on Mother's Day. Overall, there is far less honor given to mothers today than was given to them before the idea of Mother's Day began in 1908. The same outcome might have happened to the learning of Torah, had this Mitzvah-commandment been the focus of Shavuot (the custom of many to learn Torah all night is not a Jewish law). Torah learning might have suffered the "Mother's Day syndrome" – learned to perfection one day a year only, with Jews forgetting about this Mitzvah the rest of the year, and not even feeling guilty about it.

In order to avoid the situation where Jews would learn Torah only on Shavuot, not only did the Torah not assign this as THE Mitzvah of the day, but it took other precautions to prevent this possibility. Thus, the Torah did not assign any particular Mitzvah at all to Shavuot, to indicate that as far as receiving the Torah, this day is no different from any other day of the year when Torah learning is required, and, therefore, no special Mitzvah is attached to this particular day. For this reason, as well, Shavuot occurs on the seventh of the lunar month, when the moon is still rising. Like a rising moon, Torah learning is something that needs to keep growing each day. It cannot be fulfilled and cannot ever be completed, unlike the full moons of Pesach and Sukkot which represent completion. The appellation given to the greatest Torah scholars depicts this idea (Berachot 17b). The highest accolade of a person of Torah learning is a Talmud Chacham-student of wisdom. No one in Judaism ever attains complete wisdom, and always remains a student, needing to learn more.

This is also why no specific date is given in the Torah for the date of Shavuot. Had the specific date of the 6th of Sivan been mentioned in the Torah, then this would have become THE date of the Jewish year to celebrate Torah learning. Maharal (Maharal, Gevurot Hashem, chapter 46) alludes to this as the reason the date was not specified. Just as the Torah did not call attention to this particular date for Torah learning, so, too the Rabbis intentionally did not assign Shavuot to complete the Torah and celebrate it as Simchat Torah. Once again, this would have created the impression among the Jewish people that on this day and only on this day is the Torah to be celebrated and completed. Rather, they waited until after Sukkot, the time of true endings (as the last day of the 21-day holiday cycle of Tishrei) to assign Simchat Torah as the day the Torah is to be completed.

The very same concept also explains why Shavuot is referred to as the "giving of the Torah" and not the receiving of the Torah. Shavuot is only the first day that the Torah was given. The Torah actually continues to be given by God every day of every year since that day of Revelation, and it is never totally received. The Jews received the physical Ten Commandments on Yom Kippur, but they continue to receive the Torah as they learn it deeper and deeper, every day, year after year. That is why each time the Torah is read, the blessing is completed by the words "Blessed are You, our God, who gives the Torah" in the present tense (Concluding blessing after each Aliyah to the Torah). The Torah continues to be given by God each day, even today.

There are many other important underlying concepts and customs related to Shavuot, which are beyond the scope of this article. It tis suggested to read the entire chapter for a fuller understanding of this unique day, and how and why traditional Jews celebrate it.

***This column has been adapted from a series of volumes written by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel "*The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values*" available from Urim and Amazon. For the full article or to review all the footnotes in the original, contact the author at nachum@jewishdestiny.com**

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

The Book of Ruth: True Love

Sharona Hassan

As Shavuot marks our receiving the Torah, the ultimate connection between the Jewish people and the Almighty, it would seem that the special text of the day would be all about our love for Him, like Shir Hashirim, Song of Songs. Instead we read Megillat Rut, the Book of Ruth, a truly unique text which at face value has only a tenuous connection to the festival. Yet by looking carefully at Ruth's story we will see it is the foundation not only of this holiday, but also our core Jewish values and the keys to Ultimate Redemption. Exploring Megillat Rut reveals a beautiful tale of love ben adam l'chavero, of people's support for one another.

Megillat Rut is aptly named as it follows the journey of Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth. The text opens with the word 'vayhi' which in biblical literature means times are difficult. Indeed these are very painful times, as we quickly learn about a famine, the death of Naomi's husband and the death of her two sons. This introduction of hard times, unfortunately is not unique to this family or to this period in history. Much of Jewish history could begin with the word 'vayhi'.

In contrast, 'David', the last word of Megillat Rut, offers a more overt look to the future and to better times. With this singular word, we have received the introduction and the lineage to David, the great king of Israel, whose impressive resume includes conquering and establishing Jerusalem and writing Tehillim.

Looking at how the story of Ruth moves from a place of enormous pain to the Davidic dynasty is the lesson for Shavuot and all time. The Megillah begins by describing the struggles of Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah. The dialogue opens with Naomi trying to send her daughters-in-law away, with berachot, kisses, and tears. Although the time is painful, the connection between these women is deeply heartwarming. Orpah heeds her mother-in-law's words while Ruth follows her heart and continues with Naomi to Bet Lehem, to Israel.

When they arrive, Naomi is greeted by the local women. With great transparency, Naomi informs them of her pain and struggles. The next greeting comes from Boaz, a crucial character, as he calls to others, "May the Almighty be with you!" They respond, "May Hashem bless you!"

The beautiful interpersonal care and spiritual awareness in this exchange is furthered by the ensuing conversation. Boaz observes someone new, a stranger in their midst. Although the reaction to a foreigner is often negative, Boaz is incredibly proactive and kind. He demands the others look after Ruth's well-being, and then approaches her with care and support. He offers food, safety, and assistance from him and all of his people.

Eventually Boaz and Ruth marry, but their love story begins here at their first interaction. It is not a tale of romance, like Shir Hashirim, Song of Songs. It is noticing a stranger, inquiring for their wellbeing, and providing for their needs. This is the 'love story' of ben adam l'chavero, of people's support for one another.

When Ruth queries his kindness, Boaz explains that he heard her story and knows her goodness. His words revolve around compassion, generosity, and closeness to Hashem.

These themes flow through all of the dialogue, all of the conversations, throughout the Megillah. Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, and anonymous personalities, male and female, speak to one another in encouraging kindness, support, and a connection with the Divine. No occurrences in the text are miraculous or even remarkable. It simply chronicles the lives of regular people and their struggles and successes in the land of Israel, some 3000 years ago.

Except few people live their lives like this today! Obviously times have changed with yibbum, levirate marriage, not being encouraged and the barley harvest using more technology. But ultimately the struggles of mankind have not changed. Unfortunately what has changed is the way we speak to and treat others. It is rare to find someone who consistently speaks and acts like the personalities in Megillat Rut.

Shavuot, the Revelation, binds us in our relationship with Hashem, ben adam l'makom. Reading Megillat Rut on this day should open our eyes to its corollary, ben adam l'chavero, the commandments which require us to care for mankind.

Are we greeting friends and strangers with blessings of connection to our Creator? Are we truly supporting our friends with words and actions of assistance and encouragement? And have we sought out the stranger to welcome, comfort, and uplift them? These are the types of words and actions which moved a family from the pain of 'vayhi' to King David. Emulating this behavior and incorporating it into our own lives will move us from our personal pains and struggles to bringing Mashiach.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah

by Rabbi Label Lam

We're Still Talking About It!

It came to pass on the third day when it was morning, that there were thunder claps and lightning flashes, and a thick cloud was upon the mountain, and a very powerful blast of a shofar, and the entire nation that was in the camp shuddered. (Shemjos 19:16)

I remember it well. It was a Tuesday, mid-morning that week that the "The Challenger" exploded in midflight. Everyone was buzzing about this grand public- national tragedy. In Chumash class later that week someone had the temerity to ask this question to our Rebbe, Rabbi Yisrael Simcha Schorr shlita, "Rabbi, if everything that happens in the world is in that week's Parsha, where is the explosion of The Challenger in this week's Parsha, Parshas Yisro?

Without a moment's hesitation the Rebbe quoted, "It came to pass on the third day when it was morning, that there were thunder claps and lightning flashes, and a thick cloud was upon the mountain, and a very powerful blast of a shofar, and the entire nation that was in the camp shuddered." It was a Tuesday morning, the third day of the week, and there was lightning and thunder, and the nation shuddered.

Whatever happened that week, back then, was quite shocking but it doesn't come close to the visual and audio experience at the time of the giving of the Torah. The Torah testifies; "And all the people saw the voices and the lightning, the sound of the shofar, and the smoking mountain, and the people saw and trembled; so they stood from afar. (Shemos 20:15)

Whatever happened there was ultra-dramatic. What does it mean to see the thunderous voices? I cannot say! Certainly, the experience approached or likely superseded spiritual sensory overload. The Jewish People felt that they needed to stand from afar. It's difficult, bordering on impossible, for us to begin to understand what actually occurred.

A famous British theatre critic once whimsically quipped, "The play was a great success, but the audience was a total failure." Obviously, the play was a failure because no matter how clever or witty or brilliant it was, it failed to connect to the audience. That's the ultimate test!

At the event of Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah, there was an incredible light and sound show. "The entire nation saw the thunderous sounds". It would be an understatement to say that we were impressed.
Being impressed is not sufficient. The giving of the Torah is only one part of the equation. When somebody gives a thing in order for the exchange to be complete someone else has to receive it.

I once gave to one of my sons, for his birthday, a beautifully wrapped music CD. He opened it with excitement, looked at the cover and said, "You like this music!" Then he disappointedly handed it back to me. I realized he was right. What I gave him was not the music he liked but the music that I like.

HASHEM gave us, as Shlomo HaMelech said in Mishlei, "A good gift", "All its ways are

ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace." What can be better than that!? It's good and it's good for us! It offers and delivers what we all want most.

Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah is only one half of the equation. The second part is the reception, the acceptance, the embracing of what was given. That's both our ancient and current role. I think that we can confidently declare about the event, the experience of Matan Torah, "the play was a great-great success and the audience was truly electrified". The biggest proof is that here we are now 3333 years later and we're still talking about it.

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

The Ethical Foundation of Torah and Its Study - Rav Elyakim Krumbein

I. "The Soul of the Torah" – The Idea and its Concrete Expression

Let us briefly go back to the end of the previous shiur, and then mark the path ahead. We ended the last shiur with Rav Kook's commentary on birkot ha-Torah, the blessings recited over the Torah. Rav Kook said that while Torah is indeed an object of rational study, this external reality conceals its truer content: the Torah is "the source of life" that embraces all of life. This is evident in the fact that the term "study" ("limmud") is merely one of a variety of concepts appearing in birkot ha-Torah to describe the union of the people of Israel and the Torah. Along with "study," we find "occupation" ("issuk") in Torah, "pleasantness in our mouths," and "its being given to us." Even though in practice it takes up the majority of our me and effort, the cognitive act of Torah study constitutes only one aspect of a multi-faceted relationship.

It is interesting to note that Rav Kook applied this idea in a halakhic context as well (Responsa Orach Mishpat, no. 11). The Ramban maintains that the obligation to recite birkat ha-Torah is by Torah law. Rav Kook argues that according to this position the blessing is fundamentally not a "blessing recited over a mitzva" that relates to a specific act of study. Rather, it refers "to the entirety of the great goodness that God, blessed be He, illuminated our darkness with the light of the Torah." Only at a later stage did Chazal, who established that every mitzva requires a blessing, add to birkat ha-Torah the dimension of "a blessing recited over a mitzva," which requires that it be said prior to learning, just as every other mitzva requires a blessing prior to its performance.[1]

As we have seen, this understanding of the Torah is what makes study lishmah. But the understanding alone, of course, is insufficient. This truth needs to be internalized in the various areas of one's life, and not just in the beit midrash, in order for it to serve as a source of deeper involvement. In a way reminiscent of Nefesh Ha-chayim, we see here that the deep connection to Torah study is generated by assimilating the meaning of the Torah in broader areas of existence. A person whose entire life is illuminated with the light of the Torah, based on a living relationship with its presence as "the Divine soul of the perfect world," can attain this level of lishmah.

However, in order for these words to proceed beyond the level of mere slogans, we must go into further detail: What does Rav Kook mean when he speaks of life in the light of the Torah? How does one live such a life? From the perspective of Jewish ethics, the task before us is not exceptional. One of the guiding principles running through our ethical literature is that general ideas must be translated into particulars, or else they will have little practical significance. If a lofty idea is not brought down to concrete reality, it will remain detached and it will lack any hold on concrete reality.[2] This is especially critical in the case of the teachings of Rav Kook, whose modes of expression tend to sweeping poetic vision. For him, the term "meaning" is a double-edged sword: It is indeed necessary to ground ideas in concrete reality, but practical and factual details lose their meaning and "dry up," when they are not infused with a great spirit, born of the higher planes of existence. Though Rav Kook concedes these two aspects of "meaning," his wrings give more weight to spiritual flight than to the practical language needed to connect to the real world. For this reason, illustrating his ideas demands special effort. Let us now begin.

II. Torah is the Foundation of Personal Ethics - The "soul of the perfect world," that cosmic force that strives to elevate the universe – where do we find its immediate expression; where does it touch most closely upon the life of the individual? In the realm of personal ethics. We shall first present a general exposition of this principle, and then examine its reflection in Rav Kook's wrings.

Man's need to elevate himself and reach a higher spiritual level is not a demand imposed upon him from without, but rather a response to a drive found within him. This drive is rooted in the fact that man is part of the universe, in which is implanted this stream of perpetual elevation – which is nothing but the spirit of the Torah. Life based on the desire to connect in the most practical and detailed manner to this moral-vital force nurtures man's connection to the Torah in an absolutely natural manner. And conversely - distancing oneself from the desire to elevate oneself and achieve moral progress, and viewing goodness and truth as an oppressive burden weighing down upon man, extinguishes the spark of love for Torah and the ability to study it out of joy and emotional involvement. It is the spirit of the Torah that invigorates the laws that a person studies, analyzes and defines, laws that perfect the ways of the world in accordance with the will of God as it is revealed in the Torah. That same spirit of perfection is what animates the deeds of a person who strives to correct his ways. It is impossible to separate between them.

Rav Kook expresses this idea in various formulations, the common denominator being the idea that if a person wishes to unite with the spirit of the Torah, he must dedicate himself to repentance and personal ethical perfection:

Paucity of the sweet pleasantness of the Torah is caused by a deficiency in the Jewish nature of the soul, which must be corrected by way of repentance that is directed at this deficiency. Once attention is paid to correcting this deficiency, the supernal light of the holy nature of the soul immediately begins to shine, and the sweetness of the Torah begins to reveal itself. (Orot ha-Torah, 7, 4)

An innate Jewish trait is the molding of a practical life-style that is suffused with the spirit of lofty ideas. This is inherent in the idea of mitzvot, a concept which traditionally is one of the most unacceptable to and the most challenged by Christian-Western thought. To us, mitzvot are the concrete world's bridge to the spirit, and the real-life actualization of the divine will. But to the non-Jewish outsider, mitzvot seem soulless rote performances. General culture transposes onto mitzvot one of its own great maladies – the spiritual desiccation of the real world, the habit of contemplating and talking about great values, which are then quickly forgotten precisely when circumstances cry out for their realization. A student of Torah who, having been exposed to the non-Jewish viewpoint, conducts his personal life with this sense of detachment, is incapable of tasting the sweetness of the Torah, in the practical arena as well as in the study hall. But one who is imbued with the authentic Israelite standpoint, excited by the promise – held out by the Torah - of the elevation of life in all its details, can experience Torah's sweetness as he engages it cognitively.

III. Repentance and Torah - The conceptual proximity between repentance and Torah study at its highest level expresses itself in Orot ha- Torah in a manner that is reminiscent of what we learned in Nefesh ha-Chayim:

The clarity of understanding what is studied will grow in correspondence to the clarity of the repentance prior to study. The intellect rises in accordance with the rising of the will, and it becomes clarified in accordance with the clarity of the will.

Higher repentance, that which is based on great love and clear cognition, raises the entire content of study to a level of fruitfulness and welling forth that is unparalleled in the study of any discipline by itself. (Orot ha-Torah, 6, 2-3)

Here Rav Kook adopts the guidance given by Rav Chayim of Volozhin – in order to prepare oneself for Torah study, one should first meditate upon repentance and the fear of heaven. One gets the impression that the connection between repentance and Torah study is more comprehensive, and that it is not limited to those moments of preparation for study.

We already reached this conclusion from the Nefesh ha-Chayim itself, based, among other things, on the overall structure of the book. Rav Kook, however, proposes his own unique understanding of the matter. We have already encountered Rav Kook's view that the fear of heaven is the key to successful Torah study,[3] and the two paragraphs cited above expand on this. They speak of repentance characterized by "clarity" – clarity of the intellect (clear recognition) and clarity of the will – as a significant qualitative contribution to study. In addition, Rav Kook introduces an important emotional dimension: repentance based on love, and even "great love." As for clarity, it seems from here that clarity is a quality that is not

subject to compartmentalization. A "clear" person is clear in all areas: in his ethical thinking and in the conduct of his life based on clear judgment and consideration, and devoid of conscious or unconscious self-deception. This clarity also reveals itself in his intellectual studies. On the other hand, a person whose objectives in life are unclear and whose moral values are distorted, who substitutes evil for good and secondary for primary – his way of seeing things is unclear, and this trait will also impair his ability to reach the depth of truth regarding any Torah matter.

The second idea, repentance based on love, is connected here to unmatched fruitfulness and welling forth. Rav Kook asserts that this creativity comes from a plane that is above the learning act in itself. Once again we come to the essence of the Torah, the vital fountain, the identification with which allows man to take part in the stream of universal ascent. One of the conditions for such identification, argues Rav Kook, is “higher” repentance – repentance based on love. When projected onto the life of the individual, the inclination toward perfection of the world is translated into a desire for personal spiritual perfection.

Why specifically repentance "based on love"? Because in order to reach repentance based on love, a person must wean himself from the feeling that the Torah comes to crush the vigor of human life. This secret had not been revealed to the Haskala authors whose wrings we have examined; for them the clash between the Torah and life was a given. Rav Kook agrees that this idea impairs the creativity and the streaming current of study, just as it impairs life itself. But a person who recognizes the truth engages in repentance based on love. He says to himself: "The Torah is not against me – it is for me." All of the demands of Halakha and the Torah's ethics are meant to bring man to his full stature and to realize his unique potential.

IV. Repentance and the Faculty of Memory - In another passage Rav Kook explains a famous rabbinic statement which explicitly connects the moral level of the Torah student to his cognitive achievements, and especially to the sharpness of his memory:

When a person rises to elevated ideas, and adjusts his ways in accordance with them, in the depths of his spirit, he reaches the root of the Torah, in its highest form, the objective of which is to raise the world to its intended supremacy. And thus whatever he learns of the particulars of the Torah, it is not new to him, but rather like remembering something

that he already potentially knows. This is the mystery of "because they are pious, their Torah is preserved" (Berakhot 32b). (Orot ha-Torah, 6, 4)

On the face of it, it would seem that every new Torah particular that a person learns is new to him, something that he did not previously know. Yet all of these particulars are part of the grand vision that will eventually be realized, but already exists in potential now.[4] On the other hand, establishing practical life on the foundations of the Torah's morality creates closeness between man and the transcendent "root of the Torah." Since the student's soul is close to the "the root of the Torah," he carries within him the identification with this potential. Hence the new knowledge belongs to the basic structure which is internally “programmed.” It is preserved because it is not entirely new, but rather a refreshing of existing knowledge.

V. The Novelty in Rav Kook's Understanding as Opposed to the Nefesh Ha-Chayim - The main point that we have seen here is that fear of heaven (or religious morality) is not only a necessary introduction to Torah study, the two values constituting discrete elements that relate to each other reciprocally. Rather, through the concept of "soul" or "root" of the Torah, Rav Kook shows that personal moral progress and the teachings

learned from the Torah are cut from the very same cloth. The Torah is the total experience of life. But this totality does not refer to the cloistering of oneself within the walls of the Bet Midrash and the shutting-out of the rest of the world (as is common today in the Lithuanian "yeshiva world"). What it means is that Torah is the pulse of the entirety of life, and especially the life of Divine service in its broad sense. This idea is further sharpened in the following words of Rav Kook: ... Through the increase of the Torah and the light of its life, man and the entire world become elevated. Without the light of the Torah in all the visions and feelings of God-fearing and of prayer, evil would be able to penetrate into the world, giving off its rot and decay, even though the spiritual impression is great and strong. But to the extent that the Torah connects with it, goodness and the splendor of sanctity will reveal themselves. (Orot ha-Torah, 11, 9)

Rav Kook knows that it is possible to relate to prayer and religious service independently, apart from the Torah, in the spirit of the words of the Sages: "There are three things upon which the world stands: the Torah, Divine service and acts of loving-kindness." Even from this perspective, which delineates separate realms of the activity of the spirit, one can reach a "great and strong" level. But if we wish to reach a level of sanctity that washes away all the dross and all the evil, we must see all Divine service as illuminated by the light of the Torah, which is an undefeatable, universal force that constantly strives to elevate all of existence.

As in the past, this idea as well has a precedent in the teachings of Rav Chayim of Volozhin, and an examination of this precedent highlights Rav Kook's contribution to the discussion. In contrast to Rav Kook, Rav Chayim wrote as follows:

And furthermore, that sanctity, and the vitality and light of the mitzvot, which sanctify and invigorate the person who fulfills them, is taken exclusively from the sanctity and light of the holy Torah. For a mitzva in itself has no vitality or sanctity or light whatsoever, but only because of the sanctity of the layers of the Torah written with regard to that mitzva... And the reason for this is also as was explained above, that the mitzvot at their root source are connected to and dependent upon the order of the supernal worlds and forces. (But) the supreme source of the holy Torah is much higher than all the worlds and forces, and it spreads through the inner essences of all of them, and they receive their vitality and sanctity from it. Therefore it provides vitality, sanctity and light to all the mitzvot. (Section 4, chapter 30)

Rav Chayim continues the "geographical" theme that we have previously noted – the Torah is located at the highest point in the hierarchy of the worlds, and therefore the sanctity of all the mitzvot stems from it alone. In his commentary to Pirkei Avot, we find a precise formulation of this idea, which essentially states that the words of Chazal regarding the "three pillars of the world" are liable to be misleading: … Accordingly, the Torah is not a third pillar standing by itself, but rather it is all three pillars together, for without it nothing can stand.[5] (Ru'ach Chayim 1:2)

In Rav Kook, Rav Chayim's ideological statement assumes a vital and existential dimension. The mitzvot flow from the Torah because the Torah wishes to elevate and perfect man and the world, and this is the purpose of the mitzvot. A person having this awareness experiences every mitzva as growth and ascent. The "pleasantness" that rests in the Torah as a whole, reveals itself tangibly in the particulars. Rav Kook wishes to take the mystical teaching of the "vitality" that flows in the worlds and make it a fact of life.

On second thought (and the final thought for this shiur), it is clear that the more we examine the matter, the more it becomes evident that it is difficult to find ideas in the wrings of Rav Kook on this issue that are not rooted in some way in the words of Rav Chayim of Volozhin. In one of his glosses to Nefesh ha-Chayim, Rav Chayim relates to the experiential feeling described above, when he explicates the blessing-formula recited over mitzvot, "who has sanctified us with His commandments": ... From the moment that a person contemplates doing a mitzva, an impression is immediately made above in its heavenly source, and from there he draws upon himself an encompassing light, and supernal holiness rests upon him and surrounds him... it also draws his heart to acquire a few more mitzvot, since he is now sing in the Garden of Eden, taking shelter in the shadow of the wings of heavenly holiness. There is no way for the evil inclination to rule over him, to incite or to seduce him. This is what they said (Avot 4:2) that one mitzva draws another. If a person pays attention when he performs a mitzva, he will understand and feel in his soul that he is now surrounded and dressed in holiness, and a steadfast spirit has been renewed within him. This is what Scripture says: "These are the commandments that a man must do and live in them" (Vayikra 18:5) – "in them" – literally, in the midst of them, for he is then surrounded with the holiness of the mitzva and encompassed by the air of the Garden of Eden.[6] (Nefesh ha-Chayim, section 1, chapter 1, author's note)

Rav Chayim was already clearly aware of the experiential force concealed in his teachings, and he instructs us to realize this potential. Rav Kook's novel contribution was to take this "footnote" of the Nefesh ha-Chayim, and turn it into the body of the text. This development stems of course from his own thinking, but also reflects his sensitivity to the needs of his me.

(Translated by David Strauss)

[1] According to this, for example, a person who is in doubt whether or not he recited birkat ha-Torah in the morning, and expects to be called up to the Torah, may rely on that expectation regarding the

future to exempt himself now from the obligation to recite birkat ha-Torah, and in the meantime he is permitted to learn Torah without reciting a blessing.
[2] For example, this is Ramchal's central argument in the introduction to his classic work, Mesilat Yesharim.
[3] See his leer to Rav M.Y. Segel, cited in shiur 12.
[4] Rav Kook appears to be using here a kabbalistic principle, according to which the future redeemed world already exists in a potential reality that has not yet been fully materialized. On this, see Y. Cohen, Ma'arag la-Neshama, Tzfat, 5767, pp. 71-75.
[5] In Ru'ach ha-Chayim, which is based on shiurim that Rav Chayim delivered before a more popular audience, he does not go into the depths of mystical theory. Rather, he emphasizes that the Torah defines and in practice rules over the other pillars. For example, prior to the giving of the Torah, lending money at interest was considered an exemplary act of loving-kindness, whereas after the Torah was given, it is defined as a very serious transgression. From here we see that without the Torah it is impossible to maintain the pillars of loving-kindness and service.
[6] Emphasis mine – E.K.

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INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON **SHAVUOS** - 5782

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Rabbi Yissocher Frand
Parshas Bamidbar

Thoughts For Shavuos: I am "One Yosef" Because of the Power of Torah

There is a commonly-quoted Gemara (Pesachim 68b) that says: "Every year on the day of Shavuos, Rav Yosef would say to his servants, 'Prepare for me a third-born calf.' Rav Yosef explained the reason for this lavish celebration as follows: 'If this day had not caused me to learn Torah and thereby become spiritually elevated, how many 'Yosefs' are there in the market place—and I would have been indistinguishable from them!'"

The simple reading of this passage is that the Amora Rav Yosef is commenting that if not for Matan Torah and his personal Torah learning, he would be "just another Joe" (and he therefore celebrated the occasion of Shavuos by asking his servants to prepare his favorite dish).

Virtually every year on Shavuos, Rav Ruderman would say that the Gemara means something deeper than that. "How many 'Yosefs' are there in the market place" does not mean "I would be just another 'Joe'". Rather, it means "there would be so many of me—I myself would be so many different types of people." In other words, I would be all over the map, I would be so conflicted without the unifying force of Torah. That which gives unity and focus to my life and makes me into a unified person with unwavering direction is the Torah. Without Torah, I would be so many Joes—A Joe Six Pack, a Joe Ravens fan, a Joe this, a Joe that. I would be all over the place.

This, in essence, is what the Yom Tov of Shavuos is all about. It is a time to appreciate what Torah does for us.

On Shavuos we read the Megillah of Rus. Rus is not a Tale of Two Cities, but it is rather a Tale of Two People. Here we have two sisters—the same gene pool, the same upbringing, the same environment—Orpah and Rus. And yet, Rus went in one direction and made a decision which shaped her whole life thereafter. She became the Matriarch of Klal Yisrael, the great-grandmother of Dovid HaMelech. Orpah went on a different path.

What separated Rus and Orpah? Why did Rus choose what she chose and Orpah chose an entirely different path in life? Rav Moshe Schwab, zt"l, said that Orpah viewed the life that Rus was about to choose as involving too much mesiras nefesh (martyrdom and self-sacrifice). She was not willing to make that sacrifice. She felt it would be too hard of a life. She returned to what she perceived would be an easier life. Rus on the other hand was willing to make that which at the time seemed like a difficult choice. In the end, beyond the initial brief period of time, it turned out to not involve mesiras nefesh at all. It was a much more noble life. It was a much more rewarding life, and a life that was so much better in the end.

That is what we need to tell ourselves all the time. A life of Yiddishkeit sometimes seems more difficult, but it is so much more rewarding in the end. Not only in the World to Come, but in This World as well. We have purpose to our lives. Our lives are so much richer than those who do not have Torah. People make this mistake. They think a Torah observant life style is so difficult, involves giving so much up, and forgoing so much fun and so many pleasures.

That is the difference between Rus and Orpah. Orpah thought she was giving so much up. Therefore, she did not make that decision. Rus recognized that she may be engaged in something difficult for the moment, but in the end, it was going to be rewarding.

L'Havdil – look at athletes. Look at the sacrifices they make. I hate to make this comparison, but look at Michael Phelps. He spent more time in a swimming pool than most of us spend in a Beis Medrash. He wound up winning more Gold Medals than anyone in the history of the Olympics. So, in the end he looks back and thinks, "Sure, it was a sacrifice—all those years of training and practice—but it paid off. In the end, it was all worth it!" He is glad that he made that sacrifice. L'Havdil, that is the way we can look at the sacrifice and mesiras nefesh we make for commitment to Torah learning and for living a Torah observant life style.

The same dialog appears in the Hagadah. The Wicked Son asks, "What is this Avodah – for you!". The Rasha says, "I see what you are doing, but I am not willing to make that sacrifice." Look at the answer given to the Wicked son in the Torah's narration of that dialog (Shemos 12:26-27): "And when your children say to you: What does this Avodah (ceremony) mean to you? You shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the L-rd who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, for He struck the Egyptians, but our homes, He spared…".

Our answer to him is, "Yes, it is a sacrifice, but look what happened in the end! In the end, we were saved. The first Korban (sacrifice) that Klal Yisrael brought—the Korban Pesach—was the key to our salvation. That became the prototype of all future Korbonos: Yes, it is a "sacrifice" in the beginning, but in the end, "es bateinu hi'tzeel" (our houses were saved). That is the answer to the Rasha.

The Mishna (Avos 6:4) says "This is the way of Torah: Bread with salt you shall consume, and water in measured amounts you shall drink, you shall sleep on the ground, and live a life of pain, and (yet) toil in Torah." The way to acquire Torah involves deprivation and hardship. It is tough. But the Mishna concludes: "If you do this, 'Happy are you and it will be good for you.' (Tehillim 128:2) Happy are you in this world, and it will be good for you in the World to Come."

Why does the Mishna need to say "If you do this?" The Mishna just mentioned what was involved in acquisition of Torah. Why repeat "If you do this"? The answer is that after hearing the deprivation and hardship involved in acquiring Torah, it would be quite easy to dismiss

the effort – "Who needs that?" The Mishna continues – Yes, I know it sounds tough, but IF YOU DO THIS… Just try it! If you try it, do you know what the result will be? Happy are you, and it will be good for you!

Everything in life that involves sacrifice is worth the hard work. If there is no hard work, it is not worth it. That is also the way it is with Torah. IF YOU DO THIS, if you just try it, you will find out that it will make you happy in This World, and it will be good for you in the World to Come.

This is what Rav Yosef is saying. Where would I be and where would we all be without the Torah? This is the approach that we need to think about before Shavuos. Yes, it is sometimes hard to be a Jew. Yes, it is a life which involves some sacrifice, but look at the end. Look at that first Korban that Klal Yisrael brought. Es Bateinu Hi'tzil—as a result of that, we were saved. That is the sacrifice that, in the end, is the source of our salvation.

A Peculiar Verb Is Used to Command the Census Taking

Sefer Bamidbar begins with the counting of Klal Yisrael: "Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers' household, by number of the names, every male according to their head count." (Bamidbar 1:2) Indeed, this is how the sefer begins, and then again, all the way at the end of Sefer Bamidbar – in Parshas Pinchas – it ends the description of the forty-year sojourn in the Midbar with another counting of Klal Yisrael. In Talmudic literature, Sefer Bamidbar is referred to as "Chomesh haPekudim" (the Chumash of the Counts). Even in non-Jewish nomenclature, this fourth book of the Torah is called the Book of Numbers, because it begins and ends with these counts.

Rashi here quotes the famous teaching of Chazal: "Because of their dearness to Him, He counts them constantly. When they left Mitzraim, He counted them; after the Eigel Hazahav, He counted them to learn how many were lost; and when He had his Divine Presence descend upon them, He counted them: The Mishkan was erected on the first of Nissan, and therefore He counted them on the first of Iyar."

The constant counting demonstrates that the Holy One Blessed be He loves Klal Yisrael. On the other hand, we see something that, at first glance, would seem contradictory: There is a tremendous danger involved in the counting of the Jewish people. We see this all the way back in Parshas Ki Sisa. The pasuk there says: "When you take a census of the Children of Israel according to their numbers, every man shall give Hashem atonement for his soul when counting them, so that there will not be a plague among them when counting them." (Shemos 30:12). Counting Klal Yisrael introduces the risk of triggering a plague. In fact, in the days of Dovid HaMelech, when Dovid HaMelech counted the Jewish people, there was a tremendous plague. Seventy thousand people from Klal Yisrael died (Shmuel II 24:15).

So, which is it? Is counting something we should do because it shows our endearment to the Ribono shel Olam, and because it demonstrates His love for us? Or is counting something that runs a terrible risk of plague?

The answer is – it depends how the count is conducted. The key to how to count is found in the second pasuk in this week's parsha. "Se'u es rosh kol adas Bnei Yisrael." This expression (se'u es rosh) is a very peculiar way of expressing counting. There are numerous ways in Hebrew to verbalize counting. Options include Sefor (samech fay reish); Menei (mem nun hay); and many other ways to say 'Count'. The most peculiar way to say 'Count' is "Se'u es rosh," which literally means "lift up the heads." Why then, of all expressions that we might use, does the Torah use the expression "Se'u es rosh"?

The answer is that the expression "Se'u es rosh" is the key to avoiding the downside of counting. The downside of counting is that by counting a mass of people, the importance of each individual can be lost. When someone takes a census and counts 600,000 people, it minimizes the importance and dignity of each individual in that conglomerate. The Torah wants to warn us that we may have 600,000 people, but each one of those people is a person by himself and has a distinct significance, which should never be forgotten.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, ob"m, the former Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, quotes a very famous economic treatise that was written by the Scottish author and journalist, Charles Mackay, in 1841. The name of the treatise was Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds. The author documents the great danger that exists in crowds. Aside from the loss of individual identity ever present in crowds, the presence of a crowd generates a "herd mentality." When everyone starts doing something, everyone in the crowd gets wrapped into it. The example he talks about was the "Tulip mania".

What was the "Tulip mania"? In Holland, one tulip bulb was worth literally a fortune. People got wrapped up in the exquisiteness of tulips, and it became the greatest thing since sliced bread. Therefore, tulips became the hottest commodity on the market and people would spend fortunes of money for one tulip bulb. This went on until suddenly someone woke up and said, "Hey guys – we are talking about a flower!" Therefore you can go into Trader Joe's tomorrow morning and buy a dozen tulips for four dollars!

The same thing once happened in South Africa, when people went crazy about ostrich feathers. They became the rage. However, we don't need to go back into the 1700s or the 1800s. Just think back to the "Tech Bubble" of the 1990s. How do such things happen? They happen because of a "herd mentality" – people get so wrapped up in what everyone else is doing that they lose their own perspectives.

The danger of the masses is a double danger. When we look at a crowd, we do not give proper respect to the individual members of the crowd as individuals. The people become just "numbers". (There was once even a commercial that stated: "In our bank you are not just a number.") That is one danger of being part of the masses. The other danger is that people themselves lose their ability to think individually. "Everyone is buying tulips – I am going to buy tulips. Everybody is buying ostrich feathers – I am going to buy ostrich feathers." That is not the way a Jew needs to operate.

An amazingly insightful Gemara says (Berochos 58a) "Someone who sees the masses of Israel should recite the blessing: 'Baruch Chacham HaRazim'". We invoke praise of the Almighty, who looks at this large mass of people and knows exactly what is within the heart of every single one of them. He knows that every person is different, and every person has his own personality. Every person has his own secrets. Only the Ribono shel Olam knows what those secrets are!

When we see a mass of people, all we see is a mass of people. We get carried away by the crowds and don't see the individuals. The Almighty sees every individual in that mass of humanity and He knows all their secrets! This is the idea of Se'u Es Rosh – Lift each head and never forget the importance of the head of each individual person.

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www.koltorah.org/halachah/showering-on-yom-tov-by-rabbi-chaim-jachter

Showering on Yom Tov by
Rabbi Chaim Jachter Volume 18, Halachah (2008/5769)

Those who reside in relatively affluent communities are accustomed to showering on a regular basis, something that was unheard of in pre-modern times. For many years there has been discussion whether showering is permitted on Yom Tov nowadays in light of this change in hygiene habits. We shall examine the traditional prohibition to bathe on Yom Tov and see whether this prohibition still applies even in contemporary times.

Background Information – MiToch, Shaveh LeChol Nefesh and Gezeirat Balanim

Three basic concepts must be clarified at first. The first is the debate between Beit Shamai and Beit Hillel regarding the law of "MiToch." The Torah (Shemot 12:16) permits certain work on Yom Tov such as cooking, transferring fire and carrying in a public domain for the sake of Ochel Nefesh (food preparation). Beit Shamai limits this permission to food preparation while Beit Hillel expand it to any Yom Tov need.

For example, the Mishnah (Beitzah 1:5) records that Beit Shamai does not permit carrying a child, Lulav or Sefer Torah (Torah scroll) in a public domain on Yom Tov while Beit Hillel does permit such carrying on holidays. The Gemara (Beitzah 12a) explains that Beit Hillel believes that "MiToch Shehutrah Hotza'ah LeTzorech Hutrah Nami Shelo LeTzorech", "just as the Torah permits carrying for the sake of food preparation it permits carrying for any Yom Tov need", while Beit Shamai rejects this expansion. This concept is commonly referred to as "MiToch" and applies to other labors permitted on Yom Tov. The Halachah follows the opinion of Beit Hillel (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 518:1).

Even Beit Hillel agree, however, that the Torah permits labor on Yom Tov only for activities that are "Shaveh Lechol Nefesh," something that is enjoyed by most people and not something that's exotic used by only a small minority of individuals. An example of such "exotic" behavior presented by the Gemara (Ketubot 7a) is making incense, which is prohibited on Yom Tov (Shulchan Aruch O.C. 511:4). There occasionally arises some debate whether to define an activity as Shaveh LeChol Nefesh. For example, the Acharonim discussed whether smoking is Shaveh L'chol Nefesh (see Biur Halacha 511:4 s.v. Ein Osin and the chapter in the forthcoming third volume of Gray Matter where it is explained that today smoking is prohibited due to health concerns).

The third background concept is the Gezeirat HaBalanim, the "bathhouse decree." Rambam (Hilchot Shabbat 22:2) presents the issue succinctly:

"Why did the Rabbis forbid entering a bathhouse on Shabbat? Because of the bathhouse attendants who would heat water on Shabbat and claim it was heated before Shabbat (if the water was heated on Shabbat one can not benefit from the heated water as one cannot benefit from work done on his behalf on Shabbat)."

Heating Water for Bathing Purposes on Yom Tov

The Mishnah (Beitzah 2:5) presents a debate between Beit Hillel and Beit Shamai as to whether one may heat water for washing one's hands, face, and feet on Yom Tov. Predictably, Beit Shamai forbids this due to its rejection of the idea of "MiToch" and Beit Hillel permits this activity since they subscribe to the idea of "MiToch."

Interestingly, even Beit Hillel agrees that one may not heat water for one's entire body on Yom Tov. Rishonim debate the reason for this. Tosafot (Beitzah 21b s.v. Lo Yeicham) explain that bathing one's entire body is not Shaveh LeChol Nefesh as it is "fit for only finicky individuals." Rambam (Hilchot Yom Tov 1:16) believes that it is included in the Gezeirat HaBalanim, though it appears unusual to extend this edict to Yom Tov where one is permitted to engage in many labors necessary for Yom Tov. Ramban (Shabbat 40a s.v. Ha Ditnan), however, explains that since some Halachic concerns apply to bathing on Yom Tov as well, such as the worry that one may come to squeeze water (Sechitah) from one's hair or towel, the edict applies to Yom Tov as well.

There are two major differences between these two approaches. According to Tosafot, heating water for bathing on Yom Tov constitutes a Torah level prohibition whereas according to the Rambam it is only a rabbinic prohibition. Moreover, according to Tosafot this prohibition is subject to change as the category of Shaveh L'chol Nefesh varies in accordance with the habits of each particular generation, whereas the Gezeirat Habalanim is not subject to change, as the edicts of Chazal apply even when their reasons do not (Beitzah 5a).

This is quite ironic as normally we are stricter regarding a Torah law than a rabbinic requirement. However, it emerges in this case that there is more room for leniency with a Torah law than a rabbinic law. Thus, according to Tosafot it would appear to be permitted to bathe one's entire body on Yom Tov since such bathing has become Shaveh L'chol Nefesh in our times. According to the Rambam, however, the prohibition remains in effect.

The Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 511:1-2) clearly considers the Rambam's approach. Rav Yosef Karo permits bathing one's entire body on Yom Tov if the water was heated before Yom Tov, if the bathing is not done in a bathhouse. The Rama forbids bathing even outside the bathhouse. Mishnah Berurah (511:18) explains that the Gezeirat Habalanim forbids bathing on Yom Tov to the full extent as Shabbat, whether or not the bathing occurs in a bathhouse.

Accordingly, the prohibition to bathe one's entire on Yom Tov applies even today, since both the Shulchan Aruch and Rama consider the Rambam's opinion. Indeed, most Rabbanim today forbid bathing one's entire body on Yom Tov. For example, Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata 14:7, does not permit bathing on Yom Tov even though in footnote 21 he considers the fact that bathing today has become Shaveh Lechol Nefesh. Similarly, Yalkut Yosef (5:Moadim p.482) does not offer blanket permission to bathe nowadays despite the greatly increased frequency of bathing.

Moreover, bathing is problematic today even for Sephardic Jews who follow Rav Karo, as one's insures that the water used for bathing was heated before Yom Tov by shutting off the boiler before Yom Tov. Most families would not want to do this, since hot water available for washing one's hands and face would not be available for the entire Yom Tov if the valve is turned off before Yom Tov.

Possible Exceptions to the Prohibition

There is, though, possible flexibility regarding the application of the Gezeirat Habalanim. The primary area of leniency is presented in the context of women immersing in a Mikveh on Shabbat and Yom Tov evenings. Two major eighteenth century Poskim, Teshuvot Noda Bi'yehudah (O.C. 24) and Teshuvot Chacham Tzvi (number 11) forbid immersing in a Mikveh whose water is heated even before Shabbat or Yom Tov. They permitted immersion only in lukewarm water, which the Aruch Hashulchan (O.C. 326:3) defines as water that people do not commonly regard as warm, even though the water is still a bit warm (for further discussion, see Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata 14:1 footnote 3). These authorities believe that the edict was issued only in regard to hot water and not lukewarm water (although Beit Meir to Yoreh Deah 197 who believes it applies even if the water is only lukewarm).

Nonetheless, by the nineteenth century Teshuvot Divrei Chaim (O.C. 2:26) notes common practice is for women to immerse even on Shabbat and Yom Tov evenings in fully heated Mikva'ot, as approved by the leading rabbinical authorities. Two reasons are offered to justify this practice. Rav Akiva Eiger (commenting on Shulchan Aruch 307:5 and cited in Bi'ur Halacha 326:1 s.v. B'mayim) permits bathing in hot water even on Shabbat (if the water was heated prior to Shabbat) in case of great discomfort. He believes that the edict was not intended to apply in such circumstances. Since women find it very difficult to immerse even in lukewarm water, the edict does not apply. A second reason is that since the immersion is for the sake of Mitzvah, the Gezeirah was not issued in case of Mitzvah.

Application to Showering on Yom Tov

One may combine the three lenient approaches regarding Mikveh, to showering on Yom Tov. If one is bathed in sweat on Yom Tov (such as from dancing in a hot room on Simchat Torah) then it is permitted to shower in lukewarm water. In such a situation one is in great discomfort which interferes with the Mitzvah of rejoicing on Yom Tov and therefore is justified in bathing in lukewarm water on Yom Tov. Indeed, Rav Yosef Adler reports that Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik permits showering on Yom Tov in at least such circumstances even if the water is heated on Yom Tov, since today bathing has become Shaveh L'chol Nefesh. Rav Hershel Schachter told me that he would also permit showers in at least such circumstances on Yom Tov.

However, in such a situation one must take care to avoid squeezing water from one's hair or towel. One must also avoid using bar soap (Mishnah Berurah 326:30) and removing hair or loose nails or skin.

Yom Tov Sheini

One should not distinguish between the first day of Yom Tov and the second day of Yom Tov (for those who do not merit living in Eretz Yisrael) in this regard and rule more leniently for the second day since it is only a rabbinic obligation. The Aruch Hashulchan (O.C. 511:11) rejects such an approach as degrading to Yom Tov Sheini, a day whose dignity Chazal strove mightily to preserve (Shabbat 23a).

Conclusion Showering and bathing on Yom Tov remains forbidden except for exceptional circumstances.

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Torah Study Is Not Like Calculus

By Rabbi Moshe Meir Weiss - 3 Sivan 5782 – June 2, 2022

As we make final preparations for Shavuos, including a fervent desire to come away from the Yom Tov with a renewed commitment to the "learning" of Torah, we need to understand a unique aspect about Torah study. In the sixth perek of Pirkei Avos we are taught HaTorah niknis b'mem ches devorim – The Torah is acquired through 48 qualities. The Rachmastrivka Rebbe, shlit"a, asks why the Mishna did not state more directly, Konin haTorah b'mem ches devorim – One should acquire the Torah with 48 tools? He answers with a comparison to a Gemara in Kedushin which says, Ha'isha niknas, a wife is acquired. There also, the Gemara poses the question why doesn't it say, Konin es haisha – one should acquire a woman, and the Gemara answers that this language would imply that she can be acquired even against her will. So too, concludes the Rebbe, HaTorah niknis conveys that the Torah can only be acquired if the Torah itself is agreeable to mesh with the person who is studying it, and the conditions to be compatible with the Torah are the 48 traits mentioned in the Mishna.

This is an anomaly for when it comes to acquiring Torah knowledge, one of the 48 traits is a lev tov, a kind heart. Now, one doesn't need a kind heart to study calculus or learn a new language. But, if one wants to truly absorb the Torah, one needs to have a character makeup that the Torah agrees to join with. This is the meaning of the famous Talmudic adage, Derech eretz kodma l'Torah, developing a refined character has to precede a Torah career. Or, as the Mishna puts it in the third perek of Pirkei Avos, "Im ein derech eretz, ein Torah – Without proper behavior there can be no Torah success." As the Rav explains on this Mishna, if one's dealings with their fellow man are not pleasant, eventually they will forget their Torah knowledge. This explains why sometimes the very bright and promising boy in yeshiva, with an acute mind for Talmudic didactics and who asks the best questions in class, never amounts to anything. This is because the boy in question is not well behaved and the Torah shuns a person who does not practice the ways of mentchlichkeit.

In a telling posuk in Devarim, it says, Lo meirubchem mikol ha'amim – I did not choose you, because you were the largest of all the nations – ki atem ha'm'at mikol ha'amim – because to the contrary you were the smallest of all the nations. The simple understanding of this verse is that selections many times are made based upon what most people do. The most popular car is a Camry, so let me buy one. That's the restaurant that everyone goes to, so let's go there. Hashem says, "That is not why I chose you."

However, Rashi cites a different interpretation from a Gemara in Chullin. There the Gemara explains that I (Hashem) chose you because you do not aggrandize yourselves. Rather, you practice humility. Thus, we see that Hashem chose us because we have the noble character trait of being humble. This is also a prerequisite for successful Torah study. This is why when Hashem gave the Torah, He shunned the majestic Mt. Carmel and the towering Mt. Tavor and gave the Torah instead on the lowly Mt. Sinai. So too, He gave the Torah through the agency of Moshe Rabbeinu, about whom the Torah testifies, "He was the most humble of all men." It is therefore imperative that when we send our children for a Torah education, we make sure that their yeshiva has a solid curriculum of mussar study, that they will be well grounded in mentchlich behavior, for it is only then that they will have a hope of becoming true talmidei chachamim. Likewise, it goes without saying that if a husband is a brute at home to his wife, no matter how smart he is, his Torah ambitions are doomed to failure.

When we think this Shavuos about the revelation at Sinai, let's remember that the Torah was given surprisingly in the midst of billowing smoke and blackness. This is strange since the Torah is the True Light of the world. But, the Tosfos HaRosh says that since the Bnai Yisrael would sin with the heinous crime of the golden calf, they weren't able to enjoy the true radiance of the Torah. So, as we make new commitments to Torah study this Shavuos, let's also make a renewed effort to refine our behavior and in that merit may we be blessed with great Torah success, good health, and everything wonderful.

To receive a weekly cassette tape or CD directly from Rabbi Weiss, please write to Rabbi Moshe Meir Weiss, P.O. Box 658 Lakewood, New Jersey 08701 or contact him at RMMWSI@aol.com. Attend Rabbi Weiss's weekly shiur at Rabbi Rotberg's Shul in Toms River, Wednesday nights at 9:15 or join via zoom by going to zoom.com and entering meeting code 7189163100, or more simply by going to ZoomDaf.com. Rabbi Weiss's Daf Yomi shiurim can be heard LIVE at 2 Valley Stream, Lakewood, New Jersey Sunday thru Thursday at 8 pm and motzoi Shabbos at 9:15 pm, or by joining on the zoom using the same method as the Chumash shiur.

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http://www.shemayisrael.com/yomtov/shavuos/disguise.htm

Birchas HaTorah-A Blessing In Disguise

Rabbi Chaim Binyomin Kaye

Shavuos is the Yom Tov that celebrates the giving of the Torah. The Torah is the essence of the Jewish nation, and learning it is considered by our Sages to be the greatest mitzva.1 Every morning we recite "Birchas HaTorah", the blessings on the Torah. It is said that the way a person recites his Birchas HaTorah in the morning affects his Torah learning throughout the day. The Shulchan Aruch states that a person must be very careful in fulfilling the mitzva of Birchas HaTorah. 2 The Mishna Berura explains that this means a person should be wary not to learn before he has recited these brachos; and that he should say them with gratitude to Hashem for giving us His Torah. It would seem then, that Shavuos is a most appropriate time for us to show our gratitude for the Torah by saying Birchas HaTorah in the appropriate manner. Ironically, it is precisely on this day that many people don't say Birchas HaTorah themselves, but rather listen to someone else's brachos, because they have stayed up all night learning. 3

Let us now examine the nature of Birchas HaTorah. By analysing why we recite Birchas HaTorah, we will not only gain greater insight into this special bracha; we will also come to a greater appreciation of the Torah itself.

All the brachos we recite are rabbinically ordained; with the exception of Birchas HaMazon , Grace after eating bread which is a Torah commandment. Many authorities, however, are of the opinion that the recitation of Birchas HaTorah is also a Torah commandment.

There are, essentially, three categories of brachos:

a) Birchos hamitzvos - blessings we recite before performing a mitzva, for example; 'al netillas yadayim' when washing for bread, or, 'lehani'ach tefillin' before putting on tefillin.

b) Birchos hanehenin - blessings we recite before partaking in certain physical pleasures such as eating and drinking, for example; 'hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz' before eating bread.

c) Birchos hashevach vehoda'ah - blessings of praise and thanksgiving, for example; the bracha we say when hearing thunder, or, 'shehecheyanu' which we say on joyous occasions.

Birchas HaTorah seems to fall into the category of birchas hamitzvos as it is a bracha we say prior to fulfilling the mitzva of learning Torah. This assumption, however, raises several difficulties.

Firstly, why do we say more than one bracha on the Torah? There is a dispute as to how many brachos we say in Birchas HaTorah. Some consider it to be two brachos: 'la'asok bedivrei Torah', and 'asher bachar banu'. Others say there are three brachos, as they consider the bracha of 'la'asok' to be two brachos, with 'veha'arev na' being the additional bracha. Everyone agrees however that we say more than one bracha. If Birchas HaTorah is one of the birchos hamitzvos, why should it differ to all other mitzvos where only one bracha is recited?

Secondly, given that women are exempt from the mitzva of learning Torah, there is a dispute between Rav Yosef Karo, the author of the Shulchan Aruch, and the Rema, as to whether women may recite a bracha when fulfilling a mitzva they are exempt from. 4 For example, if a woman chooses to shake lulav, may she make the bracha 'al netillas lulav'?

Rav Yosef rules she may not, as she cannot say, "who sanctified us with His mitzvos and commanded us to..." because she is not commanded to do it. The Rema, however, states that she may make the brachos, as the statement of "commanded us" can refer to the Jewish

nation as a whole, even though it does not refer to women specifically. In the laws of Birchas HaTorah, however, the Shulchan Aruch rules that women do say these brachos. 5 If Birchas HaTorah is a birchas hamitzva, how can Rav Yosef permit women to say these brachos, contrary to his ruling on all other mitzvos?

Thirdly, if we consider Birchas HaTorah as birchas hamitzvos, we will have difficulty in understanding the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch that even though Torah must not be learned prior to the recitation of Birchas HaTorah, this is only if the words of Torah are said verbally. Thinking thoughts of Torah, on the other hand, is permissible. 6 If Birchas HaTorah is a blessing on the mitzva of Torah study, we seem to be at a loss to explain this. The mitzva of studying Torah is fulfilled both by speaking and by thinking. Why then should we not recite a bracha over thoughts of Torah?

In his commentary to Shulchan Aruch, the Vilna Gaon states that Birchas HaTorah are in fact birchas hamitzvos. He also raises the last two questions that we asked on the Shulchan Aruch, (how can women say these brachos, and why do Torah thoughts not require Birchas HaTorah), and disagrees with both of these rulings. He says, that women should not say Birchas HaTorah according to the general ruling of the Shulchan Aruch,7 and that even thinking Torah thoughts requires a bracha. 8

From a response of the Rashba we can see that he too considers Birchas haTorah to be birchos hamitzvos. He was asked why we only make a bracha before studying Torah and not afterwards. He answered that learning Torah is a mitzva and we only make brachos before performing a mitzva, not afterwards. 9 There are those who seem to understand Birchas HaTorah not as birchas hamitzva, but rather as one of the other two categories of brachos. The Ramban has a listing of mitzvos that differs from the Rambam's list of mitzvos The Ramban writes there that we are commanded to thank Hashem every time we learn Torah for the great goodness He has done to us-for giving us His Torah, and informing us the way of life that is pleasing to Him through which we shall inherit the World to Come. Just as we have been commanded to bless Him after eating, we have been commanded with this blessing. 10

It seems from his words that the bracha on Torah study isn't on the mitzva of learning, but rather for the fact that we received the Torah. This would seemto be from the category of birchos hoda'ah rather than birchos hamitzvos. In his summation he compares Birchas HaTorah to bentching after eating bread. His comparison could be understood to say that just as Birchas HaMazon is a bracha which we are commanded to recite by the Torah, so too is Birchas HaTorah. It is possible, however, he means to point out that just as bentching is a birchas hoda'ah, so too is Birchas HaTorah a birchas hoda'ah, not a birchas hamitzva.

If we are correct in assuming that the Ramban considers Birchas HaTorah to be a birchas hoda'ah rather than a birchas hamitzva, we may offer an answer to the second question; 'how can women say Birchas HaTorah?' If the Shulchan Aruch considers Birchas HaTorah as a birchas hoda'ah, then there is no reason why women should not say it. The Shulchan Aruch only restricted them from saying birchos hamitzvos from which they are exempt, as they can not say "and commanded us." This reason does not apply to birchos hoda'ah. The Minchas Chinuch suggests this on his own accord, without quoting the Ramban. 11 He, however, points out that the beginning of the first bracha, "Who has sanctified us with His mitzvos and commanded us to toil in the word of Torah", implies that it is a birchas hamitzva. He therefore goes on to say that possibly the first bracha is a birchas hamitzva. However the second bracha is a birchas hoda'ah. He concludes that according to this, women should only say the second bracha. This is not apparent from the words of the Shulchan Aruch. According to this we may understand why more than one bracha is made (question number one), the reason being that the first one is a birchas hamitzva, and the second one is a birchas hoda'ah. The third question, 'why don't we say Birchas HaTorah on Torah thought', still remains unanswered.

The Steipler Gaon suggests that Birchas HaTorah, besides being a birchas hamitzva, might also be from the category of birchas hanehenin. 12 Learning Torah gives a person great pleasure as it says, "The orders of Hashem are upright, gladdening the heart." "…They are more desirable than gold, -than even much fine gold; Sweeter than honey, -than drippings from the combs." 13 It is for this reason that a person on Tisha b'Av, or, who is mourning is forbidden to study Torah. 14 Since a person derives pleasure from his Torah study, it is possible to say that the brachos on Torah are birchos hanehenin. He points out that from the words of the first bracha, "Who has sanctified us with His mitzvos..." it seems that it is a birchas hamitzva. He concludes, therefore, that the first bracha is indeed a birchas hamitzva, whereas the second one is a birchas hanehenin.

This is a similar approach to that of the Minchas Chinuch stated above. According to this approach, we can answer why women can say Birchas HaTorah. Even though they are exempt from the mitzva of learning, they too get pleasure from Torah when they learn and they may therefore say the bracha. This is a reason for women to say the second bracha, but not the first, as the Steipler also says. This is also a reason to recite the two brachos; one on the mitzva, and one on the pleasure. It does not, however, answer why no bracha is said on thinking in learning, as through thought, too, a person gets pleasure 15.

It is told that every year on the yahrtzeit of the Chazon Ish, the Steipler, who was the Chazon Ish's brother-in-law, gave a shiur in the Kollel Chazon Ish in Bnei Brak. 16 One year he mentioned in the shiur the idea that the second bracha in Birchas HaTorah is a birchas hanehenin. One of the Kollel men present asked if this was contrary to what the Gemara states in Tractate Brachos. 17 The Gemara discusses the brachos of bentching after eating and Birchas HaTorah before learning. The Gemara asks if we should say a bracha after learning just as we do after eating. It answers that we cannot compare one to the other. With eating, because the person had pleasure, we understand why a bracha should be made afterwards. This is not the case with learning. This seems to disprove the Steipler's theory. The Steipler answered that it was a good question that required further study. No further answer is quoted from the Steipler. It is noted, however, that this very question was asked over a century ago to the Sochachover Rebbe, the author of the Eglei Tal.

He answered that a person does derive pleasure from learning Torah, however, in order to necessitate a bracha after something, the benefit must still be felt after its completion. This is true with eating, where a person feels satisfied even after having eaten. This is not the case with learning Torah, where the pleasure is only during the learning and not afterwards. Therefore, even though the pleasure gained may necessitate a bracha prior to learning, it does not do so afterwards. This is the meaning of the Gemara in Brachos.

Concerning question number one, as to why we make more than one bracha, the Levush offers an original answer. He claims that the first bracha is a bracha acharona (a bracha made after something) for yesterday's learning, whereas the second bracha is the bracha recited before today's learning. 18 He explains that even though it would have been more appropriate for the bracha acharona to have been said yesterday when one finished his learning for the day, it is not possible to do so. A bracha acharona is said only when one has finished that which requires a bracha. One bentches when one has finished his meal, and plans to stop eating for now. With Torah study this is impossible, as a person has to learn as much as is possible for him. The obligation to learn is constant, and even when lying in bed at night a person should think thoughts of Torah. It is therefore impossible to say that a person has finished his learning for the day until he actually falls asleep. The first opportunity for him to make this bracha is the next morning. Therefore, upon awakening, he makes a bracha acharona on yesterday's learning and a bracha rishona for today.

In the footnotes on the Levush, it is brought that someone questioned the validity of making a bracha acharona the following day. He argues that surely this case is no different to a case where one forgot to bentch after his meal and remembered a few hours later. The halacha is that he lost his opportunity to bentch as the food had already been digested. All the more so here, where a new day had arrived, so surely it's too late to make a bracha acharona. The Levush was not at all flustered by this argument. He answered, "You wanted to compare this to bentching after the food has been digested. It appears to me that they are not comparable

at all. For after digestion, there is no remnant from that meal; not even its taste, but here, what digestion has taken place? If you compare forgetting to digestion, does a person forget overnight what he had learned the previous day? Since the benefit of the learning remains, and no 'digestion' of the knowledge gained, has taken place, a bracha acharona may be said even the following day."

We have mentioned three reasons as to why we say two brachos on the Torah; namely that one is on the mitzva and the other is either on the pleasure gained from the learning or thanking Hashem for giving us His Torah. Another approach is that one is a bracha acharona and one a bracha rishona. We should note, however, that those answers don't hold true according to the Vilna Gaon, as his opinion is that both brachos are on the mitzva of studying Torah. We need, therefore, another reason why, unlike other mitzvos, more than one bracha is made on this mitzva. An explanation of this is offered in the name of Rabbeinu Yona.

He says that if Birchas HaTorah is considered to be three separate brachos ,as explained above, then they correspond to the three levels of Torah: Chumash, Mishna and Gemara. We thank Hashem individually for each one of these special gifts. If the brachos are considered to be two, then we are thanking Hashem for both Torah shebichsav (the Written Law) and Torah she'ba'al peh (the Oral Law). 19

We have not yet answered the third question. Why does the Shulchan Aruch rule that no bracha is required when thinking Torah, as even through thought the mitzva of Torah study is fulfilled? The answer to this may be found in a question that the Minchas Chinuch asks on the Vilna Gaon's opinion that Birchas HaTorah is said over thinking thoughts of Torah 20. The Minchas Chinuch points out that we don't make a bracha on bittul chometz. The Beis Yosef says the reason for this is that even though it is a mitzva, we don't make brachos on mitzvos fulfilled merely by thought. 21 Many answers are offered to explain the ruling of the Vilna Gaon. This may, however, be the very reason that the Shulchan Aruch rules that no bracha is made on thoughts of Torah. May our analysis of Birchas HaTorah enhance its daily recital, and may Hashem grant us the opportunity to fulfil the mitzva of learning Torah and to enjoy the sweetness of its words.

Footnotes 1 Talmud Torah K'neged Kulam, the study of Torah is equivalent to all the other mitzvos combined ,Peah 1:1. 2 Orach Chaim 47:1. 3 If one doesn't sleep he does not recite Birchas HaTorah, Mishna Berura 47:28. 4 Orach Chaim 17:2 5 Ibid 47:14. 6 Ibid 47:4. 7Biur HaGra 47:14. 8 Ibid,47:4 9 7:540. One might ask then, why is a bracha recited after Krias HaTorah, reading the Torah, in Shul? The Rashba answers that this bracha is not on the mitzva, but rather on a takanas Chachamim (Rabbinical enactment)-Krias HaTorah was instituted by Moshe and Ezra-and we do recite brachos on takanos Chachamim, similar to the brachos recited after the reading of Hallel and Megilla. 10 Mitzva 15. 11 Mitzva 430. 12 Kehillas Ya'akov Brachos,14. 13 Tehillim 19 14 Orach Chaim 554:1 15 The Steipler is not the first to suggest this. The idea that Birchas HaTorah is on the pleasure of learning is stated clearly in the Levush. The Levush also says that one is on the mitzva and one for the hana'ah.See below with note 14. 16 Orchos Rabbeinu HaKehillas Yaakov. 17Brachos 21a. 18 Even though we have just quoted the Gemara that says that we do not require a bracha acharona after learning as we do after eating bread,, this only means that there is no Torah requirement to do so, but rabbinically the Levush holds that there is. We should also note that the Rashba, quoted above, explained that there is no bracha acharona, as we don't make brachos after mitzvos. This is because he explains that Birchas HaTorah is a birchas hamitzva. The Levush, however, understands that Birchas HaTorah is also a birchas hanehenin, accordingly a bracha acharona is definitely appropriate. 19 Possibly the bracha of 'la'asok' (to toil in Torah) is for the Torah she'ba'al peh which requires much toil, and 'asher bachar banu' for the Torah shebichsav (as it says "and gave us His Torah"). 20 Mitzva 430 21 Orach Chaim 432.

The Time at Which to Daven maariv on the Second Night of Shavuos (2020) **Rav Hershel Schachter**

http://torahweb.org/torah/docs/rsch/RavSchachter-Corona-32-May-21-2020.pdf

The Maharil cites the custom of German Jewry in his time to daven Maariv at the start of the second day of Yom Tov only after Tzeis Hakochavim (the halachic evening). Th e reason for this practice is to avoid a situation where the women would begin preparing for the evening meal while it is still the fi rst day of Yom Tov, anticipating the return of the men from Shul. Should the meal not actually begin until aft er sunset, this would essentially be preparing on the fi rst day for the second, which is forbidden. Not all communities follow this custom.

For those communities who do not follow the aforementioned custom of the Maharil, one who davens maariv early on the second night of Yom Tov must be careful not to begin preparations for the second day of Yom Tov while it is still the fi rst day of Yom Tov (i.e. before Tzeis HaKochavim). However, if one accepts to begin the second day of Yom Tov early, immediately aft er the Plag HaMincha (which is 1¼ halachic hours before sunset) as many do in the summer months, it is permitted to prepare in the early aft ernoon of that day for a meal later in the same day - provided that the food will be eaten before sunset - since it is still technically considered the fi rst day of Yom Tov. Accepting the second day of Yom Tov early does not transform the current day (the fi rst day of Yom Tov) into the second day of Yom Tov.

On the first night of Shavuos, we follow the opinion that Yom Tov should not begin until aft er Tzeis Hakochavim in order to ensure that all 49 days of Sefi ras Ha'Omer are considered "complete" and counted in their entirety. Th ere are diff ering practices whether this refers to starting maariv aft er Tzeis HaKochavim or simply reciting kiddush at home aft er Tzeis HaKochavim. Th e Knesses HaGedolah contends that on the second night of Shavuos, we should also wait until aft er Tzeis Hakochavim before beginning Yom Tov, however, the Pri Megadim argues that this is not necessary since the days of Sefi ras Ha'Omer have already been completed.

When accepting Shabbos or Yom Tov early, it is recommended to eat a k'zayis of bread aft er Tzeis HaKochavim, in order to fulfi ll the mitzvah of eating the Yom Tov meal on the actual day of Shabbos or Yom Tov (see the Mishnah Berurah 267:5). Th is year, since we will be making an Eruv Tavshilin on Th ursday, one can certainly cook and prepare on Friday for the second day of Yom Tov which is also Shabbos. When accepting Shabbos and Yom Tov early, one should be careful not to begin the meal once it is within a half hour of the time for reciting the evening Shema (i.e. Tzeis Hakochavim). If one davened Maariv already (aft er Plag HaMincha) according to some opinions it would be permitted to begin the meal even within a half hour of Tzeis Hakochavim. However, since this is a matter of signifi cant dispute it is preferable to avoid this situation and begin the meal earlier. In order to fulfi ll saying the Shema together with the blessings in its ideal time (aft er Tzeis Hakochavim) when making early Shabbos or early Yom Tov, some have the practice to recite only the Shemoneh Esrei of Maariv following Plag HaMincha, and the Shema with its blessings (and Sefi ras Ha'Omer) only later, aft er Tzeis HaKochavim. Since one has already davened the Shemoneh Esrei of Maariv, it is permitted to begin the Shabbos or Yom Tov meal, provided that there is more than a half hour before Tzeis HaKochavim. [Oft en, the Shul calendar gives a time for Tzeis HaKochavim which includes extra time for Tosefes Shabbos. With respect to this law of not beginning a meal within half an hour of Tzeis HaKochavim, we should ignore that extra amount of tosefes and only calculate based on the actual time of Tzeis HaKochavim. Regarding the true time of Tzeis HaKochavim, there are varying opinions.]

OU TORAH TIDBITS 5780

READING FOR SHAVUOT MEGILAT RUTH

Many communities read Megilat Ruth on Shavuot morning before Torah reading. (Outside of Israel it is read on the second day). Some communities read it in the afternoon (before Mincha). A recent trend in Vatikin (pre-sun- rise) minyanim (in Israel) is to read it before davening. While some feel that it is not ideal to do so, it has become a popular practice because of the time saved for people who are quite tired and appreciate the earlier ending time of Shavuot morning davening.

When read from a kosher megila (Minhag Yerushalayim), the reading is preceded by the brachot ...AL MIKRA MEGILA and SHE'HE'CHE-YANU. Read from a book, no brachot are recited. Various reasons

combine to make Ruth a perfect reading for Shavuot. The text itself tells us that its story takes place at the time of the "cutting of the wheat". Shavuot is Chag HaKatzir. One of the major purposes of the Book of Ruth is to show us the lineage of David HaMelech and the Davidic line. Tradition tells us that David HaMelech died (and was born) on Shavuot.

Perhaps most significantly, the story of Ruth is the inspiring story of Kabbalat aTorah on an individual level, just as Shavuot is the commemoration of Kabbalat HaTorah on a national level. All of Israel were like converts at Sinai. This matches nicely that the Torah reading comes from Parshat Yitro, another example of a personal Kabalat HaTorah. Ruth is the story of CHESED, acts of kindness. The Torah begins and ends with G-d's acts of kindness - clothing Adam and Chava on the one side and burying Moshe on the other.

Akdamut On Shavuot morning, after the Kohen is called to the Torah, before his bracha and before the reading begins, it is the Ash- kenazic custom to responsively recite a 90-line poem praising G-d, His Torah and His People. Written by Rabbi Meir of Worms (one of Rashi's teachers), it conveys the spirit of love of G-d and Judaism even under the adverse conditions of the Crusades. Rabbi Meir's son was killed by Crusaders and he himself died soon after a "forced debate" with the Christian clergy of his town. The poem celebrates Torah. Each line of Akdamut ends with the syllable TA, TAV-ALEF, last and first letters of the Alef- Bet. Some see this as a reminder of the nature of the Torah itself - as soon as we complete reading or learning the Torah, we immediately begin it again.

S'faradim do not read Akdamut, but they have the custom of reading a poem called the KETUBA, com- posed by Rabbi Yosef Najara, celebrating the marriage, so to speak, of G-d and Bnei Yisrael, or the Torah and Bnei Yisrael. They read the KETUBA when the Ark is opened, before the Torahs are taken out. Torah Reading From the first of two Torahs on Shavuot morning, we read from Parshat Yitro, the account of Ma'amad Har Sinai and Matan Torah, from Sh'mot 19 & 20, a total of 48 p'sukim. The reading is divided among 5 Aliyot, as on all Yom Tov days (that don't fall on Shabbat - which Shavuot never does).

The reading begins with the famous pasuk: "In the third month from the Exodus, on THIS day, they (Bnei Yisrael) came to Midbar Sinai." Rashi's two comments on "THIS day" are: [1] it was Rosh Chodesh Sivan that the People arrived at Sinai, and [2] the Torah uses the term THIS DAY (BaYom HaZeh) rather than THAT DAY (BaYom HaHu) to teach us that Matan Torah should not be thought of as a "once upon a time, a long time ago" experience, but rather "words of Torah should be fresh in our eyes as if we received them today." This is such an important concept that it bears constant repeating, attention, and effort to internalize. Especially when there are so many detractors who proclaim the Torah and its Mitzvot as antiquated, out-dated, and irrelevant, we must be enthusiastic proponents of the opposite view. EITZ CHAYIM HI... Torah is the living, fresh, vibrant, complete source of the way of life that allows us to live in this world TODAY and to invest everything we do and are with spirituality and value.

This idea is the Shavuot counterpart of Pesach's B'CHOL DOR VADOR... in every generation a person has to see himself as if he came out of Egypt. [Could the Torah's being described as a Living Tree also contribute towards the custom of adorning the shul and home with tree branches?]

The second pasuk is no less famous. VAYICHAN SHAM YISRAEL... Israel, as one being with one heart and a singular purpose, camped opposite the mount. The unparalleled experience of Jewish Unity that gave standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai its everlasting significance, becomes one of our special goals of Jewish Life. This helps explain the DAYEINU couplet: Had You brought us to Har Sinai and not given us the Torah, we would still have reason to thank You.

Aseret HaDibrot is read in the "upper notes", TAAMEI ELYON, even according to Minhag Yerushalayim (which uses TAAMEI HATACHTON for Parshat Yitro and Va'etchanan). TAAMEI ELYON presents the text as separate commandments - with fanfare and flair - rather than as p'sukim - like all of the Torah - which is the way we hear it with TAAMEI TACHTON.

Maftir (in the second Torah) is the Musaf of Shavuot from Parshat Pinchas (Bamidbar 28:26-31).

Haftara is Yechezkel's first chapter and his most vivid and esoteric vision. The level and type of prophecy attained by the Jews at Sinai has been compared to the visions of Yechezkel.

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Shavuot Thoughts

Rabbi Berel Wein

Here in Israel Shavuot is a one day holiday. Since many stay up all night on Shavuot and therefore spend a great deal of the Shavuot day sleeping off the night's study session, the day really whizzes by. This really does not allow for much true contemplation of the holiday and its intended message and long lasting influence upon us. We all know that Shavuot marks the granting of the Torah to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai, though the biblical names for Shavuot which appear in the Torah itself do not specifically reflect this truth. The reality of the holiday is not easily absorbed within us in so short a period of time as one day. After all we savor Pesach but it takes a week to do so and the same is true for Succot which lasts eight days. When I lived in the United States the second day of Shavuot was one of my favorite days of the year. I appreciated the wisdom of Jewish tradition in extending the holidays for a day for Jews living in the Diaspora. But living now in Israel with its one day holiday of Shavuot has forced me to consider the import of the holiday in a less leisurely manner than before. There is no second day of Shavuot here but the aftermath of Shavuot nevertheless can and should wield an influence upon us our attitudes, behavior and beliefs. If it does not, the holiday itself passing in a blur, loses its sense of importance and relevance and becomes a wasted opportunity.

Dealing with the Torah is not a one time situation. Perhaps this is the reason behind the Torah itself not emphasizing Shavuot as the anniversary of its being granted to the Jewish people on Sinai 3382 years ago. Torah is "our life and the length of our days." It really therefore has no anniversary or commemorative day for it is the constant factor in the life of Jews. It is a continuous guide and challenge in our everyday life, always demanding and probing into our innermost thoughts and outward behavior and lifestyle. It does not allow for vacations and negligence, societal correctness and sloppy thinking. Our teacher Moshe stated in his famous psalm that life itself passases by us as in a blur, much like the holiday of Shavuot does. Without focus and purpose, dedication and fortitude, life itself resembles a lost opportunity. Therefore Shavuot's message truly lies in its aftermath and not so much in its one day of commemoration. In Temple times Shavuot so to speak was extended for another week to allow the holiday offerings of individuals to be brought upon the Temple's altar. There was a conscious effort by Torah law to impress upon the Jews the continuity of Shavuot with the deep understanding that out of all of the holidays of the year it was the one that never quite ended for it was and is the source of "our lives and the length of our days." Shavuot is only one day out of 365 days but its true commemoration extends to the other 364 days of the year as well.

I have often remarked that Shavuot is the forgotten holiday for many Jews in the Diaspora. Its almost complete disappearance from Jewish life outside of the observant Orthodox community has become the symbol of the ravages of assimilation, intermarriage and alienation that plague the modern Jew who has little self-identity and abysmal ignorance of Torah and its values. Here in Israel all Israelis are aware of Shavuot, even those who only honor it in its breach. So the Torah and its influence is still a vital part of Jewish life here. The study of Torah and Jewish subjects of interest and worth on the night of Shavuot here cuts across all lines and groupings in Israeli society. Secular and religious, Charedi and Reform, synagogues and community centers, all have all night learning sessions on the night of Shavuot. So Torah has an effect upon all here, naturally in varying degrees of knowledge and attitude. In the Diaspora Shavuot is simply ignored by many Jews and thus it cannot have any continuity in the lives and value systems of those Jews. It is difficult to see how this situation can be materially changed in the near future. Yet Shavuot has always somehow been able to produce its magic

on the people of Israel. We should therefore be most grateful that the Lord has extended to us a year long and eternal Shavuot.

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https://www.shemayisrael.com/yomtov/shavuos/rus.htm
From the Jewish Observer December 2001

THE BOOK OF RUS - AN ODE TO THE "ORDINARY" LIFE

Rabbi Yisroel Greenwald

[Rabbi Greenwald serves as a dayan on the Melbourne beis din.]

THE HUMBLE GARB OF GREATNESS

Other works of the Prophets describe miracles, prophecies, and great historical events. The Sefer Rus, however, is a celebration of the ordinary. The emotions and pathos of the story - the loss of loved ones, isolation, obstinately pursuing an ideal, and resilience - are universal. On its pages unfold a familiar life: one of turmoil and tranquility, degradation and triumph. But to fully appreciate the true beauty of this story one must be attuned to its delicate nuances. There is a gentle theme that runs through it: an ordinary life can be sublimated and become extraordinary by absorbing the spirit of G-dliness and Torah.

The heroes of this saga are not only the nation's leaders and scholars, but also its common folk. We find Naomi, bereaved of both her husband and children, express the pain and anguish of her tormented soul. "Do not call me Naomi - pleasant one - call me Mara 'the embittered one,' for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me."1 Being a portion of Torah and therefore deserving of study, we learn from here that one is permitted to cry out in pain. The Torah allows for the expression of human emotion.

But her next sentence demonstrates her noble Jewish spirit, when she accepts her decree as being from Hashem.

We read about people going about their daily business. From these passages the sages derived the halachic basis of certain legal transactions2. We see menial labourers toiling in the fields, harvesting the crops. But instead of coarse language, we hear them greet each other with the name of Hashem on their lips3. The story bursts forth with acts of kindness. We see a mutually-loving and loyal relationship between mother and daughter-in-law; the dignified and respectful manner in which Boaz dispenses charity to his poor relatives; and the kindness of Rus, to both her mother-in-law and later to Boaz, by choosing him over much younger suitors. The townsfolk did not merely mumble a Mazel Tov when they entered a simcha (as is so often done today!). Upon Boaz's betrothal to Rus, the townsfolk present at the ceremony recited this lengthy, original rendition:

All the people at the gate and the elders answered, "We are witnesses! May Hashem make the woman who is entering your house be like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the house of Israel. May you prosper in Ephras and establish a name [for yourself] in Beis Lechem. And may your house be like the house of Peretz, whom Tamar bore to Yehuda - through the offspring which G-d will grant you by this young woman." 4

Similarly, after Rus bore a son, a woman said to Naomi:

"Blessed is Hashem, Who has not denied you a redeemer today! May his name be established in Israel. He will revive your soul and sustain your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, gave birth to him."5

These acts of kindness may not seem to be of earth shattering import, but besides the warm feeling that a reader has upon reading them, more importantly, these minute acts of compassion were deemed worthy of inclusion in the Divine script.

This itself is one of the lessons of Rus. Imagine you lived in the time of Rus and lived in Boaz's neighbourhood. And a relative of your's from Yerushalayim dropped in for a visit. He asks you, "What's new in town?" Would you reply, "You know what! Boaz invited a poor woman to eat together with him, and he gave her some toasted grain!" To us this is a Jewish behavioural norm: neither extraordinary nor newsworthy. Yet the Torah describes this, and other acts, in detail to demonstrate that if we live our day-to-day, mundane lives according to the Torah, it is of monumental importance. Shmuel Hanavi penned this seemingly minor detail in the book of Rus to impress upon us that every small act of kindness and decency is worthy of inclusion in the eternal Torah and is infinitely precious before Hashem.

Rabbi Yitzchak said, "The Torah teaches us [by detailing the kindness of Boaz to Rus] that when a person does a mitzvah [such as an act of kindness and charity to one's fellow man], he should do it with a fully joyous heart. For if Boaz had known that Hashem would write about him, 'He handed her parched grain, and she ate was satisfied and left over' 6, he would have fed her fattened calves."

Rabbi Levi said, "In the past, a person would do a mitzvah and the prophet would write it. Now that there are no prophets, when a person performs a mitzvah who writes it? Now, Eliyahu the prophet and Mashiach chronicle [the deeds of men of all generations] and Hashem signs it."7 At times we may feel that our uneventful lives do not amount to much. But just as Boaz and Rus's seemingly insignificant acts of kindness planted the seeds which later heralded the birth of King David and, ultimately, Mashiach, so too, each of us in our small way, in our private lives, are also rectifying the world and bringing it closer the ultimate redemption.

Naomi's life clearly illustrates this point. Naomi viewed herself as utterly useless and empty.8 But as the tale of Rus reveals, Naomi, whose name means sweet, fully lived up to her name. Naomi's character was so sweet and attractive, Rus was drawn to her like a magnet. The verses make clear that Rus's willingness to convert to Judaism was not based on her intellectual assessment of the truths of Judaism alone. Rather it was Naomi's persona that Rus found so compellingly appealing.

When Naomi attempted to dissuade Rus from following her, Rus adamantly replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back from following you. For where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people, and your G-d is my G-d. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May Hashem do this to me - and more! - if anything but death separates me from you!"9

It was not merely Hashem and the Jewish people that Rus wished to embrace. Rus wanted to bond with Naomi's G-d and Naomi's people. So while Naomi lamented, "Hashem has set me empty," her life was far from it. The fact is, it was Naomi who orchestrated Rus's conversion and marriage, which directly led to the birth of the ancestor of Mashiach.

After the birth of Rus's son, Oved, Naomi took the child, held it in her bosom and became his nurse. Then the neighbourhood woman came and joyously proclaimed, "A son is born to Naomi!"10 Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen states a principle that whatever is written in the Torah is true, not only in the narrative sense, in that those comments were actually made, but is actually intrinsically true. The cunning remarks of Lavan and the crude scoffing of Pharaoh could not have been recorded by the holy Torah had their statements not been intrinsically true. Therefore, if the Torah writes that the people said Naomi was the mother of Oved, then that is the actual truth. The Torah also deemed Naomi his true mother.

CHILDREN OF A SPIRITUAL KIND

While Noami's motherhood can be attributed to her raising the young Oved, it can be understood on a deeper level as well. A childless person lives on a different plane, a more spiritual dimension, than most. While everyone knows the fruit of one's spiritual labor is reserved for the World to Come, many are blessed with a foretaste of those sweet fruits even in this life. And those fruits are one's children. As we find the Torah likens offspring to the fruits of the vine and the olive.11 Those precious fruits link us to our sense of eternity and provide a tangible intimation of the rewards awaiting us in the next world. One who lacks children lacks the physical support system that was designed to make the Divine service a naturally joyous experience.12 On the contrary, it is not surprising to find Noami's bitter, self deprecating sentiments echoed by anyone faced with similar life circumstances:

Rabbi Yehuda said, When a person leaves this world without children he cries from pain and anguish.

But the Midrash continues:

Hashem comforts him and says, "My child, why do you cry? Is it because you did not bear fruit in this world? Your fruit is greater than children." He asks, "Ribbono Shel Olam, what fruit did I bear?" Hashem replies, "Your good deeds are your offspring."13

Because the physically childless perform their life mission under superhuman conditions, their reward likewise transcends the physical world.

Precisely because this thought is so difficult to internalise, it is a recurring theme in the words of the Yeshayahu Hanavi:

Let not the barren one say, "Behold I am a shrivelled tree." For thus says Hashem to the barren ones... who choose what I desire and grasp my covenant tightly. "In My house and within My walls I will give them a place of honour and renown, which is better than sons and daughters; eternal renown I will give them, which will never be ended."14

"Sing out O barren one, who has not given birth; break out into glad song and be jubilant, O one who had no labor pains, for the children of the desolate wife outnumber the children of the populated wife" says Hashem.15

The Chasam Sofer explains that these verses demonstrate that there are two distinct types of children: physical and spiritual.16 Whereas the barren may not have physical children, they are by no means childless. Parents who are physically childless bring down souls from heaven just as their friends who push strollers do. These spiritual children are created through their parents' steadfast service to Hashem, despite their constant indescribable pain and humiliation. Such souls are so lofty they cannot be contained in a corporeal form, which is why the prophet says they are "better than sons and daughters" - they are greater than their physical counterparts. Each such spiritual child, says the Chasam Sofer, "equals tens of thousands of physical children born with flesh and blood."

In yet another vision, Yeshayahu Hanavi depicts a scene from the time of the future redemption, which at first glance defies comprehension:

And you will say in your heart, "Who has begotten these? For I have been bereaved and alone, an exile and a wanderer - so who has reared these? Behold, I have been left by myself; where are these from?"

For thus says Hashem: "Behold I will raise My hand towards nations, and will hoist My banner towards peoples, and they will bring your children in their arms, and your daughters will be carried on their shoulders... Then you will know that I am Hashem, and those who put their hope in Me shall not be ashamed."17

Is it possible that a mother can be unaware that she bore children?

The Shomer Emunim writes that these verses deal with the spiritual children discussed above. "When, unfortunately, one is a companion to pain and misfortune - owing to childlessness or any other trying circumstance - this is often accompanied with feelings of inadequacy and a sense of lacking any constructive accomplishments in life. One may feel hopeless, broken, unnecessary and useless. Even one's prayers, Torah study, and good deeds begin to feel hollow and appear pitifully meagre."

But what one may fail to see, explains the Shomer Emunim, is that "for every pain which passes over a Jewish soul, especially at times when one feels disconnected to Hashem and as if He is neglecting him, and yet one accepts this without complaint or anger against Hashem - and all the more so if it is accepted with a slight amount of love and joy - this creates a glory to Hashem of the highest magnitude. In fact, the simplest person at the lowest spiritual level can accomplish more under these circumstances than the service of a great tzaddik. Many 'lost souls' that have not found rectification since the beginning of creation, are now rectified through this supreme level of faith."

"When Mashiach comes, Hashem will reveal to them the myriad children they created. They will stream to such a person from all sides of the earth, just as children come to embrace their beloved parents after a long separation. He will stand agape with wonder looking at these beautiful creations, 'Who has begotten me these? I was bereaved and alone. They certainly cannot be mine.' But he or she will be considered the true parents of these thousands of souls."18

The book of Rus describes a natural world, as seen through the limited eyesight of mortal men. In that world, Naomi thought she lived a bitter and wasted life. But little did she know that from the vantagepoint of heaven, a dimension that transcends all physical laws, she actually was the grandmother of the king of Israel.

LIFE BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

The story of Rus does not speak about angels or prophets who reveal any earth-shattering events. Nor do Boaz and Rus declare the royal destiny of their future son. The heavenly curtains descend and veil any inkling to the goings on of the heavenly realms. Instead, the backdrop of the book of Rus presents a familiar slice of Jewish life. It details seemingly ordinary daily activities, from the labourers' greeting to the townsfolk blessings. It is this limited vantagepoint of man, not the infinite view of G-d, which the perspective of the book of Rus is based. From a human point of view, life is often dry and ordinary or - as was the case with Naomi - sometimes even dark.

Perhaps it is precisely for this reason the book of Rus is read on Shavuos. On this day we merited to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai, through a miraculous revelation amidst thunder and lightning. But from that moment on, we can no longer seek Hashem amidst the fire of miracles, the thunderous sounds of prophecy, or the whirlwind of momentous historical events. For the most part, it is in the quiet, day-to-day life, where we can find our personal pathways to Hashem.19

When Hashem spoke directly to the Jewish nation on Mount Sinai, they felt a rapture so intense that it caused their souls to momentarily depart from their bodies.20 They epitomised a state known as d'veikus - the ultimate blissful experience of connecting with the Divine. Achieving d'veikus is one of life's primary goals; as the Mesillas Yesharim writes, writes, "all of one's actions should be motivated to drawing near to the Blessed One, until he is pulled to Him as is metal to a magnet."21

If so, should not the thrust of our efforts be spent seeking those activities that provide immediate spiritual satisfaction? Isn't spending hours upon hours in sublime meditation the path which leads to true d'veikus? In truth, however, humbly serving Hashem in an ordinary fashion in an ordinary world, through the voluminous minutiae of halacha, is what breaks the barriers that stand between us and our Creator. This is what leads to d'veikus.22

THE DANGERS OF D'VEIKUS

To achieve d'veikus is one of the highest aims of Divine service. But as the book of Rus points out, it can also be a potentially dangerous weapon. The ecstatic experience of d'veikus can also take the form of shochad - bribery - against our Divine obligations. For example, one immersed in Torah study may find it so pleasurable, that he is tempted to look in a sefer during chazaras hashatz, something prohibited by Halacha. In such a case, the d'veikus generated from the love of Torah results in its own defect. (Needless to say, this example was not intended as an excuse to disdain one seen possessing this relatively minor flaw. One who possesses the love of Torah to the extent that he has such a temptation itself attests to his spiritual stature. If only this author merited having such evil inclinations...)

At times, performing Hashem's will requires foregoing the act most conducive for d'veikus: Music during sefira may be quite uplifting and inspiring, but if halacha forbids it, then adherence to halacha is the true service of Hashem.

The dangers of d'veikus was actualised in one of the most tragic figures in the story of Rus: Orpah. After the death of her husband, she began following Naomi back to the land of Israel, presumably contemplating embracing Judaism. At that historic moment, she stood at the threshold of eternity. But while Rus remained adamant in remaining with Naomi, Orpah returned home.

The prophet concludes her life story here. One would imagine that this precious soul who came so close to Judaism, would devote the remainder of her life to goodness, serving Hashem faithfully as a righteous gentile. But the sages relate the sad end of her saga: the day she parted from Naomi she plunged from the heights of spiritual greatness to the lowest depths of moral depravity.

Perhaps her erratic behaviour can be understood in the following light. As anyone who merited the experience can testify, being in the close presence of a spiritually elevated person is one of the greatest pleasures in life. When one enters his proximity, sometimes one feels like having stepped into an elevator since within moments one feels like one is being lifted effortlessly to dizzying heights.23 But therein lurks a hidden danger, which can be termed the Geichazi syndrome.24 Being in constant contact with a holy person risks becoming an intoxicating

experience. The vicarious spiritual contentment of living through one's rebbe can sometimes blanket any feelings of inadequacy for one's personal failings.

Orpah experienced the joy of a Jewish life. She appreciated the true love of a Jewish husband, the pleasantness of a Shabbos table, and felt inseparably drawn to her mother-in-law's holy personality. She fell short committing herself to the responsibilities that Judaism entails. But her brief encounter with Judaism gave her a taste of d'veikus. Merely subscribing to the seven Noahide laws now appeared to her dry and spiritually unfulfilling. She wanted a quick fix, the spiritual "high" which only Judaism can give. As she could no longer get it through holiness, she attempted to duplicate the ecstasy by throwing herself into the excesses of depravity.

In the secular world, the search for spirituality has become a popular trend. But "spirituality" does not necessarily mean to them what it means to us. To them, it may represent the nadir of hedonistic pleasure seeking. The Hollywood pop star who goes to Kabbala classes wants the best of both worlds: to retain all the pleasures this world has to offer, together with the ecstasy that only spirituality can provide. Kabbala is the perfect forum for connecting with G-d on your own terms: no commitment, no responsibility, just an exhilarating soul-soaring thrill ride.

THE MEANING OF RUS

What is the significance of the name Rus? R' Yochanan said: For she merited that David descended from her, who "sated" the Holy One, Blessed be He, with songs and praises.25 Rav Dan Segal asked, What did Rus do in particular to be deserving of bearing a descendant who was capable of satiating Hashem? He answered that it was in merit of her determination to cling to Hashem, despite all the obstacles that stood in her path. Naomi attempted to dissuade her to return home; she had no marriage prospects awaiting her; no promising future to look forward to. But she stood steadfast despite all odds.26 Serving Hashem in the face of insurmountable difficulties is the greatest human quality, and in that merit Rus bore a David. Her act of devotion without the aid of d'veikus, brought into the world the sweet singer of Israel, who satiated his Creator with his sublime songs of d'veikus to Hashem.

1 Rus 1:20 2 Ibid., 4:7, Bava Metzia 47a. 3 Rus 2:4. 4 Ibid., 4:11-12 5 Ibid., 4:14-15. 6 Rus 2:14 7 Midrash Rabba, Vayikra 34:8 8 See Rus 1:21. 9 Rus 1:16-17 10 Rus 4:17 11 Tehillim 128:3 12 See Devarim 14:26, 16:14. 13 Midrash Tanchuma, Noach 14 Yeshayahu 56:3-5 15 Ibid. 54:1. 16 Nidda 13b 17 Yeshayahu 49:21-23 18 Shomer Emunim p 79. 19 See Melachim 1, 19:11-12. 20 Shir Hashirim Rabba 5:6 21 End of chapter one. The Torah was given to us so we can experience the d'veikus of Sinai in our daily lives. In a certain respect, the Torah gives one the ability to recreate the Sinai experience on an even higher level. On Mount Sinai, "my soul departed when He spoke" (Shir Hashirim 5:7). The Torah enjoins us to achieve d'veikus and still be connected to one's physical body! It is told that certain great chasidic masters had no difficulty in attaining a state of d'veikus that made soul soar back to heaven. The Torah's obligation of v'chai bahem dictated otherwise; one must live the precepts of the Torah, not die as a result of them. They therefore had the difficult task of reigning in their souls from leaving their bodies. 22 See Nefesh Hachaim, 4:1. 23 Naturally only a sensitive soul would be attuned to this sensation. Someone one brought the secular author, Franz Kafka, to a tisch of the Belzer rebbe zt'l. Widely recognized as one of the greatest chassidic Rabbis in prewar Europe, even the Nazis referred to him as the Vunder Rabbiner, the 'wonder rabbi.' When Franz Kafka left the tisch he remarked to his companion that it was no more inspirational to him than if he had witnessed a tribal ceremony. 24 Geichazi was the disciple and shamash of the prophet Eliyahu. Though he merited a closer relationship to his master than his other students, his behaviour was the most contemptible. 25 Brachos, 7b. The name Rus is related to the Hebrew word for sated, ravah. 26 Rus 1:18.

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Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

This week's reading as well as the entire book of Bamidbar is replete with the numbers of the populations of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai. Slightly more than 600,000 male Jews over the age of twenty comprise the population of the Jewish people under the leadership of Moshe. Extrapolating the old, the young, infirmed, the women and the multitudes of people of other nations that left Egypt together with the Jewish people, most Rabbinic authorities estimate a Jewish population of between two and three million souls.

As important as it may be for us to be aware of the population numbers, the question arises: why does the Torah spend so many verses and details in enumerating the population of the Jewish people at that time? What is the religious, spiritual, or historical perspective necessary for us to understand this listing? Regarding this question, there are many proposed ideas and answers, but it is almost universally accepted by all commentaries that this is one of the areas of the Torah where mystery prevails over mere human understanding and logical reasoning.

In short, whatever answers we may give to this problem of why the population numbers seem so important, and occupy such prominence in the book itself, is difficult for us mere mortals to comprehend its true message and meaning. Apparently, the greater the detail, the greater the mystery that it engenders. Since the words of the Torah are eternal accounts of the Jewish people and its population, this indicates that, somehow, this remain a source of inspiration and spiritual holiness for all generations.

One of the interesting facets of the detailed counting is the fact that the Torah lists the names of the leaders of the individual tribes who participated at arriving at this census of the people. As difficult as it is for us to understand the count itself, it is doubly difficult for us to understand the prominence given the names of the leaders of the tribes. This is true because we are aware that none of these people would survive the 40-year sojourn in the desert, and all of them would be replaced with new leaders of their respective tribes, before the entry of the Jewish people into the land of Israel after the death of Moshe.

One understanding of this difficulty is that the Torah wants to constantly remind us that it is a book about people and their behavior, and not about cold facts, events, trends, and esoteric knowledge. The Torah wishes us to remember that people are not merely ciphers or numbers but, rather, flesh and blood individuals, personalities, all different one from another.

The words of the Talmud are that we are all cast from one mold, but no two of us are alike. Since the Torah expends so much detail, both in the count of the people, as well as the specific names of who counted them emphasizes that we are talking about actual people, and not only about numbers per se. This is a fundamental lesson in Judaism, and it is also why the Torah calls itself the book of the generations of humankind.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Chana Necha bas Yakov. "May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

Making it Count

And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai […] saying: "Take a census of all the congregation of Bnei Yisroel […]" (1:1-2).

The fourth book of the Chumash, known as Sefer Bamidbar (literally, book of being "in the desert"), opens with Hashem asking Moshe to undertake a comprehensive counting of the Jewish people. Our sages, therefore, refer to it as "The Book of Counting" (see Mishna Yoma 68b and Rashi ad loc). In fact, even in English we don't translate it literally (i.e. "In the Desert"), rather the fourth book of the Torah has come to be known as "Numbers."

This is odd for a number of reasons; first, what is so significant about this counting that the event has come to define the entire sefer? In other words, Sefer Bamidbar spans a period of forty years, so why does an event that took place at the beginning of the forty years define the entire volume?

Second, the whole concept of a census seems problematic. We have a steadfast rule regarding quantifying objects: Rabbi Yitzchak said, "We only find blessings by things that are concealed from the eye" (See Baba Metzia 42a and Rashi ad loc). Once objects become quantified they are no longer subject to specific blessings from Hashem (this is very different from the secular philosophy of "count your blessings"). The Zohar (Bamidbar 117b) ask, if this is true, then why does Hashem want us to take a census?

Furthermore, why are things that have been counted no longer subject to blessings from above?

We find a very interesting principle of Jewish law: If someone loses money, the rule is "finders keepers." This is not true by other possessions – only for money. The Talmud (Baba Metzia 21b) explains the reason for this as "a person is always checking his pocket (and making sure that his money is there)." Therefore, if someone finds money, one can assume that the person who lost the money is aware of his loss and has given up hope of ever getting it back, thereby relinquishing his ownership. However, what is behind the psychology of a person always checking on his money?

Most assets that a person owns have already been actualized to some kind of use (jewelry, cars, art, etc.); they have intrinsic value and therefore add some measure of pleasure to the owner. By their very nature, a person has a sense of ownership over these objects; they are his to enjoy. On the other hand, money and monetary instruments (e.g. stocks, etc.) are merely tools to acquire what he wants. Money has no intrinsic value as an object; its only value lies in its potential. This makes it hard to feel like you have anything. The reason a person is constantly checking on his wallet (or stock portfolio for that matter) is to feel connected and a sense of ownership.

The very act of quantifying something is to count what you have. Once a person has done that, the object leaves the domain of God's blessing and enters the domain of the owner; it is therefore no longer subject to a blessing from Hashem. The only exception to this universal rule is when Hashem Himself wants to make an accounting. Rashi (1:1) explains that Hashem counts the Jewish people as an expression of His deep love for us. By counting us, Hashem is showing His desire to be connected to us. It is fascinating to note that the word that Rashi uses for love is "chiba," which is derived from the word "chav – responsibility."

In other words, true love is taking responsibility for the object of your affection. A true love relationship requires you to be a giver. This means making sure your beloved is well taken care of (obviously, the other party has to respond in kind for it to be a relationship and not some kind of self-sacrificing martyrdom).

This is why our sages chose the name the "Book of Counting" for the desert experience. This fourth volume of the Torah is replete with story after story of Hashem's steadfast love and support for the Jewish people throughout the sometimes tumultuous experience of forty years in the desert. By counting us at the beginning of this experience, Hashem is telling us that he will take care of us – because he loves us.

Patrilineal Descent?

These are the children of Aharon and Moshe […] And these are the names of the sons of Aaron; Nadav the firstborn, and Avihu, Eleazar, and Itamar (3:1-2).

Rashi (as loc) points out a rather glaring inconsistency in the verses; although the Torah explicitly mentioned that it was about to list the children of both Aharon and Moshe, the Torah only records the names of Aharon's children. Rashi goes on to explain that from here the Talmud derives the axiom; "whoever teaches Torah to his friend's child, it is considered as if he gave birth to them" (Sanhedrin 19b).

This principle needs clarification. What does it mean that if you teach someone Torah it is as if you gave birth to him? Chazal don't exaggerate or take poetic license; perhaps you taught them some information or

gave them some life skills, but how is this akin to giving birth to someone? Additionally, Moshe taught Torah to all of Bnei Yisroel; why are the children of Aharon singled out? This principle should apply to anyone who was at Mount Sinai.

The next Rashi on the verse provides us with a clue: "On the day Hashem spoke to Moshe" (3:1), this teaches us that "they became his children because he taught them what he had heard from the mouth of the Almighty" (Rashi ad loc). Why does Rashi essentially repeat what he already told us in his previous comment?

Rashi is bothered by the words "on that day." What specific day is being referred to? If we look at the last verse in next week's parsha, we find a very interesting concept: Hashem communicated to Moshe by talking to himself and Moshe merely listened. This seems a little odd; throughout the Torah we find that Hashem spoke directly to Moshe. What is being added here?

The answer is that Moshe heard Hashem studying Torah aloud. Hashem wasn't giving a speech for Moshe to listen to; Hashem was teaching Moshe how to analyze the Torah through His studying it aloud.

This is what Moshe taught the children of Aharon. He didn't merely give them information on what they should and should not do. Moshe taught them the skills in the analyzation of Torah. These skills allow one to have insights into the Torah that are wholly one's own. In other words, this skill allows one to create one's own Torah. This transforms the Torah from merely being information to being a tool from which one is able to transform one's self through the study of Torah.

What happens when a person is born? A person achieves a separate identity from his parents. While inside the mother, there is a shared identity. Once born a person has an independence and separate life mission. This is what Moshe achieved by giving the sons of Aharon the skills of Torah analysis. They now had their own individual portion within the Torah – their own identity and that it is why Moshe is credited in giving birth to them.

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ZTL

Law as Love

BAMIDBAR

One of the most amusing scenes in Anglo-Jewish history occurred on 14 October 1663. A mere seven years had passed since Oliver Cromwell had found no legal bar to Jews living in England (hence the so-called "return" of 1656). A small synagogue was opened in Creechurch Lane in the City of London, forerunner of Bevis Marks (1701), the oldest still-extant place of Jewish worship in Britain.

The famous diarist Samuel Pepys decided to pay a visit to this new curiosity, to see how Jews conducted themselves at prayer. What he saw amazed and scandalised him. As chance or providence had it, the day of his visit turned out to be Simchat Torah. This is how he described what he saw:

And anon their Laws that they take out of the press [i.e., the Ark] are carried by several men, four or five several burthens in all, and they do relieve one another; and whether it is that every one desires to have the carrying of it, I cannot tell, thus they carried it round about the room while such a service is singing … But, Lord! to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true God, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this.

The Diary of Samuel Pepys, entry for 14 October 1663, ed. Richard Le Gallienne (New York: Modern Library Classics, 2003), p. 106.

This was not the kind of behaviour that Pepys was used to in a house of worship.

There is something unique about the relationship of Jews to the Torah, the way we stand in its presence as if it were a king, dance with it as if it were a bride, listen to it telling our story, and study it, as we say in our prayers, as "our life and the length of our days." There are few more poignant lines of prayer than the one contained in a poem said at Neilah, at the end of Yom Kippur: Ein shiyur rak haTorah hazot – "Nothing remains," after the destruction of the Temple and the loss of the land, "but this Torah." A book, a scroll, was all that stood between Jews and despair.

What non-Jews (and sometimes Jews) fail to appreciate is how, in Judaism, Torah represents law as love, and love as law. Torah is not just "revealed legislation".[1] It represents God's faith in our ancestors that He entrusted them with the creation of a society that would become a home for His Presence and an example to the world.

One of the keys as to how this worked is contained in the parsha of Bamidbar, always read before Shavuot, the commemoration of the Giving of the Torah. This reminds us how central is the idea of wilderness – the desert, no man's land – is to Judaism. It is midbar, wilderness, that gives our parsha and the book as a whole its name. It was in the desert that the Israelites made a covenant with God and received the Torah, their constitution as a nation under the sovereignty of God. It is the desert that provides the setting for four of the five books of the Torah, and it was there that the Israelites experienced their most intimate contact with God, who sent them water from a rock, manna from heaven and surrounded them with Clouds of Glory.

What story is being told here? The Torah is telling us three fundamentals to Jewish identity. First is the unique phenomenon that, in Judaism, the law preceded the land. For every other nation in history the reverse was the case. First came the land, then human settlements, first in small groups, then in villages, towns and cities. Then came forms of order and governance and a legal system: first the land, then the law.

The fact that in Judaism the Torah was given bemidbar, in the desert, before they had even entered the land, meant that uniquely Jews and Judaism were able to survive, their identity intact, even in exile. Because the law came before the land, even when Jews lost the land they still had the law. This meant that, even in exile, Jews were still a nation. God remained their sovereign. The covenant was still in place. Even without a geography, they had an ongoing history. Even before they entered the land, Jews had been given the ability to survive outside the land.

Second, there is a tantalising connection between midbar, 'wilderness,' and davar, 'word.' Where other nations found the gods in nature – the rain, the earth, fertility, and the seasons of the agricultural year – Jews discovered God in transcendence, beyond nature, a God who could not be seen but rather heard. In the desert, there is no nature. Instead there is emptiness and silence, a silence in which one can hear the unearthly voice of the One-beyond-the-world. As Edmond Jabès put it: "The word cannot dwell except in the silence of other words. To speak is, accordingly, to lean on a metaphor of the desert."[2]

The German-American political scientist Eric Voegelin saw this as fundamental to the completely new form of spirituality born in the experience of the Israelites:

When we undertake the exodus and wander into the world, in order to found a new society elsewhere, we discover the world as the Desert. The flight leads nowhere, until we stop in order to find our bearings beyond the world. When the world has become Desert, man is at last in the solitude in which he can hear thunderingly the voice of the spirit that with its urgent whispering has already driven and rescued him from Sheol [the domain of death]. In the Desert God spoke to the leader and his tribes; in the desert, by listening to the voice, by accepting its offer, and by submitting to its command, they had at last reached life and became the people chosen by God.[3]

Israel and Revelation

In the silence of the desert Israel became the people for whom the primary religious experience was not seeing but listening and hearing: Shema Yisrael. The God of Israel revealed Himself in speech. Judaism is a religion of holy words, in which the most sacred object is a book, a scroll, a text.

Third, and most remarkable, is the interpretation the prophets gave to those formative years in which the Israelites, having left Egypt and not yet entered the land, were alone with God. Hosea, predicting a second exodus, says in God's name regarding the Israelites:

I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her . . .
There she will respond as in the days of her youth,
As in the day she came out of Egypt.

Hos. 2:14-15
Jeremiah says in God's name:
"I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved Me and followed Me through the wilderness, through a land not sown." Jer. 2:2
Shir HaShirim, The Song of Songs, contains the line, "Who is this coming up from the wilderness leaning on her beloved?" (Shir HaShirim 8:5)
Common to each of these texts is the idea of the desert as a honeymoon in which God and the people, imagined as bridegroom and bride, were alone together, consummating their union in love. To be sure, in the Torah itself we see the Israelites as a recalcitrant, obstinate people complaining and rebelling against the God. Yet the Prophets in retrospect saw things differently. The wilderness was a kind of yichud, an alone-togetherness, in which the people and God bonded in love.
Most instructive in this context is the work of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep who focused attention on the importance of rites of passage.[4] Societies develop rituals to mark the transition from one state to the next – from childhood to adulthood, for example, or from being single to being married – and they involve three stages. The first is separation, a symbolic break with the past. The last is incorporation, re-entering society with a new identity. Between the two comes the crucial stage of transition when, having cast off one identity but not yet donned another, you are remade, reborn, refashioned.
Van Gennep used the term liminal, from the Latin word for "threshold," to describe this transitional state when you are in a kind of no-man's-land between the old and the new. That is what the wilderness signifies for Israel: liminal space between slavery and freedom, past and future, exile and return, Egypt and the Promised Land. The desert was the space that made transition and transformation possible. There, in no-man's-land, the Israelites, alone with God and with one another, could cast off one identity and assume another. There they could be reborn, no longer slaves to Pharaoh, instead servants of God, summoned to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex. 19:6)
Seeing the wilderness as the space-between helps us to see the connection between the Israelites in the days of Moses and the ancestor whose name they bore. For it was Jacob among the patriarchs who had his most intense experiences of God in liminal space, between the place he was leaving and the one he was travelling to, alone and at night. It was there, fleeing from his brother Esau but not yet arrived at the house of Laban, that he saw a vision of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending, and there on his return that he fought with a stranger from night until dawn and was given the name Israel.
These episodes can now be seen to be prefigurations of what would later happen to his descendants (ma'aseh avot siman levanim, "the acts of the fathers are a sign of what would later happen to the children").[5]
The desert thus became the birthplace of a wholly new relationship between God and humankind, a relationship built on covenant, speech, and love as concretised in the Torah. Distant from the great centres of civilisation, a people found themselves alone with God and there consummated a bond that neither exile nor tragedy could break. That is the moral truth at the beating heart of our faith: that it is not power or politics that link us to God, but love.
Joy in the celebration of that love led King David to "leap and dance" when the Ark was brought into Jerusalem, earning the disapproval of King Saul's daughter Michal (2 Sam. 6:16), and many centuries later led the Anglo-Jews of Creechurch Lane to dance on Simchat Torah, to the disapproval of Samuel Pepys. When love defeats dignity, faith is alive and well.
[1] As Moses Mendelssohn described it in Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 89–90, pp. 126–28.
[2] Edmond Jabès, Du Desert au Libre, Paris, Pierre Belford, 1980, p. 101.
[3] Eric Voegelin, Israel and Revelation, Louisiana State University Press, 1956, p. 153.
[4] Arnold Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage (Chicago: University of Chicago) 1960.
[5] See Ramban's commentary on Gen. 12:6.

Shabbat Shalom: Parshat Bamidbar (Numbers 1:1-4:20)
By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin Efrat, Israel –"And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they left the Land of Egypt." (Numbers 1:1)
How can we transform a no-man's land into a domain of sanctity? The Book of Numbers, which we begin reading this Sabbath, provides an answer to this question. In doing so, it addresses the uncertainties and complexities of transitions: from Egyptian servitude to desert freedom and from abject slavery to the possibility of redemption.
Perhaps most importantly, this fourth book of the Bible offers a glimpse into the complexities assailing the greatest leader in world history, Moses, and the challenges he faced in leading this transformation.
A fierce advocate for his people and passionate lover of God, Moshe Rabbeinu is a towering persona who reminded a nation about its mission in the world and inspired humanity with his clarion call about the human right to freedom. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding his stunningly remarkable achievements, Moses left the world frustrated and disappointed, having been denied his dream of joining his people in the Promised Land.
Fortunately, God's greatest prophet has been resoundingly vindicated by Jewish history. The Jewish People's dramatic and historic return to the Land of Israel continues to draw inspiration from his teachings and longings, as well as from his legacy. The book that bears his name, "Torat Moshe," is humanity's blueprint for redemption.
It is with this context in mind that we approach the book of "Bamidbar" ("In the Desert"), an apt name for a work that documents the Jewish People's 40-years of transition between Egypt and the Land of Canaan. Indeed, this desert period serves as the precursor of – as well as a most poignant metaphor for – the nearly two thousand years of homeless wandering that characterized much of Jewish history from the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.
The Hebrew word for desert, midbar, contains meanings and allusions that in many ways have served as a beacon for our exile. An example of this is the word for leader, which, though most commonly referred to in Hebrew as manhig, our Sages also referred to as dabar, fully cognizant of its shared Hebrew letter root d-b-r with midbar. (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 8a).
In the Bible, the paradigmatic position of leadership – as exemplified by Abraham, Moses, and David – is the shepherd. And the desert is, of course, the most natural place for a shepherd to lead his flock: the sheep can comfortably wander in a virtual no-man's land and graze on the vegetation of the various oases or their outskirts without the problem of stealing from private property or harming the ecology of settled habitations.
And perhaps the letter-root d-b-r means leader-shepherd because it also means "word" (dibur). Just as the shepherd directs the flock using sounds and words, the leader of people must also inspire and lead with the verbal message he communicates. Indeed, the Aseret Ha-Dibrot (literally, "The Ten Utterances," but better known as "The Ten Commandments") were revealed in the Sinai desert (midbar), and they govern the Jewish People – as well as a good part of the whole world – to this very day.
Moreover, it is important to note that wherever the Jewish People wandered in the desert, they were always accompanied by the portable desert sanctuary (mishkan), which is derived from the word Shekhina (Divine Presence). However, God was not in the Sanctuary, for even the greatest expanse of the heavens cannot contain the Divine Presence, as King Solomon declared when he dedicated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem (I Kings 8:27). It was rather God's word (dibur), which was in the sanctuary, in the form of The Ten Utterances (Aseret Ha-Dibrot) on the Tablets of Stone preserved in the Holy Ark, as well as the ongoing

and continuing Word of God that He would speak from between the cherubs on above the Holy Ark (Exodus 25:16-22).
It was by means of these Divine words (dibrot) that even the desert (midbar) – a metaphor for an inhospitable and alien exile environment: boiling hot by day, freezing cold by night, and deficient in water, the elixir of life – can be transformed into sacred space, the place of the Divine word (dibur).
Indeed, the words from the desert of Sinai succeeded in sanctifying the many Marrakeshes and Vilnas and New Yorks of our wanderings. The world is a desert (midbar) waiting to become a sanctuary (d'vir) by means of God's word (dibur), communicated by inspiring leaders (dabarim).
Shabbat Shalom!

A Tale of Two Covenants
by Jonathan Rosenblum
Mishpacha Magazine
A fundamental commonality between the United States and the Jewish People
David Goldman and others have pointed to a fundamental commonality between the United Stations and the Jewish People: Both nations are founded on a covenant, not on blood and soil.
The Jewish covenant was forged at Sinai, an event that we will celebrate a few days from now on Shavuos. Just as our ancestors entered into a covenant with Hashem based on their acceptance of mitzvos, so too any person who commits to the observance of mitzvos in the same fashion is eligible to become a full-fledged member of the Jewish People today.
Similarly, citizenship in America never depended exclusively on one's ancestry or longtime presence. America is, after all, a land of immigrants, composed of people from all corners of the earth. The one fundamental requirement for becoming a citizen is an oath of loyalty to the United States and to the Constitution.
Americans have traditionally been bound by their constitutional faith and belief in the wisdom of the Founders. They studied in school the Founders' vision of divided and limited government, and read the best arguments in favor of the arrangement entered into in the Federalist Papers.
Of late, however, the parallel between the Jewish devotion to Torah and American's constitutional faith has been waning fast. During the Watergate hearings my first year in law school, Senator Sam Ervin would frequently pull a well-worn copy of the Constitution and read from it.
Even then his reverence for the Constitution was a bit quaint. I never managed to read the entire document in law school — and I wanted to teach constitutional law. And I would be surprised if even a handful of classmates did. But few would have dismissed the Constitution, as did one current Yale law student recently, as a "document drafted by wealthy white men," or argue that the Founders "did not codify rights for anyone other than themselves," as if there were no Bill of Rights.
Another current YLS student described classmates who are members of the Federalist Society — in which Yale Law graduates Justices Samuel Alito and Bret Kavanaugh have been active — as conspirators in a "Christo-fascist political takeover," and wondered "why are they still coming to our parties [and] laughing in the library... with precious few social consequences and without being subjected to unrelenting daily confrontation?" Another proclaimed, "Democratic institutions will not save us. Now is not the time for 'reform.' " At least one of these law students enthusiastic about burning the place down will be interning for a prominent federal judge this summer. Apparently, it did not occur to these future advocates that there might be value in debating the "originalist" understanding of constitutional interpretation against other approaches, or in reasoned debate at all. Long forgotten is John Stuart Mills's trenchant comment, "He who knows but one side of an argument knows not even that."
The call for ostracizing conservative students is of a piece with the recent actions of 120 Yale Law students to prevent a Christian lawyer from presenting her position at a Federalist Society event. Since the woman in question has prevailed nine times in the Supreme Court, one might have thought that those eager to advance another legal opinion would have seized the opportunity to hear and challenge arguments that they are likely to confront one day as lawyers. But no.
No wonder that a prominent law professor told Bari Weiss after the leak of Justice Alito's draft opinion overruling Roe v. Wade, an unprecedented breach of confidentiality, "To me, the leak is not surprising, because many of the people we've been graduation from schools like Yale are the kind of people who would do such a thing."
Like the anarchist Stavrogin in Dostoyevsky's The Possessed, "They think that everything is violence. And so everything is permitted."
Even if Yale were not annually rated the country's top law school, this mental cast would be cause for concern. That ranking only makes the type of graduates it is producing a matter of greater concern. As Andrew Sullivan puts it, "We all live on campus today." Students don't grow up and become more nuanced; they don't discover new value in long-existent institutions or patterns of behavior, or find something to be said for reasoned debate. Rather they dictate the future.
AND WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE THE U.S., once bound together by that constitutional faith set forth in historian Louis Hartz's The Liberal Tradition in America, which allowed America to avoid the bitter class and ideological divisions of Europe?
Psychologist Jonathan Haidt, in an April piece in the Atlantic, "Why the Past 10 Year of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid," finds the collapse of the Tower of Babel to be the best metaphor for that ten-year period. "We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth. We are cut off from one another and from the past."
The problem is not just the factionalism of which James Madison warned in Federalist No. 10, without any mediating institutions to keep things from coming to an instantaneous boil. Rather it is the "fragmentation of everything. It's about all that had seemed solid, the scattering of people who had been a community... not only between red and blue, but within the left and within the right, as well as within universities, companies, professional associations, museums, and even families." (We will discuss in coming weeks some of Haidt's suggestions for reversing that fragmentation through procedural reforms of the tech platforms that fan it.)
When trust has been lost, as in the publicizing of a draft opinion of the Supreme Court, whether in private or public affairs, it is almost impossible to restore fully.
IF, HOWEVER, the American covenant is fracturing, it seems to me that something quite the opposite is occurring within that community (or communities) that still order their lives around Torah.
I am now back in America for the first time in nearly three years. And while I am unqualified to comment on all the various ways in which Covid affected communal life based on my two-week visit, one thing appears clear to me: Thousands of Jews took advantage of Covid to increase both the quantity and quality of their Torah learning. (And I should add that apart from one brief foray into Boro Park for some long-delayed suit shopping, I was not in what would be described as yeshivish communities.)
Everywhere I went, all the talking was in learning — of the proliferation of daf yomi shiurim being offered by Jews from various walks of life, of the means being developed to foster mastery and retention of material learned, or of new nighttime kollelim for balabatim, many of them with regular tests. In Teaneck this morning, I could say for perhaps the first time with confidence (not just faith) that the baal tefillah said every word of the long Tachanun. On this trip, I watched a lawyer in one of the country's cutting-edge firms learning Teshuvos Rabi Akiva Eiger until the wee hours of the morning with his chavrusa. Another friend — a Harvard-trained doctor but without a day of formal yeshivah learning — has been taking off an hour or more every afternoon to daven in a yeshivah near his hospital and to learn with bochurim for years. With another chavrusa, he has been learning Aruch Hashulchan for well over a decade. He has now resigned his prestigious position in large part to devote more time to learning.

When great roshei yeshivah come from Eretz Yisrael, hundreds flock to hear their Torah. And many balabatim receive the shiurim of leading roshei yeshivah and learn them with chavrusas.

While I am depressed by the loss of the American covenant, and view the effects of its passing as unsettling for Jews, it is a source of inspiration that it is the bris olam (eternal covenant) of Torah that remains strong after more than three millennia, while the former is barely holding on after less than 250 years.

The Fighter Still Remains

Are You Still the Chosen People?

Rabbi YY Jacobson

The infinite value of human life.

The Blind Golfer

Charlie Boswell was a great athlete who became blind during World War II while rescuing his friend from a tank that was under fire. When he returned to this country after the War, he decided to take up a sport that he had never tried as yet—golf. Years of practice and determination led him to win the honor of National Blind Golf Champion no less than 13 times. One of his heroes was the great golfer Ben Hogan, so it indeed was an honor for Charlie to win the Ben Hogan Award in 1958.

Upon meeting Hogan, Charlie was awestruck and told the legendary golfer that his greatest wish was to have one round of golf with the great Ben Hogan.

Hogan was duly honored, after all, he knew Charlie as the great blind player that he was, and truly admired his skills.

But suddenly Boswell blurted out an unexpected challenge. "Would you like to play for money, Mr. Hogan?"

"Charlie, you know I can't play you for money, it wouldn't be fair!" said Mr. Hogan.

Boswell did not flinch. Instead, he upped the ante. "Come on, $1,000 per hole!"

"I can't. What would people think of me, taking advantage of a blind man," replied the golfer who was able to see.

"Chicken, Mr. Hogan?"

"Okay," blurted a frustrated Hogan, "I'll play. But I warn you, I am going to play my best!"

"I wouldn't expect anything else," said the confident Boswell.

"You're on Charlie. I'll tell you what. You name the time and the place!"

A very self-assured Boswell responded: “Fine. 10 o'clock . . . tonight!"

A Strange Juxtaposition

In the portion of Bechokosai, G-d communicates to the Jewish people the idyllic blessings awaiting them if they live up to their covenant with the Almighty. This is followed by the warning, that if the Jewish people fail to fulfill their role in our world as the Divine ambassadors, they will become the victims of horrendous curses and losses described in frightening detail.

Immediately following this section, known as the “Tochacha” (rebuke, chastisement), the Torah begins a totally new subject—the laws of “erchin,” which means evaluation. These laws specify how a person might donate his or her own value or the value of another human being to the Holy Temple. The Torah specifies the exact sum one must contribute if he or she makes such a pledge. The sum is not based on the individual’s strength, or character, but rather it is a generic value for each gender and each age. For example, the “erech,” or standard value, of a Jewish male between the ages of 20 and 60 is fifty silver shekel (a silver currency weighing around 9000 grams of silver). It doesn’t make a difference whether the individual whose worth was pledged was a neurosurgeon or a street sweeper, no matter if the person whose worth I pledged was Moses himself, or some outcast, the amount donated is dependent only on age and gender. If I pledged to contribute the value of a five-year-old boy, I need to contribute 20 silver shekel (a silver currency weighing around 360 grams) to the Temple. If I pledge to contribute the value of a one-year-old boy, I need to pay to the Temple five silver shekel. (There is an entire Tractate in the Talmud, Erchin, devoted to this topic.)

[Obviously, these numbers do not reflect the true value of a human being. A person is priceless. Rather, these are symbolic numbers the Torah attaches to different genders and different ages representing certain generic features of this gender or age group. The details of this are beyond the scope of this article.]

The order in Torah is meticulous. What is the connection between the Tochacha, the stern and harsh chastisement, and the laws of evaluation, discussing the “value” of every single human being, man, woman, and child?

The Power of Charity

I will present two answers, one is numerical and moral; the other is psychological.

The Baal Haturim (Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, one of the great Medieval sages in Germany and Spain, 1269-1343) explains this as follows.

The Portion of erchin contains evaluations in this order: 50 shekel, 30 shekel, 20 shekel, 10 shekel, 5 shekel, 3 shekel, 15 shekel, and 10 shekel—for various age and gender groups. The total of all distinct categories comes out to be 143 shekel. This number matches the exact sum of the curses in the Torah—45 in this week’s portion, Bechokosai, and 98 in the portion of Ki Savo in the book of Deuteronomy. The Torah is, in effect, saying that the antidote for the Tochacha is the mitzvah of erchin, the mitzvah of charity. The 143 shekels of contributions cancel out the 143 chastisements.

This is the power of giving.

Still the Chosen People?

The second explanation, presented by the Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenstern (Poland, 1787-1859), is this.

One of the greatest gifts of the Jewish people was that they did not allow the humiliation and persecution they endured by mighty nations to define their inner identity, dignity, and destiny. Like fearless lions, they left Auschwitz, and the next day they went to rebuild Jerusalem.

We know of many people or cultures who endured savage suffering, and as a result, they could never rehabilitate themselves emotionally. They remained eternal victims of their oppressors. And even after they were set free, it was merely external freedom, but their inner sense of identity and liberty has been obliterated.

Where did the Jewish people glean the strength to emerge from every disaster with the courage and confidence to rebuild and prosper? From the order in this week’s portion! After the Torah enumerates the suffering the Jews might experience from the nations around them, it goes right on to discuss the value of every single human being. No matter what happens to you, the Torah is intimating, you have value as an individual, and as part of a nation. And your value can contribute to the Holy Temple, to the revealing of the Divine presence in the world.

Still Chosen?

After the Nazis invaded the small village of Klausenberg, Romania, they began to celebrate the defeat of the Jews in their usual sadistic fashion. They gathered the Jews into a circle in the center of town, and then paraded their Rebbe, Rabbi Yekusial Yehuda Halberstam (1905-1994), into the center.

The Klausenberger Rebbe was later taken to Auschwitz, where his wife and 11 children perished. He survived the war and came to America, where he remarried, had more children, and built a grand Chassidic movement. He also built the beautiful Laniado hospital in Netanya, Israel.

The SS guards began taunting and teasing the Klausenberger Rebbe, pulling his beard and pushing him around. The vile soldiers trained their guns on him as the commander began to speak. "Tell us, Rabbi," sneered the officer, "do you really believe that you are the Chosen People?"

The soldiers guarding the crowd howled in laughter. But the Rebbe did not. In a serene voice, he answered loud and clear, "Most certainly."

The officer became enraged. He lifted his rifle above his head and sent it crashing on the head of the Rebbe. The Rebbe fell to the ground. There was a rage in the officer's voice. "Do you still think you are the Chosen People?" he yelled.

Once again, the Rebbe nodded his head and said, "yes, we are." The officer became infuriated. He kicked the rebbe in the chin and repeated. "You stupid Jew, you lie here on the ground, beaten and humiliated, in a puddle of blood. What makes you think that you are the Chosen People?"

With his mouth gushing blood, the Rebbe replied. "As long as we are not the ones kicking, beating, and murdering innocent people, we are the chosen people."

Rise Up

Many of us have experienced loss, abuse, and grief in our lives. There are individuals who from a very young age have been given the message that they are worthless and that their lives amount to nothing. For years they struggle to regain the inner confidence to create a blessed life for themselves.

Comes the Torah and teaches, that after you experienced turbulence in your life, after you endured a "Tochachah," a harsh experience, make sure that you do not allow those experiences and messages to make you doubt your value. You may have been challenged, but let the fighter in you still remain.

True Dignity

It also works the other way around.

The true value and dignity of a person emerge in moments of pain and despair. The real quality of people, their depth and majesty emerge after a "Tochacha," after a painful experience.

When Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, the Satmar Rav (1887-1979), visited Israel, a Hungarian Jew came and asked him for a blessing before his departure back to the US. This Jew expressed the fear that after the Satmar Rav returned to America, there would be no one worthy to ask for a blessing. His Rebbe told him: "Go to any Jew that has a number tattooed on his arm and ask him for a blessing. When such a person is available, you do not need me to give you a blessing."

Violence in Schools

America is reeling from the school shooting in Texas, on May 24, 2022. 18-year-old Salvador Ramos opened fire at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, killing nineteen students and two teachers, and wounding seventeen people. What our youth in America needs more than anything else is a moral education -- an education about values and character, about the truth that the dignity of each life is absolute and non-negotiable.

Sure, it is absurd that an 18-year-old can just obtain a machine gun legally, without any investigation. Even if you are pro-guns, there must be limits. But beyond that, when each of our children is taught from the earliest age that we are responsible to G-d, and that He expects us to honor life, and to be kind to each other, murder will not be part of the language of a teen in pain.

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Bamidbar

The Starting Count

This week we begin the book of Numbers. Actually, the first portion, Bamidbar, begins with a discussion of numbers. Moshe was told to count the Jewish nation. "Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers' household, by number of the names, every male according to their head count. From twenty years of age and up — everyone who goes out to the legion in Israel — you shall count them according to their legions, you and Aaron." (Numbers 1:2-3). This count included every tribe except that of Levi. They were reserved for a separate count. And their count was not of men ages twenty and up. It began with a much younger crew. "Hashem spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, saying. "Count the sons of Levi according to their fathers' household, according to their families, every male from one month of age and up shall you count them" (Numbers 3:14-15).

The question is obvious. Why did the infants, one month and above, get counted? Why were the tiny babies included the count? Why were the infant Levites counted and not the infants of the other tribes? The Torah also differentiates between this Levite count and the rest of the nation. "The leader of the Levite leaders was Elazar, the son of Aaron the Kohen, the assignment of the guardians of the charge of the sanctity" (ibid v. 32). This was not a count for legions. It was a count to assign the guardians in charge of sanctity. Does that start at thirty-days-old? Not long after my father, Rabbi Benjamin Kamenetzky, founded the Yeshiva of South Shore, back in the late 1950s, he invited his illustrious father Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, of blessed memory, to visit the school. After an impressive tour, in which he interviewed teachers and tested the students of the fledgling institution, my father showed him the pre-school program, which imbued the youngest children with a love for Judaism. On the portal of the classroom, there was a colorful mezuzah. Normally a mezuzah is supposed to be placed at the bottom of the top third of the doorpost. This one was not. It was placed lower – at the bottom third of the doorpost. The teachers explained to both my father and grandfather the reasoning for the downward adjustment. "This way, the children will be able to reach the mezuzah, and kiss it." My grandfather smiled. "We must not lower the mezuzah, for the children to kiss it. Instead, we must raise the child, to reach the mezuzah at its proper level. What we must do is put a stepstool in order for the children to reach higher — to the proper level of the mezuzah! Raise the child at an early age to reach the height of the mitzvah, instead of lowering the mitzvah to the child!"

The difference between the counting of the Levites and the rest of the nation is very clear. The nation was, as a whole, counted "according to their legions," the Levites were counted for their job of " guardians of the charge of the sanctity." Though legions are counted at a fighting age, our children, guardians of the sanctity of our nation, must be counted as early as possible. The tribe of Levi represents our leadership. "Today," says Maimonides, "everyone who accepts Torah leadership is considered an integral member of tribe of Levi!" For that mission, no child is too young! Charged with the mission of guarding the sanctuary and preserving the spirituality of the nation, we must lift the heads of our children, imbuing them with finite goals and responsibilities, from their very first moments of cognizance. We must raise them to the greatest height of spirituality at the earliest age. Even if we need a stepstool!

Good Shabbos

Dedicated to the speedy healing of Hinda bas Gittel, Mrs. Henrietta Milstein

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לע"נ

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל ע"ה

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.

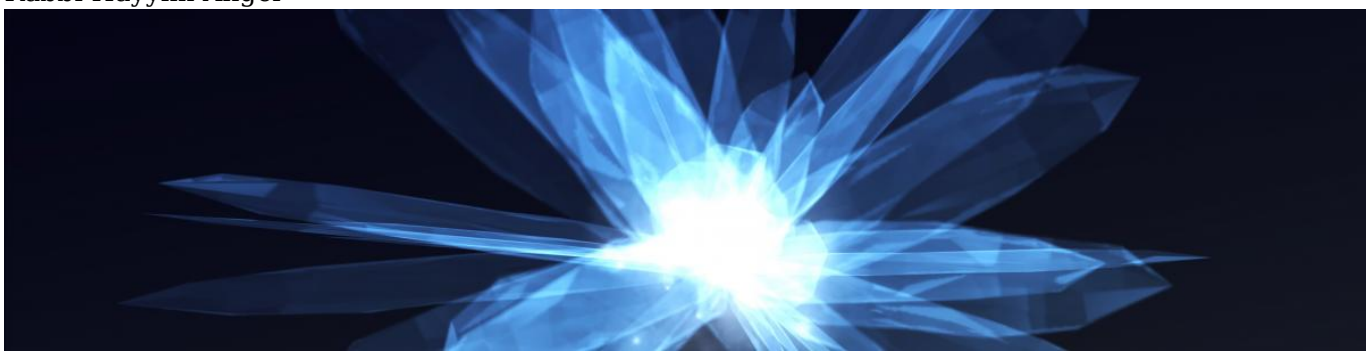
Above all, the greatest irony of the Sefer is the clash of visions: Hashem and Moshe attempt to build a grand, beautiful organization to accomplish transcendent goals, but the people remain interested in water, tasty and varied food (not just manna every day!), and power politics.

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

A WOMAN OF VALOR HAS BEEN FOUND

Byline:
Rabbi Hayyim Angel



Simple glass reflects the beam of light that shines on it only once. A precious gem, in contrast, reflects different sparks with its many facets; a single beam of light that shines on it is reflected and is returned to us greatly enhanced. ~ Feivel Meltzer [1]

INTRODUCTION

This analogy can serve as a guide for understanding a literary gem, Megillat Ruth. Seldom do we come across such an ideal society, characterized by hesed (loyalty, loving-kindness), heroes, and no villains. At worst, there are average characters such as Orpah, Boaz's foreman, and So-and-so who serve as foils to highlight the greatness of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz.[2] R. Zeira's classic statement captures the essence of the megillah:

R. Zeira said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanliness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness (Ruth Rabbah 2:14).

Although it appears that hesed is the predominant theme of our megillah, there is considerably less clarity over how to define that hesed, or what other religious lessons emanate from the text of Megillat Ruth. Which characters truly epitomize R. Zeira's statement? What is the relationship between divine providence and human hesed?
Although the surface reading of the Book of Ruth appears idyllic and straightforward, many elements in the book that initially appear clear are more elusive after further scrutiny. Rather than limiting ourselves to one side or another, it is preferable to see how these viewpoints coexist. By doing so, one stands to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the text and its messages.

Mordechai Cohen sets out two criteria for ascertaining deliberate ambiguities in a biblical text: (1) one must establish the cogency of two separate readings; (2) one must demonstrate how the ambiguity contributes to the literary context by expressing something that could not be expressed in unambiguous language.[3] Taking this argument to a different level, one might contend that much in Megillat Ruth fits these criteria. This chapter will consider some of the major issues of the megillah with an eye toward its overall purposes.

THE FIRST FIVE VERSES: PUNISHMENT FOR SINS?

The Book of Ruth opens in a jarring fashion, with Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion dying at the outset. Some midrashim and later commentators contend that Elimelech and his sons deserved their respective deaths. They maintain that Elimelech left the Land of Israel,[4] or a starving

community behind,[5] while his sons lingered in Moab and intermarried. [6]

Perhaps the juxtaposition of Elimelech's departure and his death and the juxtaposition of the sons' marriages and their deaths suggest these conclusions. However, there is a ten-year gap between the sons' marrying Moabites and their deaths (1:4). By including the lengthy time separating the two events, the megillah appears to exclude intermarriage as a direct cause of their deaths.[7] We also are not told how long Elimelech remained in Moab before he died. These uncertainties yield at least three possible lines of interpretation:

1. Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion simply died: They maintain that the family left during a famine for legitimate reasons. Ibn Ezra (on 1:2, 15) insists that Ruth and Orpah converted prior to their marriages to Elimelech's sons. The book's opening verses are primarily background setting the stage for the main story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, and should not be understood as punishment for sins.

2. This story is parallel to Job: Like Job, Naomi first complained about her God-given lot (1:20–21). The deaths and suffering at the outset of Ruth are theologically significant, but the reader is not told how.

Unlike the Book of Job, however, where God's direct involvement is discussed in the beginning and end of the book, in Ruth it is not. Additionally, the characters in Megillat Ruth played an active role in changing their fate, whereas Job did not. It is unclear whether Megillat Ruth was intended to parallel the Book of Job or whether the two books should be contrasted, with Megillat Ruth's characters held responsible for their original suffering and credited for their eventual happiness. [8]

3. This is a story of God giving just recompense: Elimelech and his family are punished for leaving a starving community behind. The unwarranted lingering of Mahlon and Chilion in Moab led them to intermarry, causing their untimely deaths. Likewise, the happy ending of Megillat Ruth may be viewed as God's reward for the acts of hesed performed over the course of the story.

Does the text teach divine recompense? This reading is possible, but no more compelling than a non-recompense reading. This uncertainty encapsulates our difficulty in pinpointing any one specific interpretation of the ephemeral characters in the opening verses of Megillat Ruth. The initially straightforward narrative contains significant ambiguities that will continue throughout the book.

NAOMI

A second ambiguity is evidenced in the character of Naomi. It is unclear whether she was a passive follower of her husband, or an active participant in the abandonment of the community (assuming that there was anything negative about their leaving). Sensitive to the vagueness of the text, several midrashim address both sides of the question:

He was the prime mover and his wife secondary to him, and his two sons secondary to both of them (Ruth Rabbah 1:5). [9]

Why did the text mention him, his wife, and his children? To teach that all of them were stingy (Ruth Zuta 1:2).

From the text, it is difficult to determine whether Naomi did anything wrong, if she was an innocent victim of her family members' sins, or if she was a victim of the unexplained deaths of her family members.

The motives behind Naomi's efforts to persuade her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab also remain elusive. Although Naomi emphasized the marital prospects of Ruth and Orpah (in 1:8–15), it is possible that she was driven by other considerations as well:

R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Judah b. Haninah: Three times is it written here "turn back," corresponding to the three times that a potential proselyte is repulsed; but if he persists after that, he is accepted (Ruth Rabbah 2:16).

Why did Naomi want to return them? So that she would not be embarrassed by them. We find that there were ten markets in Jerusalem, and they [the classes of people who shopped at each] never intermingled.… The people were recognized by their clothing—what one class wore, another would not (Ruth Zuta 1:8).

Ruth Rabbah 2:16 casts Naomi as unwilling to compromise Jewish religious standards. This view receives textual support from Naomi's observation that Orpah's return to Moab came with religious consequences as well: "So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law'" (1:15; cf. Ibn Ezra, Malbim).

In contrast, Ruth Zuta 1:8 depicts a less flattering portrait of Naomi. Her professed concern for the welfare of her Moabite daughters-in-law cloaked a desire to protect her own noble self image in Judean society. The inordinate emphasis on Ruth as a "Moabite" (seven times in this tiny megillah) could support this reading as well.
Despite the potentially complex nature of her concern for their welfare, Naomi certainly emerged successful by the end of the narrative. She had her estate redeemed by Boaz; she was esteemed by her neighbors; and Ruth's son was born into her family. It appears that there are several textually valid readings of Naomi's character:

1. Naomi as a paragon of hesed: Who could ask for a better mother-in-law than Naomi? Bereft of her husband and sons, with only Ruth and Orpah to comfort her, Naomi was more concerned with their welfare than with tending to her own loneliness. Moreover, Naomi never stopped caring for Ruth, helping her find security via matrimony. As a consequence of her hesed, God rewarded Naomi at the end of the megillah with family, friends, and land (4:14–17).

2. Naomi as self-serving: Although Naomi always verbally expressed interest in her daughters-in-law, she really was more concerned for herself. She joined her family in abandoning her community. She wanted to drive her Moabite daughters-in-law away because they would harm her social status upon return. Naomi knew she could benefit from Boaz's intervention; therefore, she orchestrated the encounter between Boaz and Ruth to help herself. Fittingly, the narrative concludes with Naomi's happiness—she took the child and had the blessings of her friends along with her land. Ruth is only a tangential figure in the megillah's climactic frame. [10]

3. Naomi as similar to Job: Naomi suffered without any explanation, complained against God, and then was restored in the end:

She said to them, Call me not Naomi; call me Mara; for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me (ki hemar Shaddai li me'od) (Ruth 1:20).

As God lives, who has taken away my judgment; and the Almighty, who has tormented my soul (ve-Shaddai hemar nafshi) (Job 27:2).

Although Naomi used similar language to that of Job, possibly indicating that she viewed herself as suffering unjustly, the narrator remains conspicuously noncommittal as to whether or not Naomi's story parallels that of Job.

4. Complexity: Naomi was concerned with herself, and also for Ruth. One might view the happy ending either as a consequence of Naomi's and the other characters' actions, or as a providential reward for her goodness, or some combination thereof. This view combines the first two explanations above, and each layer of motivation appears to be simultaneously sustained by the text.

BOAZ

Yet another ambiguity can be found in the person of Boaz. According to all readings, Boaz was a hero. He protected Ruth from harassment (2:9, 15) and helped her in other ways unbeknownst to Ruth (2:15–17). He provided sustenance for Naomi (3:15), completed the redemption of Naomi's field, and married Ruth (3:18–4:10). Boaz deserves praise for overcoming the anti-Moabite biases of Judean society.

However, Boaz allowed Ruth to glean for approximately three months (cf. Ruth Rabbah 5:11) and needed prodding from Naomi and Ruth before he took more substantial action. Why didn't he help earlier, especially given his awareness of Ruth's character and outstanding accomplishments (2:11–12)?

Perhaps the Moabite issue figures decisively in answering that question, since there was a stigma against marrying her. Additionally, Boaz assumed that he was too old so Ruth would not be interested in marrying him (3:10–11). These reasons may explain Boaz's possible reluctance to marry Ruth; but how do we justify his allowing her to glean in his field for so long instead of giving her food and support directly? As Feivel Meltzer observes, "it is impossible to understand adequately why Boaz did not see it fit to visit the widows and attend their needs." [11]

Sensitive to these cues, some midrashim cast Boaz as one who acted kindly only when he knew he would receive something in return:

R. Isaac commented: The Torah teaches you that when a person performs a good deed he should do so with a cheerful heart.... If Boaz had known that the Holy One, blessed be He, would have it written of him that he "Gave her parched corn" (2:14), he would have given her fatted calves! (Lev. Rabbah 34:8).

Rabbah, son of R. Huna, said in the name of Rav: Ibzan is Boaz. What does he come to teach us?... Boaz made for his sons a hundred and twenty wedding feasts, for it is said, "And he [Ibzan] had thirty sons, and thirty daughters he sent abroad, and thirty daughters he brought in from abroad for his sons; and he judged Israel seven years" (Jud. 12:9); and in the case of every one [of these] he made two wedding feasts, one in the house of the father and one in the house of the father-in-law. To none of them did he invite Manoah, [for] he said, "Whereby will the barren mule repay me?" All these died in his lifetime (Bava Batra 91a).

Boaz certainly is a paragon of hesed. At the same time, however, these midrashim view Boaz's hesed as insufficient and motivated at least partially by his own interests. Both lines of interpretation are simultaneously supported by the text.

DIVINE–HUMAN CONTINUUM IN MEGILLAT RUTH

There is an apparent ambiguity in 2:20 concerning Naomi's gratitude upon learning that Ruth was gleaning in Boaz's field:

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed is he to the Lord, who has not abandoned His kindness with the living and with the dead."

or
Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “Blessed to the Lord is he who has not abandoned his kindness with the living and with the dead.” [12]

It is unclear whether Naomi acknowledged God for orchestrating Ruth’s chancing upon Boaz’s field, or whether she blessed Boaz for his efforts in treating Ruth well and for his potential as a redeemer. Mordechai Cohen views this verse as intentionally ambiguous, highlighting the complex relationship between human and divine action in Megillat Ruth. This ambiguity runs throughout the megillah, as it often is unclear where human initiative stops and God’s intervention begins.

While Boaz blessed Ruth by saying that God should reward her for coming under His wings (tahat kenafav, 2:12), Ruth eventually realized that nothing would get done unless Boaz actively spread his “wings” over Ruth (u-parasta kenafekha al amatekha, 3:9). Earlier, Naomi had prayed that God grant marital security (menuhah) to her daughters-in-law (1:9); but she ultimately had to orchestrate the threshing floor scene to provide that manoah, “security,” for Ruth (3:1). One might view the happy ending as a consequence of the concerted actions of the characters. It is equally possible to view the human actions as mirroring God’s plan—the divine blessings people had wished on one another had been realized.

It is noteworthy that the only two times the narrator explicitly mentions God’s involvement are regarding the end of the famine (1:6)—which is presented only as something Naomi heard—and Ruth’s getting pregnant (4:13).[13] The omission of such references in the rest of the narrative leaves the extent of God’s involvement subject to speculation. According to one reading, the megillah teaches that God “withdrew” Himself to allow greater human action. According to another, it reveals God’s providential hand constantly assisting these paragons of hesed.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RUTH AND JUDGES

The opening verse of Megillat Ruth connects the narrative to the period of the Judges. What is the connection between the Dark Age of Judges and the display of hesed in Megillat Ruth, where the Judeans were religiously faithful and kind to one another?

The megillah does not offer greater precision in dating the narrative than that it occurred in the period of the Judges—a period spanning centuries. Some midrashim link Ruth to the time of the earlier judges,[14] while others identify Boaz with the later judge Ibzan (Jud. 12:8). [15] Malbim, however, suggests that the story of Ruth is not dated precisely, casting it as representative of the entire period.

How Megillat Ruth is representative of the period of the Judges, however, remains problematic. Malbim asserts that the opening verses of Megillat Ruth highlight the negative atmosphere of Judges. These verses demonstrate that people were concerned primarily for themselves, and this selfishness was characteristic of the period. According to Malbim, Megillat Ruth’s connection to the period of Judges is limited primarily to its opening verses. In contrast, the remainder of Megillat Ruth is characterized by hesed.

Alternatively, one might argue that Megillat Ruth is characteristic of the period, but in a more complex manner. Most people were generally righteous or at least average. However, the unwillingness of individuals to help one another except when they could gain themselves, demonstrates a general lack of hesed. The Talmud cited earlier regarding Boaz—one of the great figures of that era—captures this theme (Bava Batra 91a). Boaz certainly demonstrated hesed in the megillah; but the Talmud accuses even this hero of not inviting Samson’s father Manoah to his children’s wedding feasts since he would not receive a reciprocal invitation. To remedy this societal

problem, and to break out from the cycle of the period, the Israelites needed an outsider like Ruth to teach them what true hesed was. One midrash captures this message:

God said: may Ruth, who is a convert, and who did not challenge her mother-in-law—come and rebuke Israel who has rebelled against Me (Ruth Zuta 1:7).

This midrash looks beneath a superficial reading of Megillat Ruth, where the Judeans are not depicted as "rebels." Instead, the midrash forges an intimate connection between Megillat Ruth and Judges and determines the root problem inherent in Israel's society to be selfishness.

CONCLUSION

Ruth is the only character in the megillah who is unambiguously positive, as she reflects genuine hesed. She sacrificed heroically to accompany Naomi and to accept God. A textual parallelism points to Ruth being compared to Abraham in leaving her family to serve God:

The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing" (Gen. 12:1–2).

Boaz said in reply [to Ruth], "I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before" (Ruth 2:11).

In light of this comparison, one might argue that Ruth is portrayed even more favorably than Abraham. God spoke directly to Abraham and promised him reward. In contrast, Ruth came voluntarily and hardly could have expected anything but a lifetime of begging and discrimination in return for her sacrifices. Ruth also declined marriage opportunities with younger Judeans in order to marry Boaz in order to preserve Mahlon's name.

The ambiguity of Ruth's world is reflected in the many ambiguous characters and circumstances presented by the text. The extent of God's intervention in her suffering and salvation is unclear, as are the motivations of the members of the society on whom she depended. Nevertheless, she remained steadfast in her commitment to Naomi, Mahlon, and God. Ruth has the distinction of being the only biblical woman explicitly called by the epithet eshet hayil, "woman of valor" (3:11). While Ruth struggled mightily to preserve Mahlon's name, she in fact has immortalized her own name, winning the hearts of readers generation after generation.

Megillat Ruth is characterized by deliberate ambiguity. Not only are multiple readings possible; these ambiguities are precisely the vehicles through which the short narrative captures so many subtleties in so short a space.

NOTES

[1]Da'at Mikra: Ruth, in Five Megillot (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1973), introduction p. 3 n. 1.

[2] See especially Meltzer, introduction to Da'at Mikra: Ruth, p. 8; Moshe Garsiel, "Literary Structure, Development of Plot, and the Goal of the Narrator in Megillat Ruth" (Hebrew), in Hagut ba-Mikra, vol. 3, ed. E. Menahem (Tel Aviv: Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1979), pp. 66–83.

[3] Mordechai Cohen, "Hesed: Divine or Human? The Syntactic Ambiguity of Ruth 2:20," in Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm, ed. Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1997), pp. 11–38, esp. pp. 32–33.

[4] See Bava Batra 91a; Gen. Rabbah 25:3; Rashi (on 1:2).

[5] See Ruth Rabbah 1:4; Tanhuma Behar 3; Zohar Hadash Ruth 77b; Rashi (on 1:2).

[6] See Ruth Rabbah 2:9; Targum (on 1:4), Rashi (on 1:12), Malbim (on 1:4), who maintain that Ruth and Orpah did not convert prior to their marriages to Mahlon and Chilion. Ibn Ezra (on 1:2, 15) disagrees, as does Zohar Hadash Ruth 79a. Rambam (Hil. Melakhim 5:9) maintains that the family members were punished because they were communal leaders and therefore held to a higher standard of conduct. Malbim adopts a middle position: the initial departure of Elimelech and family was justified, since they went only as a temporary measure (la-gur); once they elected to stay permanently, however (va-yeshevu sham), they brought punishment upon themselves.
[7] Sensitive to this difficulty, Tanhuma Buber Behar 8 states: “For those ten years, God was warning them. When He saw that they were not repenting, He began to strike their camels and cattle—yet they still did not repent. When He saw that they did not repent, immediately (!) ‘Mahlon and Chilion died also.’” See also Ruth Zuta 1:4: “This teaches that decrees are suspended for ten years.” Of course, without these modifications, the text is far less clear in presenting their deaths as punishment.
[8] See further discussion in R. Amnon Bazak, “The World Is Built on Hesed: Between Megillat Ruth and Job” (Hebrew), Megadim 18–19 (1993), pp. 169–175.
[9] Cf. Rashi, Malbim.
[10] The dialogue in chapter 4 intimates that Boaz considered Naomi’s field to be the primary element in the redemption altogether; Ruth is mentioned only in passing (4:3, 9–10). Ezra Z. Melammed (“Megillat Ruth in Light of the Halakhah” [Hebrew], Sinai 24 [1961], p. 156) maintains that Ruth was the more important aspect of the deal, but Boaz emphasized the field out of respect for Ruth.
[11] Meltzer, Da’at Mikra: Ruth, p. 16, n. 20.
[12] See the survey of opinions on this verse in Cohen, “Hesed: Divine or Human? The Syntactic Ambiguity of Ruth 2:20,” pp. 11–38. The above translations are from his article, pp. 11–12.
[13] The formulation that God “gave her pregnancy” (va-yitten lah herayon) is unique in Tanakh. Perhaps this expression signals divine approval of the union of Boaz with the Moabite Ruth (Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, The Jewish Publication Society Commentary: Ruth [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011], introduction p. li).
[14] Ruth Rabbah 1:1; Seder Olam Rabbah 12; cf. Makkot 23a.
[15] Bava Batra 91a.

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