BS"D
May 12, 2023
Friday is 43rd day of the Omer

Potomac Torah Study Center

Vol. 10 #30, 31, May 19, 26, 2023; 28 Iyar, 6 Sivan 5783; Bemidbar, Shavuot 5783
Shabbat Bemidbar (Machar Hodesh). Friday (May 13): Yom Yerushalem. Shavuot: next Friday and Shabbat.

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 more than 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.

Why do we read parashat Bemidbar the Shabbat before Shavuot? The most frequent explanation is that chazal did not want the curses at the send of Sefer Vayikra to come right before Shavuot. My question, however goes deeper. Does this parsha connect thematically with Shavuot in some way that makes it especially appropriate to read as we count down the final days to the holy days?

Rabbi David Fohrman raises a connection in his insightful discussion of the Torah's connection with Shavuot. We approach this holy day by counting the Omer, seven weeks of seven days, with the next day (50) being Shavuot. We have just read about Shmitta and Yovel (parashat Behar, last week), another series of seven times seven plus one – this time counting to Yovel (when all land would revert to the original owners from the time of Joshua, and when all debts among the people would be cancelled). The Torah uses the same words for Yovel and Shavuot (compare Vayikra 23:15-16 and Vayikra 25:8, 10).

The first mention of Yovel in the Torah, however, is Shemot 19:13 – sounding the shofar at Har Sinai at the end of the Revelation. The Revelation at Har Sinai came on the 50th day after leaving Egypt – another seven times seven plus one. The Torah connects the Revelation, Yovel, and Shavuot by counting seven times seven plus one and using the same language (about yovel).

Rabbi Fohrman adds another connection, to the conquest of Jerico under Yehoshua at the beginning of Navi. The process of conquering the first city in Eretz Yisrael was for seven Kohanim, each with a shorfar, to circle the city seven times while sounding the shorfar, for six days. On the seventh day, the Kohanim would circle the city seven times again, and blow their shofars again. At the end of the process on day seven, the people would raise a cry, and the city walls would self destruct. Again, we have the pattern of seven times seven with the sounding of a shofar.

As Rabbi Fohrman observes, Tanach draws a parallel among the Revelation, Yovel, Shavuot, and capturing Jericho. The Torah in discussing Shavuot mentions bringing first fruits to a place that Hashem will reveal, having a joyous feast, inviting all family and needy people (those who do not possess their own land), and including a special offering with two loafs of bread (the only time to my knowledge that an offering includes bread rather than matzah. The Torah does not mention that Shavuot occurs on the same calendar day as the Revelation, but it is easy to calculate that fact once one realizes that it is fifty days after the first day of Pesach.

At Har Sinai, God tells Moshe to emphasize that we have an obligation to share our material blessings with the poor and needy – especially slaves, widows, and strangers (foreigners). God mentions one reason for sharing these blessings is that all the land belongs to Him, not to any human "owner." The Torah adds that we are to include these disadvantaged people at our joyous meal on the festive day 50 days later (Shavuot). On Yovel, we are to free slaves, return land to the

original owners from the time of Joshua, and include the freed slaves and their families among those with whom we rejoice at the holiday feast. Connecting the people with their original land holdings provides everyone with a source of income and food. Everyone starts debt free again. With family returning to original land holdings, everyone is close to family for protection.

What is the connection between Shavuot and Bemidbar? God presents the Torah to B'Nai Yisrael at Har Sinai, an anonymous, small mountain in the midst of a desolate land. The Sinai desert is hefker – ownerless – land on which families could not raise crops or live successfully without divine assistance. Bemidbar opens as B'Nai Yisrael leave the base of Har Sinai and return to their journey through the same desolate land. Other than an occasional oasis, B'Nai Yisrael spend virtually all their time in the Midbar by themselves, rarely meeting other people, traveling to the land that God promised to our Avot hundreds of years earlier. Shavuot is a time for family and connections with fellow Jews. It is a time to stay away from other nations, to focus on our relationship with Hashem and avoid influences from pagan nations. (Times when our ancestors meet other nations are significant because they bring trouble, rarely for positive reasons.)

On Pesach, God ends the physical slavery of the Jews and starts our road to becoming a free nation. At Har Sinai, B'Nai Yisrael receive the Torah in a desolate land far from other nations. At Bemidbar opens, the Jews prepare to leave the base of Har Sinai and return to more of the desolate desert. On Shavuot, we relive receiving the Torah and focusing on our families and fellow Jews, not on other nations. At Jericho, God brings a miracle to make the city walls crash – a sign that the period of the Canaanites is over and it is time for Hashem to start the promise that He gave to our Avot many years earlier. The local for these stories matters, and that is a key reason why Bemidbar is a fitting introduction to Shavuot. We must relearn the lessons of the counting, the shofar, and the Midbar every year.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, devoted Shavuot each year to honoring children in the congregation who attended Jewish day schools. These students would lead the various parts of the service, read the Torah, and present a Devar Torah. This custom beautifully honored the continuity of our religion from generation to generation. In Parashat Bemidbar, the Torah says, "These are the offspring of Aaron and Moshe. . ." The Torah then only mentions the sons of Aaron, neglecting those of Moshe (3:1-2). Chazal learn from here that one who teaches children Torah is like a father. Shavuot, with the tradition of studying Torah all night and davening Shacharit (and the Torah reading, including Aseret Dibrot) as early as Halacha permits, connects us to many other parts of the Torah on this special holy day.

Shabbat Shalom; Chag Shavuot Samaich.

Hannah and Alan

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

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Avraham ben Gavriela, 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; Sharon bat Sarah, 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; Chag Shavuot Samaich,

Hannah & Alan

Student to Student, a high school peer education program of the Jewish Community Relations Council:

●Strives to reduce prejudice and bigotry

●Fosters understanding among peers

●Brings together Jewish students from different backgrounds

●Trains them to talk about their lives as Jewish teens

●Facilitates discussions in an effort to dismantle antisemitismPuts a human face to Judaism

Student to Student presentations take place in public and independent schools. Since this is a presentation by students for students, it is not perceived as "just another lecture" It resonates with the students and creates more of an informal discussion where questions are encouraged.

Join us for the 2023-2024 school year in sharing our lives as Jewish teens to break down stereotypes and foster increased understanding with other teens in our community:

NOMINATION AND APPLICATIONS ARE OPEN FOR THIS YEAR. Returning student applications and **nominations due by June 16**.

Please nominate rising Juniors and Seniors to participate in Student to Student 2023-24, at:

https://www.jcouncil.org/form/student-student-nomination-form-2023-24

Bemidbar – Like Cheese Cake

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5773

Shevuos is almost here and cheese cake production is in high gear. It's a time to associate the Torah with something sweet and rich with good flavor. What flavor does the Torah have?

Rabbi Shimon Schwab ztl. reported having heard the Chofetz Chaim ask rhetorically that if the Manna tasted just like whatever the individual thought it tasted like then what flavor was the Manna if someone had no thought? The Chofetz Chaim posited that if one does not think then there is no taste. Most probably that applies to Torah and life and marriage and lots of things in general. The flavor of a thing depends upon the thought of the receiver.

Just to add some spice to life it may be worthwhile to cogitate on the words of the Chovos HaLevavos in *Shaar Cheshbon HaNefesh,* the *Gates of Introspection* where he provides a suggested list of 30 things a person could and should contemplate regularly. Here is #5:

> *To bring oneself to an accounting for delaying coming to understand the book of G-d's Torah, and his being contented not to grasp its matters. And one would not do this for a book that was sent to him from a king. If he had a doubt as to its meaning due to its unclear handwriting or words, or due to the depth of its matter, or its subtlety, or confusing mix of subjects or its enigmatic words. Rather, he would apply his whole heart and mind to understand its meaning, and would greatly pain himself until he understood its intent.*

(Marpe Lenefesh commentary: The book *Orchos Tzadikim (Shaar Zechira)* ends off:

> *"Without a doubt, if there was in his city even the lowest of the lowest person who knew how to explain the part of the letter he did not understand, he would hurry to go to him and would not be embarrassed.*

If he does this to understand the words of a weak, mortal man like himself, how much is it his duty to do many times more than this until he understands the book of G-d, which is his life and his salvation (from eternal death), as written *"For it is your life and the length of your days"* (Devarim 30:20). How did you permit yourself, my brother, to hide from it, and to

content yourself from it with that which is readily familiar of its matter and revealed of its surface meaning, and you were lenient with (knowing) the rest.

Rabbi Mendel Kaplan ztl. who taught in Chicago for many years but who later left a lasting imprint from his long and colorful career as a Rebbe in Philadelphia Yeshiva, once stood before his class and in his hand he held a Sefer, *Raziel HaMalach*. He told his students, "You see this Sefer!? It was written by a Malach- an angel!'They sat in stunned silence!" Then he lifted up a Chumash and said, "You see this Sefer!? It was written by HASHEM!" If one approaches the Yom Tov of Shevuos with that simple awareness, then the reception of the Torah will certainly be more delectable just **like cheese cake.**

Good Shabbos!

https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5773-bamidbar/

Chuppah and Har Sinai

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2009, 2023

When we move from sefer Vayikra to sefer Bamidbar, we are finally moving away from Har Sinai, where Bnei Yisrael have been for almost a year. From the middle of Shemot through the end of Vayikra, they have been encamped at the foot of Har Sinai, having received the Torah, mitzvot and laws, and then all the laws of the Kohanim, through Kedoshim and Behar Bechukotai. It is only because we lose sight of this that the opening of Behar takes us by surprise. *"What does Shmitta have to do with Mt. Sinai?"* Rashi asks. The answer is obvious — because they are still there, and the parsha is reminding us of that, as it draws to wrap up their experience at Har Sinai.

Now, this experience at the foot of Har Sinai can be likened to the period of the chuppah and the sheva berakhot. The moment of the giving of the Torah was the moment of marriage (nissuim). The intimacy, intensity, and immediacy of the connection and self-revelation that occurred between God and Bnei Yisrael is like the coming together of chatan and kallah, the consummation of the betrothal (kiddushin). In addition to the intensity of the love, the brit is actualized and the full obligations of the relationship are accepted — the mitzvot and the laws — with the sefer habrit being, in essence, the ketuvah, with all its reciprocal obligations.

Now, however, as we move to Bamidbar, it is time to move away from the chuppah, and to move on with our lives. The question will be — how has our life changed and how will we move forward? The Torah tells us that when we camp elsewhere, the encampment must always be with the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, in the center. Even when we break camp and move forward, the Mishkan must move in the center. As the Torah says in Terumah — *"and I will dwell in your midst."* Even when we depart Har Sinai, when we are distant from the immediacy of the Shekhina, we must always encamp around the Mishkan — we must orient our lives towards God and God's presence. And when we move — it is in the context of our relationship to God — *"by the command of God they encamped, and by the command of God they moved."* Thus, no matter how geographically distant we are, we will not lose our way if we continue to orient ourselves to God — *"around the Mishkan they shall encamp."* The way I read it, the remainder of Bamidbar is the working out of this challenge — can Bnei Yisrael depart from Har Sinai, and continue to keep God in their midst, and orient themselves towards God's presence? We know this is not trivial — it can be a real challenge.

This is also the challenge as a couple moves from the chuppah and the sheva berakhot and begins to move forward and continue with their life. Sometimes one of the couple will need to travel geographically, or will need to involve him or herself in career, education, or other demands or pursuits. This is a necessary part of life. We must move from Har Sinai. But if we have worked on the relationship, and continue to work on the relationship, then wherever and whenever one travels, the other will always be their center, and all that we pursue will be with the other in mind. William Donne put it best in his *"Valediction: Forbidding Mourning":*

> Dull sublunary lovers' love
> (Whose soul is sense) cannot admit

Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we, by a love so much refined
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two:
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do;

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like the other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

Let us constantly work on our relationship with our spouse, and our relationship with God, so that when we leave the chuppah and we leave the experience of matan Torah, and that wherever and however far we doth roam, that the other will be our center, so that we will make our circle just and end where we had begun.

Shabbat Shalom!

https://library.yctorah.org/2023/05/chuppah-and-har-sinai-2/

Two Tents: Thoughts for Parashat Bemidbar

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

"And the Lord spoke unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they came out of the land of Egypt…" (Bemidbar 1:1).

The Torah refers often to the "tent of meeting" (ohel mo'ed) as the place where God communicates with Moses. But where exactly was this tent located?

It seems that the ohel mo'ed was another name for the mishkan — the sanctuary that was constructed in the center of the Israelite encampments while in the wilderness. The Torah goes to great length describing the exact measurements and materials in the construction of the mishkan. It specifies the clothing that the cohanim must wear, and the details of what kind of offerings are to be sacrificed. The ohel mo'ed/mishkan was the physical and spiritual center of the Israelites.

But Shemot 33:7, in a scene prior to the construction of the mishkan, informs us that Moses took the tent and pitched it

outside the camp, *"far off from the camp; and he called it the tent of meeting, that was outside the camp."*

Commentators and scholars offer various suggestions attempting to understand these two frameworks for the ohel mo'ed — one at the center of the camp and one outside the camp. Perhaps the Torah is teaching us something essential about the proper functioning of religious life…and of civilization in general.
The ohel mo'ed at the center of the camp represents orderliness, organizational integrity, ritual propriety. All the tribes of Israel were arranged around the ohel mo'ed. This reminded the Israelites that their physical and spiritual core was God-centered. The ohel mo'ed symbolized a structured pattern of religious and communal life.

The ohel mo'ed outside the camp was a counter-force. If the tent at the center of the camp represented orderliness and organization, the tent outside the camp represented an unpredictable source of divine truth. It was a challenge and corrective to the central tent. Yes, religion and civilization require a structured central framework…but they also need an outside voice that doesn't allow them to become complacent. Orderliness and ritual — while vital to society's wellbeing — cannot be allowed to become stultified. An outside prophetic voice must constantly inject new insights and new approaches; it must inspire the central tent to stay alive and receptive to the needs of the people. Spiritual friction — while not always welcome or appreciated — is vital to the overall wellbeing of society.

In his novel, *The Lost World,* Michael Crichton offers a wise observation. "Complex systems tend to locate themselves at a place we call 'the edge of chaos.' We imagine the edge of chaos as a place where there is enough innovation to keep a living system vibrant, and enough stability to keep it from collapsing into anarchy….Too much change is as destructive as too little. Only at the edge of chaos can complex systems flourish."

The two tents of meeting were, in a sense, keeping the community at the "edge of chaos," a spiritual condition that required balancing stability and innovation, orderliness and spontaneity. "Organized religion" provides vital structure. But the voice from outside the camp prods innovation, creativity, re-evaluation. It challenges stagnation.

We need a strong and stable spiritual center. And we also need prophetic voices from outside the camp. The "edge of chaos" keeps religion alive and awake. It is challenging to stay on balance…but very dangerous to slip off the edge into chaos.

* 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 Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals at this time.

https://www.jewishideas.org/article/two-tents-thoughts-parashat-bemidbar

---

Jerusalem Undivided: Thoughts for Yom Yerushalayim

By Rabbi Marc Angel *

That Jerusalem is Israel's capital should be obvious to everyone...and many thoughtful people rejoice at this acknowledgment of truth. Yet, in the "politically correct" community, it has been assumed that Israel has no right to its own capital city. People raise the concerns of Palestinians, of the Arab world, of Muslims, of the sanctity of Christian holy sites. They worry about everyone's rights – except the rights of Jews. Some people don't remember the pre-1967 years when Jerusalem was divided; when Jews had no access to our holy sites in the Old City;

During the Six Day War in 1967, Israel regained control of East Jerusalem. This was a historic event that returned the ancient holy sites of the Old City to Israeli sovereignty. Yom Yerushalayim has become a day of religious and national commemoration.

While pundits comment on the status of Jerusalem, it is important to put things into historic context.

The Muslim Ottoman Empire controlled the land of Israel for hundreds of years. Relatively few Jews lived in the holy land during those centuries. The Ottoman Empire could very easily have established a Muslim country in the land of Israel with Jerusalem as its capital city. The thought never occurred to them! "Palestine" was a poor backwater of little significance; Jerusalem was an old, decrepit city that no one (except Jews) cared very much about. There was no call for a "Palestinian State," and no claim that Jerusalem should be a capitol of a Muslim country.

Between 1948 and 1967, Jordan controlled the West Bank and the Old City of Jerusalem. Egypt controlled Gaza. Neither Jordan nor Egypt ceded one inch of territory to Palestinian Arab rule. Neither suggested the need for a Palestinian country, nor took any steps in the direction of creating a Palestinian State. Jordan did not declare Jerusalem as a capital city of Palestinians.

In June 1967, Israel defeated its Arab enemies in the remarkable Six Days War. In the process, Israel took control of the Sinai, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and the Old City of Jerusalem. In making peace with Egypt, Israel ceded the Sinai to Egypt. In attempting to create conciliatory gestures to Palestinian Arabs, Israel ceded much of the West Bank and Gaza to the Palestinian Authority. **Israel is the only country in the world to have given territory to the Palestinian Arabs. Israel has a legitimate claim to much of this territory, but for the sake of peace decided to forego pressing its claims.** [emphasis added]

Although no Muslim or Arab nation, when having control of Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, created (or even suggested creating) a Palestinian State with a capital of Jerusalem – the current propaganda in the "politically correct" world is: the Palestinian Arabs have a right to their own State with Jerusalem as capital.

Why did this "politically correct" position gain so much credence? Doesn't everyone know that Israel's claim to Jerusalem goes back 3000 years, and that Jews have prayed facing Jerusalem from time immemorial? Don't both Christianity and Islam recognize the sanctity of the Hebrew Bible – a Bible that highlights the centrality of Jerusalem in so many texts?

When the land of Israel was a desolate, poor backwater, no one cared much about it. But once Jews came and revitalized the land – suddenly people started to take notice. Jews planted farms, developed progressive agricultural techniques, built cities, roads, schools, universities. Suddenly, this desolate backwater became desirable due to the labor and ingenuity of Jews. Before the Six Day War, no one cared much about the desolate West Bank or the poverty-stricken Gaza Strip or the poorly maintained Old City of Jerusalem. But once Israel took control and started to turn these places into beautiful, modern areas – then these places became desirable. Once the Jews had made so many improvements, now claims were made on behalf of Palestinian Arabs that they should have all these things themselves.

Israel has a right to flourish and to enjoy the fruits of its labors and creativity and idealistic endeavors. Israel does not ask to be judged more kindly than any other nation – only that it should not be judged less kindly than any other nation.

The current "politically correct" propaganda ignores hundreds of years of history of the holy land; ignores the rights of the people of Israel; ignores truth.

If we are to have peace between Israel and the Palestinians, it would be most helpful if people understood the historic context of the unrest, if both sides strove to establish a spirit of mutual respect, if both sides focused on how much benefit all would have if a just and fair peace were to be in place. Misguided individuals and countries who forget history, who ignore or deny Israel's rights, who look the other way when Israel is maligned and attacked – such people are part of the problem, not the solution.

As we read in Psalm 122: Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: may they prosper who love thee.

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

https://www.jewishideas.org/blog/jerusalem-undivided-thoughts-yom-yerushalayim

The Humility of an Open Mind: Thoughts for Shavuoth

By Rabbi Marc Angel *

When I was a senior at Franklin High School in Seattle, my teacher for Language Arts was Mr. James Britain. Even after these many years, I remember him and his class quite vividly.

I invariably got A grades on all my papers. But once, Mr. Britain marked my paper with a D. I think I learned more from that D than from all my A papers. What was the paper about and what did I learn?

Mr. Britain often presented the class with challenging assignments. Once, he asked us to walk around the outside of the school building and to observe all its architectural details. Another assignment was to study a painting and analyze it as carefully as possible — its colors, perspective, lighting etc. His goal was to teach us to "see," to focus in on detail, to look for the usual and the unusual.

One day, he played a recording of atonal electronic music for the class and asked us to write our impressions. I was outraged by this "music" and wrote a scathing essay condemning it. This was not music at all! It was a cacophony of senseless screeching, painful to the ear. Mr. Britain gave me a D on this paper. He wrote me a one line comment: "In order to learn, you must open your mind to new ideas."

When I spoke to him afterward about my "unfair" grade, he calmly explained that I had entirely missed the point of the assignment. He indicated that I should have listened carefully, with an open mind; I should have tried to understand the intentions of the composer; I should have put aside my preconceived notions so as to experience the music on its terms — not on mine. Only after I had processed the experience with an open mind was I entitled to offer my judgments about it. Think carefully, don't rant.

That was one of the most valuable lessons I've ever learned — and one of the most difficult to apply.

We all have fixed ideas on a great many topics. It is often painful to hear opinions that conflict with our sure understanding of life. New ideas, unusual approaches, unconventional artistic expressions — these are difficult to absorb. It is tempting — and usual — to shut off ideas that challenge our own views and tastes. It is very common for those who have different views to talk at each other, or to talk against each other; it is far less common for people actually to listen to each other, to try sincerely to understand the ideas and approaches of others. To open our minds to new ideas demands tremendous self-control and humility.

And this brings us to some thoughts about Shavuoth.

The festival of Shavuoth commemorates the Revelation at Mt. Sinai. The Torah and its commandments were revealed by the Almighty to the people of Israel on this special mountain.

In the early 17th century, Rehuel Jessurun wrote *Dialogo dos Montes,* a drama based on the rabbinic tradition that various mountains competed for the privilege of having the Torah revealed on them. (The drama was presented on Shavuoth, 1624, in the Bet Yaacob synagogue of Amsterdam.) Each mountain offered its claim to be the most worthy of this honor. Mount Sinai, though, was humble. It was a low and unimpressive mountain, hardly worthy of being chosen by God for the Divine revelation of the Torah. Because of its very humility, God chose Mount Sinai upon which to give the Israelites the Torah.

Much of human life resembles the Dialogue of the Mountains. People seek to assert their pre-eminence, to highlight their virtues, to claim the highest honors. Yet, it is the Mount Sinais of the world who reflect the quiet humility worthy of Divine blessing.

As we celebrate the Shavuoth festival commemorating the Revelation at Mount Sinai, it would be appropriate for us to

recall the symbolic virtues of Mount Sinai — humility, awareness of limitations, openness to new and unique revelation.

“In order to learn, you must open your mind to new ideas.”

This does not mean that one must accept all new ideas, or that one should adopt every new opinion. Rather, it entails the ability to listen carefully, to analyze and process ideas, to think carefully and not to rant. Even ideas that we ultimately reject may contain kernels of truth that will sharpen and enhance our own understanding.

To open our minds to new and differing ideas is not only the way for all of us to grow intellectually and spiritually; it is the foundation of a responsible civil society.

Moadim leSimha.

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

https://www.jewishideas.org/humility-open-mind-thoughts-shavuoth

---

Bamidbar - Shavuot: The Desert Treasure

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

Parshas Bamidbar begins by telling us that Hashem spoke to Moshe in the desert. One might think that it was just coincidental that the communication of Torah was in the desert. But the Medrash)Bamidbar Rabboh 1(tells us that the fact that it was in a desert is specifically mentioned to provide a metaphor for Torah. Just as a desert is available for anyone, so Torah is available for anyone who wants it. Also, just as a desert is available, so a person who wants to succeed in Torah must make himself available.

The comparison of Torah to a desert is one of great insight. Just as a desert is not seen as something of value, so the wisdom of Torah is undervalued by many. The story of Unkulos the convert to Judaism is instructive.)Tanchuma Mishpatim 5(When asked why he converted he replied, “I followed good business advice. I invested in a commodity that is currently undervalued, but I know will one day be recognized.”

Indeed, the nature of Torah and its availability, can make it undervalued. Like the wisdom of a parent or teacher, the student doesn’t always appreciate what greatness is being made available to him or her. As Dovid said,)Tanchuma Eikev(, “Perhaps because Torah is so readily available, I did not properly respect it.” Hashem’s goal was to make Torah very available to people. Then it is really up to mankind to decide to partake in this treasure.

How does a person partake of the treasure called Torah? The Medrash maintains that the successful student of Torah is one who — like a desert — makes himself available.

How does a person make himself available to the relationship with Torah?

A beautiful analogy can be found in the Novi where the prophet Elisha instructs a needy woman to gather empty vessels. After telling the woman to gather many empty vessels, he instructs her to pour from a jug of oil into the vessels, and the oil will miraculously keep filling the vessels until they will all be full. Then she will be able to sell the oil to provide for her needs.

When we reflect on the dynamics of this miracle, we realize that the only thing that held the oil back from providing more and more blessing was how many empty vessels there would be. Similarly, Torah can provide guidance in abundance to an unlimited number of people. The only restraint is how many people feel empty, and are emotionally available, craving its guidance.

In more modern terms, we might say that the Torah is like a lighthouse. It stands in desolate areas totally available, prepared to provide its guidance to anyone who wants, provided that the person is interested in heeding its message.

Among my various interests and responsibilities is that I am the Menahel)administrator(of a Beis Din for Geirus)conversion(. When a man or woman who was not born Jewish chooses Judaism, they are provided with a process by which they can become Jewish. Typically, after years of dedicated study and preparation for observance, the process reaches the awesome moments of the final interview before immersion. When a conversion takes place at this time of year, near Shavuos, the responses of the candidate take on a very profound emotional meaning. Each question — about acceptance of Torah, Rabbinic law, customs, and beliefs — is responded to. Much as our ancestors at Sinai accepted the Torah so does anyone who wishes to enter the covenant.

I recall candidates whom we have met over the years, responding to the questions with a sense of mission and commitment that echoes the great legacy of Jews like Rus and Unkolus, who discovered Judaism and decided to join. Indeed, Torah is very available. It is available to those who make themselves available to it.

Sometimes, Torah is so available that we can forget its holiness. It is a system that encourages questions, nurtures innovation, and celebrates personal creativity. Yet, it is still Torah, the sacred word of Hashem. As available and encouraging as Torah is, we need to respect it and approach it with reverence. Like the sailor appreciating the communication of a lighthouse, ultimately, it is the sailor not the lighthouse that must adjust course to avoid a collision. When we approach Torah as empty vessels, available to the relationship it offers and to its teachings, we can best benefit from this gift, given in the desert, to guide us for eternity.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos and Yom Tov!

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 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.**

Megillas Rus & Supporting Each Other

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer* © 2020

The Book of Rus opens with the story of a famine during which Elimelech, one of the leaders of the generation, leaves Israel together with his family. They travel to Moav, where the sons marry Moabite princesses, Rus and Orpah, and we quickly learn of the death of the father and both of his sons.

The Medrash Rus Rabbah 1:4 asks why Elimelech was punished for leaving Israel, if indeed this would appear to be the appropriate response to a time of famine? The Medrash quotes a Tannaic statement that one should indeed leave town when there is a famine. The Gemara (Bava Kamma 60b) learns this lesson from Avrohom who travelled to Egypt when famine struck Israel in his day. The Medrash answers that Elimelech's error was that he caused the nation to lose heart.

The Medrash explains this with a parable. There was a wealthy man living in a country. Everyone relied on this man saying that if a famine would come, he could support the entire country with food for ten years. When a famine struck, his maidservant went out to the market with her basket to find grain like everyone else. Upon seeing this people cried out "This is the man we were relying on to provide us with food for a decade, and behold his maidservant is here with her basket in hand?!" So too Elimelech was one of the leaders and supporters of his generation. When the famine struck, Elimelech realized that everyone would indeed be relying on him for food and would be coming knocking on his door. Overwhelmed by the thought, Elimelech fled to Moav. In so doing, he devastated his generation as they realized their source of support was gone.

This Medrash is very difficult to understand. It would appear that Elimelech had done something far worse than devastating the community. When he realized that he would be called upon for charity, he had fled the country. Why does this not suffice to explain why he was punished? Even if Elimelech felt that the demand was greater than he could

supply, that wouldn't seem to justify fleeing the country. Let him stay to shoulder the burden and assist as much as he can. Let him give as much charity as he can, and at the very least minimize the effects of the famine? Why is it that the Medrash merely describes him as one who had caused them to lose heart, and not as one who callously abandoned his people in their time of need?

When a person is going through a difficult time, their specific need at any point in time is only a small part of their struggle. Beyond their daily need for food was their concern for what the future would bring and how they would provide for their families until the famine passed. This concern was somewhat alleviated by Elimelech's presence. When he left, their hope left with him. This was even more painful than the lack of financial assistance. Irrelevant of what financial assistance one can give, one must seek to find ways to alleviate the underlying strain. As the Gemara says (Bava Basra 9b) "One who gives charity to a poor man receives six blessings, and one who appeases him with words receives eleven blessings." Emotional support can be worth far more than financial assistance.

As we continue to struggle with the impact of the current situation, emotional well being can be as serious a concern as financial straits. We must each seek to find ways to support each other in whatever way we can. Kindness is in caring for the whole person. I recently saw a note where a person was thanking his brother for advice during this time. "I haven't received much support, which has made the threat to my business all the more scary…. most importantly, I just really need to feel like I have someone else on my team. Thanks for having my back." This Shavuos, as we celebrate the birth of our national identity, may we merit to recognize our national unity, reach beyond ourselves and truly be there for each other.

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer kindly let me run a Dvar Torah from his archives, because his new Devrei Torah did not reach me in time for my deadline.

Behar - Bechukotai

By Rabbi Herzl Hefter *

[I did not receive a Dvar Torah from Rabbi Hefter this week. Look to this spot for future Devrei Torah from Rabbi Hefter.]]

* Founder and dean of the Har'el Beit Midrash in Jerusalem. Rabbi Hefter is a graduate of Yeshiva University and was ordained at Yeshivat Har Etzion. For more of his writings, see www.har-el.org. To support the Beit Midrash, as we do, send donations to America Friends of Beit Midrash Har'el, 66 Cherry Lane, Teaneck, NJ 07666.

Bemidbar: Individual and Society

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

]Note: Rabbi Ovadia has sent an insightful Dvar Torah on Megillat Ruth for Shavuot. Because of its length and number of footnotes, I am sending it as a separate attachment by E-mail.[

The book of במדבר 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 deal 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 במדבר about? Numbers? Is it really the Book of Census, as it was known in Rabbinic literature, a travelogue, or a collection of unrelated of data, laws, and history?

I believe that במדבר's story conveys an extremely important message to humanity:

> *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.*

במדבר 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 Nazirite as two extremes. The deviate woman lets herself be controlled by desire while the Nazirite decides to detach himself from society and abstain from wine. Both are not healthy, as one has to strike a balance between the pursuit of spirituality and enjoying life, so they are technically outside the camp. Between the two sections, the one which deals with lepers and those who suffer from spiritual contamination, and the one dealing with the Nazirite and the deviate woman, there is a paragraph which seems out of place. It speaks about paying back financial obligations, and also states that an unpaid obligation to another person is considered an offense towards God. Now, not only does this paragraph belong here, but 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 considered 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!

And it was a total disaster!

Within three days, the people complained for no reason, and then cried for food. Moshe was willing to quit his job, and when 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 cause a rebellion… the list goes on and on.

This overview allows us to see how a perfect plan can fail if there are no committed individuals to carry it out, even at the price of their pride and sense of entitlement.

Since the events of במדבר are intricately interwoven, I will expand more on the details of that message in the next segment, but meanwhile I would like to conclude with words from David Brooks, in his recent book, *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 book of במדבר, in a quiet, unassuming manner, teaches us the same idea, as valid today as it was millennia ago in the desert.

* Torah VeAhava. 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** . The Sefaria articles usually include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

The March of Flags

By Rabbi Josh Pernick *

There's something remarkable about flags. A simple wooden pole, with a designed fabric attached, can immediately inspire within us intense feelings of camaraderie or revulsion. Friend or foe is often decided based on what is depicted in that design. While flags carry such strong associative connections for us today, their connective capabilities were clear even in the times of our ancestors in the wilderness. We read in this week's parsha*, "The Children of Israel shall encamp, each by his division, with the flagstaffs of their father's house"*)Bamidbar 2:2(.

Tellingly, this "tribal" mentality is brought back into the national consciousness at the beginning of the parsha in which we prepare to re-engage with the world after an extended encampment at Har Sinai. *"Na'aseh Venishma Amru K'echad,"* we are taught; while receiving revelation at the mountain, the nation was as one body with one voice, happily declaring their intent to follow God's word.

Bamidbar marks a significant transition in our identity. It was relatively easy to think and act as one while living in a vacuum, removed from all outside influences. This cohesion is much harder to maintain, however, upon our re-entry into the flawed world in which we live.

Our parsha teaches that uniformity is not sustainable once we leave the mountain. If unity of thought and mind is the barometer by which we measure our success as a nation, our national project would have been declared a failure from the moment that we began to pack our bags in preparation for leaving Har Sinai.

We are commanded to divide up into our camps, into the "flags" by which we mark our closeness to some and relative distance from others: *"The children of Israel encamped, each person according to his camp and each person according to the flag of his division"*)Bamidbar 1:52(.

The flags marking the identity of each subset of the Israelite people, however, are not like other flags. Rashi teaches that

> *"Every division shall have its own flag pole, with a colored flag hanging upon it. The color of each flag was unique, different from that of any other tribe. Each flag corresponded to the color of that tribe's stone in the High Priest's breastplate. And by this means everybody will be able to recognize his flag*")Rashi *Bamidbar* 2:2(.

Each flag was distinct, yet each was critically important. The Kohen Gadol could not enter the Holy of Holies missing one stone from his choshen, and the Mishkan could not be moved if one tribe was missing from the encampment. What enabled the Israelites to survive in the desert and eventually reach the land of Israel was their acceptance of difference within the camp, a demand for unity rather than uniformity.

The flags of our parsha represent divisions within the camp, but these flags ultimately weave together a tapestry of colors, of perspectives, which build upon and add vibrancy and beauty to the collective. Easier said than done, of course, but this is the Torah's demand. May we all work to see its fulfillment.

* Rabbi in Residence and Director of Jewish Life and Community Relations at the Jewish Federation of Greater New Haven. Distinguished alumnus of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. Hebrew omitted because of problems going across various software programs.

https://library.yctorah.org/2023/05/the-march-of-flags/

Shavuon Bemidbar - Shavuot

By Rabbi Moshe Rube *

I remember asking my Grandpa Eli what the main mitzvah or ritual of Shavuot was. Sukkot has the Sukkah and Lulav. Pesach has the Seder and Matzah. But what does Shavuot have?

My grandfather answered, “What do you mean? God gave us an explicit commandment that on Shavuot, Thou Shalt Eat Cheesecake!”
That’s probably the best answer I’ve heard so far.

Because to be straight, the holiday of Shavuot is a lesser known holiday, a forgotten holiday amongst Jews and gentiles alike. Everyone will have heard of Pesach and most will remember seeing a Sukkah or a Lulav. But of all the Jewish holidays, Shavuot does not have a flashy official ritual like lighting Hannukah lights, wearing costumes, fasting or unleavened bread eating. We have our customs of cheesecake and Torah study. But that’s hardly enough to break into the popular psyche like Channukah or Passover.

It wasn’t always like that. Shavuot had special Temple offerings, and it's proper date was the basis for many political fights between the Sadducees, early Christians, and Pharisees. But we don’t live in the Second Temple Era. We live in 2023. And in 2023 we face the reality that Shavuot has taken on a different quality in our Jewish year. A quieter, less flashy, dare I say more intimate quality than the other holidays.

On the holiday celebrating the receiving of the covenant at Sinai, the Jewish people’s marriage to God, we are not parading through the streets with lights, going on talk shows talking about Matzah or waving plants around. We gather and learn, eat some cheesecake and pray our holiday prayers.

To me, the modern experience of Shavuot is like what a married couple experiences after the wedding, after the seven days of partying, after all the guests have gone home. They look at each other and say, “Wait. The party is over? Now it’s just you and me without the loud music, people dancing all around us, and catered three course meals? Now it seems the fanfare is gone and what we are left with is just… us.” Shavuot is that holiday. After a year of holidays, and parties, the fanfare has died down and it’s God and… us. Shavuot helps us cultivate that more intimate quality.

It’s the quality that makes life worth living but does not cultivate as much likes on social media. Because it’s beyond that game.

Chag Shavuot Sameach all, and everyone is invited to join us for all Shavuot events and services here at AHC.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Rube

* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera)Auckland(, New Zealand.

Rav Kook Torah
Jerusalem Day: Returning to the Kotel

In a sense, it all started in the fall of 1966. During the annual memorial for Rav Kook on the third of Elul, Rav Tzvi Yehudah surprised the people gathered at Beit HaRav with an unusual statement. “My father labored for the sake of the Jewish people when he was alive in this world,” he said. “And he continues to work for the Jewish people, with even greater strength and merit, while in the next world.”

These labors, Rav Tzvi Yehudah noted, are connected to the Jewish people's possession of Eretz Yisrael. Especially this year:

> *"As his stay in the next world lengthens, so his power and influence grow. Each year, he conquers an additional realm in the "yeshiva on high," and these conquests continue and spread. This year is the 31st year since his passing]in 1935[. The number of conquests is thus 31 — corresponding to the number of Canaanite kings that Joshua subdued]when conquering the Land of Israel[."*

The following spring, the security situation in Israel deteriorated rapidly. Egypt expelled UN peacekeeping forces in the Sinai Peninsula and began massing troops on Israel's border. On May 22, Egypt blocked the Straits of Tiran, passageway for almost all of Israel's oil. The following week, Egypt and Jordan signed a defense pact, posing a further threat to the young country.)Syria had signed a mutual defense agreement the previous November.(And the Iraqi army deployed troops and armored units in Jordan.

In Israel, spirits were low and tensions high.

During Israel Independence Day celebrations at the Mercaz HaRav yeshiva, Rav Tzvi Yehudah usually spoke about the spiritual significance of the day. But this year, the nineteenth year of the State of Israel, his address took on a different tone. It was less lecture, more prophetic vision.

Rav Tzvi Yehudah recalled his visceral pain nineteen years previous, when the 1947 UN Partition Plan was approved, assigning parts of the Jewish homeland to an Arab state. People streamed into the streets to celebrate and rejoice.

> *"But I could not go out and join in the celebration. I sat alone and silent; a heavy burden lay upon me. During those first hours, I could not resign myself to what had been done. I could not accept the fact that, indeed, "They have divided My land"*)Joel 4:2(."

The rabbi then stunned the audience as he thundered,

> *"And where is our Hebron? Are we forgetting this? Where is our Shechem, our Jericho? Have we forgotten them?"*

Rabbi Hanan Porat, well-known author, educator, and member of Knesset, was one of the Mercaz HaRav students who fought in the battle for Jerusalem. *"I was in the yeshiva during that Independence Day celebration,"* Rabbi Porat recalled. *"Rav Tzvi Yehudah's roars still reverberate in my ears. If I think back to lectures or speeches which influenced me, without a doubt it was this address that had the greatest impact on me."*

He added, *"We felt that our rabbi was speaking with prophetic spirit, that 'the Shechinah was speaking though his mouth.' The very walls shook. People looked at one other in wonder."*

The Liberation of Jerusalem

Rabbi Yisrael Ariel, another student of Mercaz HaRav who participated in the liberation of Jerusalem, told his story, which began soon after that momentous address in the yeshiva.

When they announced preparations]of the reserve army[before the Six-Day Way, I was called up as a paratrooper. For three weeks, we waited in orchards near the Lod airport, ready to parachute into the Sinai Desert.

During these weeks of waiting, many thoughts passed in my head. What was the meaning of this war? Ten years earlier, the Sinai War had been fought, at the price of many lives. And in the end, nothing had been gained from it. What was the point of another war and the further spilling of precious blood?

I wrote my questions in a letter to Rav Tzvi Yehudah and the Rav HaNazir. But before I had a chance to mail my letter, the war broke out. Our division, under the command of Motta Gur, was re-assigned to Jerusalem. With God's mercy, we had the privilege of liberating the Old City and the Temple Mount.

As we made our way to the Temple Mount, it was rumored that two elders from Jerusalem had arrived. I was overcome with powerful emotions and an unbelievable feeling of elation. I was sure that these two elders must be the Messiah and Elijah the prophet....

When I descended from the Temple Mount to the Kotel, I discovered that the two elders were none other than our master, Rav Tzvi Yehudah, and the Rav HaNazir. We hugged, we kissed, and our tears flowed without stop....

I realized then that I had received the answer to my questions — directly from Rav Tzvi Yehudah and the Rav HaNazir. We had merited seeing, with our own eyes, God's return to Zion!
Rabbi Hanan Porat related his memories from the war:

> *On the fourth day of the war, we fought at Ammunition Hill. From there we went up to Mount Scopus and the Agusta Victoria hospital. We started making our way toward the Temple Mount. Suddenly — I couldn't believe my eyes — an army jeep passed by us, carrying Rav Tzvi Yehudah and the Rav HaNazir! They were wearing steel helmets, and the Rav HaNazir's long hair streamed out in the wind....*

It was an otherworldly sight. The fact that these two holy scholars were among the first ones to reach the Kotel added another level of holiness to our return to the Kotel.

Rabbi Porat recalled how Rav Tzvi Yehudah cleaved to the stones of the Kotel. He prayed with intense fervor; and afterward he turned to the soldiers and kissed them. The Rav HaNazir, on the other hand, cleaved to the Kotel and never let go. He was soaring in elevated realms. This was typical of these two great figures; each one expressed himself in his own individual spiritual path.

The Soldier's Reward

The next day, several of Rav Tzvi Yehudah's students went to visit their master. They found Rav Tzvi Yehudah visiting the Rav HaNazir in his Jerusalem apartment. The two scholars were discussing the momentous events of the previous day.

> *"Around eleven o'clock in the morning,"* Rav Tzvi Yehudah told the students*, "an army officer knocked on my door. He told me that Rabbi Goren, the IDF Chief Rabbi, had invited me to come immediately to the Kotel. A jeep waited for me in the street."*

The rabbi entered the vehicle, where he was joined by the Rav HaNazir)who was the father-in-law of Rabbi Goren(. On the way to the Kotel, the officer told them the following story:

When the paratroopers arrived at the Kotel, one of the soldiers — a student at Mercaz HaRav — climbed up to the highest row of stones and waved the flag of Israel. Down below, the paratroopers shouted and cheered. The commander announced that the soldier deserved a prize for his action, and asked him what he wanted.

In the silence that followed, the soldier thought for a moment and replied, *"The greatest prize for me would be to bring Rav Tzvi Yehudah Kook, the head of the Mercaz HaRav yeshiva, so that he will join us in our great joy."*

The Rav HaNazir then startled those present with his account of the visit. *"As we approached the Kotel, I saw Rav Kook, of blessed memory, standing there, wearing his Sabbath clothes."* Surprised by the looks of confusion on the students' faces, he said, *"But of course the Rav had to be there on that special day!"*

)Stories from the Land of Israel. Mashmia Yeshu'ah, pp. 327-334.(

https://www.ravkooktorah.org/JERUSALEM-DAY-76.htm

The Two Journeys)Bemidbar 5778(

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

The books of Shemot and Bamidbar have some striking similarities. They are both about journeys. They both portray the Israelites as quarrelsome and ungrateful. Both contain stories about the people complaining about food and water. In both the Israelites commit a major sin: in Shemot, the golden calf; in Bamidbar, the episode of the spies. In both, God threatens to destroy them and begin again with Moses. Both times, Moses' passionate appeal persuades God to forgive the people. It is easy when reading Bamidbar to feel a sense of déjà vu. We have been here before.

But there is a difference. Shemot is about a journey from. Bamidbar is about a journey to. Shemot is the story of an escape from slavery. Exodus, the English name of the book, means just that: departure, withdrawal, leaving. By contrast, in Bamidbar the people have already left Egypt far behind. They have spent a prolonged period in the Sinai desert. They have received the Torah and built the Sanctuary. Now they are ready to move on. This time they are looking forward, not back. They are thinking not of the danger they are fleeing from but of the destination they are travelling toward, the Promised Land.

If we had never read the Torah before, we might have assumed that the second half of the journey would be more relaxed, the people more optimistic, the mood more hopeful. After all, the great dangers had passed. After prolonged refusal, finally Pharaoh had let the people go. Miraculously they had been saved at the Red Sea. They had fought and defeated the Amalekites. What else did they have to worry about? They knew that when God was with them, no force could prevail against them.

In fact, though, the opposite is the case. The mood of Bamidbar is palpably darker than it is in Shemot. The rebellions are more serious. Moses' leadership is more hesitant. We see him giving way, at times, to anger and despair. The Torah, with great realism, is telling us something counterintuitive and of great significance.

The journey from is always easier than the journey to.

So it is in politics. It may take a revolution to depose a tyrant, but it is easier to do that that than to create a genuinely free society with the rule of law and respect for human rights. The Arab Spring, with its high hopes and its legacy of failing states, civil war and terror, is a compelling example. So is the history of post-Tito Yugoslavia or present-day Russia.

Likewise in the life of individuals. There have been endless stories in the modern world of Jews who were determined to break free of "the ghetto" and what they saw as Jewish provincialism and backwardness. They became great successes in one field after another, only to find themselves – like the marranos of fifteenth century Spain – deeply conflicted and doubly alienated, having lost a home in the old world and failed to find full acceptance in the new.

There is a biological reason why this is so. We are genetically predisposed to react strongly to danger. Our deepest instincts are aroused. We move into the fight-or-flight mode, with our senses alert, our attention focussed, and our adrenalin levels high. When it comes to fleeing-from, we often find ourselves accessing strengths we did not know we had.

But fleeing-to is something else entirely. It means making a home in place where, literally or metaphorically, we have not been before. We become "strangers in a strange land." We need to learn new skills, shoulder new responsibilities, acquire new strengths. That calls for imagination and willpower. It involves the most unique of all human abilities: envisaging a future that has not yet been and acting to bring it about. Fleeing-to is a journey into the unknown.

That was the difference between Abraham and his father Terach. The Torah tells us *that "Terach took his son Abram … and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there"*)Gen. 11:31(. Terach had sufficient willpower for the journey-from)Ur Kasdim(but not for the journey-to)Canaan(. It was left to Abraham to reach the destination.

To be a Jew is to know that, in some sense, life is a journey. So it was for Abraham. So it was for Moses. So it is for us, collectively and individually. Hence the importance of knowing at the outset where we are travelling to, and never forgetting, never giving up. Leaving is easy, arriving is hard.

Which is why, when students ask me for advice about their careers, I tell them that the most important thing is to dream. Dream about what you would like to do, to be, to achieve. Dream about the chapter you would like to write in the story of our people. Dream about what difference you would like to make to the world. "In dreams," said W. B. Yeats, "begin responsibilities." I'm not entirely sure what he meant by that, but this I know: in dreams begin destinations. They are where we start thinking about the future. They signal the direction of our journey.

I am amazed by how many people never really dream a future for themselves. They can spend months planning a holiday, but not even a day planning a life. They take it as it comes. They wait, like Charles Dickens' Mr Micawber, for "something to turn up." This is not the best recipe for a life. *"Wherever you find the word Vayechi, 'and it came to pass,'"* said the Sages, *"it is always the prelude to pain."*]Megillah 10b.[Letting things happen is passive, not active. It means that you are letting outside factors determine the course of your life. Of course, they will always affect it. However sure we are of what we want to achieve, we are always subject to unexpected occurrences, wrong turns, bad decisions, setbacks and failures. But if we know where we want to be, eventually we will get back on track.

Timothy Ferris, compiler of the book *Tribe of Mentors,* asked me an interesting question: "When you feel overwhelmed or unfocussed, what do you do?" I told him that just before I became Chief Rabbi, in 1991, I realised that the sheer pressure of unexpected happenings, especially when you are in public life, can blow anyone off course. When someone asked British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan what he most feared, he replied, "Events, dear boy, events." So it became clear to me that I had to set out my objectives in advance, in such a way as to ensure I would never forget or be distracted from them.

In 1991 we did not yet have smartphones or computerised diaries. I used a pocket notebook called a Filofax. So on the first page of my Filofax I wrote my life goals. This meant that I saw them every time I looked in my diary. I was reminded of them several times daily. I still have them, and they have not changed in all the intervening years. How far I was successful, I do not know. But this I know: that I never forgot where I was travelling to. I never lost sight of the destination.

Travelling-from is easy. I knew I had to overcome my ignorance, Jewish and secular. I knew I had bad habits I had to cure – I am still working on them. But the real challenge is to know where Hashem wants us to travel to. What task were we put in the world, in this time and place, with these gifts, to do? The answer to that constitutes the destination we key in to our satellite navigation system for the journey called life.

The Israelites, in their journey, made a series of mistakes. They focussed too much on the present)the food, the water(and too little on the future. When they faced difficulties, they had too much fear and too little faith. They kept looking back to how things were instead of looking forward to how they might be. The result was that almost an entire generation suffered the fate of Abraham's father. They knew how to leave but not how to arrive. They experienced exodus but not entry.

So, in answer to Tim Ferris's question, "What do you do when you feel overwhelmed or unfocussed?" I replied with this life-changing idea: Remember your destination. This will help you make the single most important distinction on life, which is to distinguish between an opportunity to be seized and a temptation to be resisted.

https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bamidbar/two-journeys/

Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar. Since this Dvar Torah had only one short footnote, I put in in the text.

11 Shavuot Myths and Misconceptions

By Yehuda Altein* © Chabad 2023

1. Myth: Shavuot Is Always on 6 Sivan

Every year, the holiday of Shavuot takes place on the 6th)and 7th(day of the Hebrew month of Sivan)corresponding to May-June(. It would seem that Shavuot has always been celebrated on this date.

Fact: Shavuot Is the 50th Day From the Omer

The Torah instructs us to count seven weeks)49 days(from the day of the omer offering, and to celebrate Shavuot on the 50th day.1 The omer offering was brought on the second day of Passover)more on this below(, and according to the calendar we follow today, 50 days later is 6 Sivan.

In Temple times, however, each month was established anew by the rabbinical court, based on the testimony of witnesses who had observed the new moon.)Read: The Jewish Month.(The length of each month varied accordingly, and Shavuot therefore occurred on either the 5th, 6th, or 7th day of Sivan.

Interestingly, alternative Shavuot dates are possible today as well — for someone who crossed the International Dateline between Passover and Shavuot. In such a case, your 50th day is different from the 50th day of those around you. If you crossed the line westward)e.g., from America to Australia(, your Shavuot will begin on 7 Sivan. Conversely, if you crossed the line eastward)e.g., from Australia to America(, you will begin celebrating on 5 Sivan.

If you are planning to cross the dateline between Passover and Shavuot, make sure to discuss the relevant halachic details with a competent rabbi.

2. Myth: Shavuot Is Always on Sunday

Although this mistake is pretty much a thing of the past, it is probably the oldest Shavuot myth in history, dating back to Talmudic times.

The Torah instructs us to "count seven complete weeks from the day after the day of rest, from the day you bring the omer offering."2 This seems to imply that the omer offering was brought on Sunday)the day after the "day of rest" — Shabbat(. If this is when the seven-week count begins, it should always conclude on Shabbat, and Shavuot — the fiftieth day — should always be celebrated on Sunday.

Fact: The "Day of Rest" Is the First Day of Passover

Along with the Written Torah, G d gave us the Oral Torah to ensure the correct interpretation of the law. The Talmud cites an oral tradition,3 sourced from Moses, who received it from G d Himself, that the "day of rest" in this verse refers not to Shabbat, but to the first day of Passover.)Indeed, it is common for Scripture to refer to holidays as "days of rest" or "appointed times."(

Hence, the omer offering was always brought on the second day of Passover, no matter which day of the week it was, and Shavuot is 50 days later, be it a Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, or Thursday.

3. Myth: It Is Enough to Celebrate Shavuot for One Day

Many people erroneously believe celebrating Shavuot for one day is sufficient.

Fact: Shavuot Is Celebrated for Two Days in the Diaspora

According to Torah law, Shavuot is a single day. In Temple times, since each month was established anew by the rabbinical court in Jerusalem, and it took time to send out word, the communities in the Diaspora were often unsure as to when the holidays were to be observed. As such, a second day was added to most holidays to cover all bases.

In the 4th century CE, a fixed calendar was established, and people knew in advance when the festivals would occur. Nevertheless, the Talmud explains that we are bound by rabbinic law to observe a second day. On a simple level, the reason for this ancient requirement is to uphold the customs of our forefathers. Deeper, mystical reasons are also provided.

4. Myth: It's a Mitzvah to Eat Dairy

On Rosh Hashanah it's a mitzvah to hear the shofar; on Sukkot — to eat in a sukkah; on Passover — to eat matzah; and on Shavuot — to eat dairy. Shavuot without cheese blintzes is not Shavuot, right?

Fact: It's a Custom)Albeit a Delicious One(

The Torah does not instruct us to eat dairy; in fact, it is not even mentioned in the Talmud. Eating dairy foods on Shavuot is a custom that evolved in post-Talmudic times, with numerous explanations)see next myth for more on this(. As with all customs, we express our devotion to G d by doing even more than He asks of us.

5. Myth: It's Primarily Because That's What We Had After Sinai

Perhaps the most well-known reason for eating dairy is that when G d gave the Torah, the Jews became obligated to observe the kosher laws. All the meat in their possession was rendered unfit, and since the Torah was given on Shabbat, no cattle could be slaughtered nor could utensils be koshered. They had no choice but to eat dairy, and we commemorate this by doing the same.

Fact: This is Only One of Many)Earlier(Reasons

This explanation can be traced to a book printed about 100 years ago, presenting Torah thoughts of the chassidic greats of the 18th century. However, many other fascinating reasons have been given for this custom, some of them from centuries earlier.

6. Myth: No Need to Eat Meat on Shavuot

The typical Shabbat and festival fare includes a sumptuous meat-based dish. Eating meat is one of the ways we fulfill the mitzvah to rejoice on the holidays. Some assume that Shavuot is an exception. Since we must wait a specified amount of time between eating meat and dairy, the custom to eat dairy would seem to override the obligation to eat meat.

Fact: There Is Still an Obligation to Eat Meat)Separate From Dairy, of Course(

Shavuot is no exception; the obligation to eat meat remains. There are numerous customs regarding when to serve dairy so it should not conflict with the meat. One common practice is to serve a dairy meal immediately after morning services. Then, after reciting Grace After Meals and waiting an hour, a meat meal is served.

7. Myth: Tractate Shevuot Is About Shavuot

There is a Talmudic tractate devoted to each of the major holidays — Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Purim, and Passover)although Chanukah is a noticeable exception(. There is also a tractate named Shevuot. Obvious conclusion: Tractate Shevuot is about Shavuot.

Fact: Tractate Shevuot Discusses Oaths

Interestingly enough, Tractate Shevuot is not about Shavuot but about oaths. While the holiday's name means weeks, as it is celebrated seven weeks after the omer offering, the similar word shevuot means oaths, and that is the subject of the tractate.

Although Shavuot is blessed with a myriad of beautiful customs, it has very few unique laws. Many laws relating to festivals in general are discussed in another tractate — Beitzah.

There is, however, a connection between Tractate Shevuot)oaths(and Shavuot)the holiday(: On this day G d swore eternal devotion to us, and we in turn pledged everlasting loyalty to Him.

8. Myth: We Received the Two Tablets on Shavuot

Shavuot is the day G d gave us the Torah. Many understand this to mean that we received the two Tablets)Luchot(on this day.

Fact: We Got Them)and Lost Them(on 17 Tammuz

On Shavuot G d communicated the Ten Commandments to us, the first two directly and the last eight via Moses. Moses then ascended Mount Sinai and remained there for 40 days, where G d gave him the Tablets upon which these Ten Commandments — the foundation of all 613 mitzvot G d taught him during that time — were inscribed.

The 40 days concluded on the 17th of the Hebrew month of Tammuz. When Moses descended with the Tablets, he was met with the sight of the Jews worshipping the golden calf. Horrified, he threw the Tablets to the ground, shattering them instantly.

Moses then ascended Mount Sinai once more to intercede on behalf of the sinners. G d heeded his requests and forgave the Jews, and 80 days later, on Yom Kippur, Moses descended once more with a second set of Tablets.

9. Myth: The Giving of the Torah Was a One-Time Phenomenon

The giving of the Torah was a wondrous experience, unmatched by anything since. The common perception is that on Shavuot we commemorate a climactic event that occurred over 3,330 years ago.

Fact: Every Year — Every Day — We Receive the Torah

From a deeper perspective, the Jewish festivals do not merely commemorate long-gone events. On a spiritual realm, the incidents of yore recur each year, imbuing us with ever-increasing energy and vigor.

Moreover, we are taught that G d gives us the Torah anew each and every day. This idea is expressed in the blessing we recite — in present tense — each morning before studying Torah: Blessed are You L rd who gives us the Torah.

So this year on Shavuot, picture the momentous giving of the Torah as a current reality. It's happening today! And next year, when circumstances allow, be sure to attend synagogue and hear the Ten Commandments read from the Torah.

10. Myth: The Ten Commandments Are the Most Important Mitzvot

It is common knowledge that the Ten Commandments are the most important of the 613 mitzvot, while the remaining ones are less significant and perhaps not binding. Or are they?

Fact: Every Mitzvah Is Equally Important

While the Ten Commandments certainly occupy a unique role, we should not underestimate the significance of any mitzvah, no matter how small it seems.

A mitzvah is the will of G d, and its value far exceeds anything we can grasp. Each and every mitzvah is an opportunity to forge a personal connection with G d Himself. So go ahead and do any that you can!

11. Myth: We Slept in Because We Were Apathetic

The Midrash relates that the night before the giving of the Torah, the Jewish people turned in early for a good night's sleep. The next morning, they slept in and Moses had to wake them. To rectify this wrongdoing, it is customary to stay up all night on Shavuot and study Torah texts.

This story is commonly viewed as a shameful part of our history, reflecting our forefathers' lack of enthusiasm to receive the Torah.

Fact: We Wanted to Prepare by Drawing Spiritual Energy

Although the Jews did sleep in on that fateful morning, there is a deeper dimension to the story, giving us a more positive way to look at what happened.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that the Jews went to sleep not because of apathy, but because they felt that was the best way to prepare. When you sleep, your soul ascends to the supernal realms and receives renewed spiritual energy. What better way to prepare for the giving of the Torah, they felt, than to spend the preceding hours basking in spirituality?

Despite their good intentions, that was a mistake. By going to sleep, the Jews demonstrated they had misunderstood the point of the Torah. The Torah wasn't given so that we can become spiritual beings, but for us to grapple with and refine our physical nature. We therefore stay up to fix their mistake. We spend the night learning, working with our body, inspiring it, and purifying it, so that every part of us, both the physical and the spiritual, is ready to receive the Torah anew.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Leviticus 23:15–16.

2. Leviticus 23:15.

3. Menachot 65b.

* Writer, translator and editor)Brooklyn, NY(specializing in Jewish subjects and handwritten family material.

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4747286/jewish/11-Shavuot-Myths-and-Misconceptions.htm#utm_medium=email&utm_source=1_chabad.org_magazine_en&utm_campaign=en&utm_content=content

---

Bemidbar: The Value of Every One

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

The Value of Every One

> *You and Aaron should count all those in Israel 20 years old and over who are fit to serve in the army, by their troops.*)Num. 1:3(

Counting something is a way of showing that we value it. By counting how much of something we possess, we express how much value each unit of the whole adds to the total value of the whole and how indispensable each unit is to the whole.

In a census, each individual counts for one – neither more nor less. Thus, by commanding Moses and Aaron to take a census, G-d informed the people that each one of them is equally dear to Him, as an individual. We each possess invaluable worth by virtue of our unique soul-essence. By virtue of this essence, which the lowliest among us possesses no less than did Moses, we are all, equally, G-d's people.

When we recognize this, we, too, will cherish ourselves as individuals and cherish every other individual – as an individual of infinite worth – as well.

– From Kehot's Daily Wisdom #3 *

Gut Shabbos,
Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

* *Your Dailly Wisdom,* a three volume set in a special lucite case, is now available from Kehot Publication Society. Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky has adapted and translated these inspiring lessons from the Lubivatcher Rebbe, and Chabad House Publications of California has now made them available in a special set:

https://store.kehotonline.com/prodinfo.asp?number=ERE-DAIL.LSLUCITE

Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah via the Internet

Volume 29, Issue 30 **Shabbat Parashat Bemidbar** **5783 B"H**

Covenant and Conversation
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Law as Love

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]

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: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"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).

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

The Wilderness First

My first exposure to the study of the Bible was in the Yiddish language. We spoke only English at home, but almost all the teachers we had in the yeshiva I attended were Holocaust survivors who had escaped to the safety of these shores only a few years prior.

I must admit that we learned to translate into Yiddish by rote and had little conception about what the words meant in English. Thus, we translated the very first verse of the Torah as "In der anfang hatte der Oibeshter bashaffen", not having a clue that "In der anfang" meant "in the beginning," that the "Oibeshter" was "the One Above," and that "bashaffen" meant "created."

When we reached the Book of Numbers, Sefer Bamidbar, we finally had a teacher who, although he continued to provide the Yiddish translation, told us, in his broken English, what the words meant in the language we understood. And he would even provide visual aids, photographs and drawings, which would help us truly grasp the meaning of what we were studying.

I'll never forget his opening lesson. He told us that we were beginning a new book of the Torah, and a new weekly Torah portion, that both went by the name "Bamidbar". "In Yiddish", he said, "the word means 'in der veesternisht.' " We were all about nine years old and the word "veesternisht" triggered a giggle which soon morphed into hilarious laughter. There is something about the sound of the word that is comical to me to this very day.

He waited for our laughter to subside, and then said that "veesternisht" in English meant "a desert." And he showed us a picture of the Saharan desert. "The Jewish people were wandering through such a desert," he explained, "and the entire book that we are beginning to study took place there."

He then asked us if we remembered coming across the word "veesternisht" earlier in our studies, in a slightly abbreviated form.

It was my dear friend Michael, who passed away some years ago now, who remembered that first verse inGenesis, which contains the phrase "tohu va'vohu", which is generally translated as "unformed and void". In Yiddish, the phrase is rendered as "poost und veest, empty and desolate."

Bamidbar is the Torah portion which we read this week, and which is always read on the Shabbat before Shavuot. I researched about a dozen biblical translations, including some non-Jewish ones, and found that only a few translated "Bamidbar" as "in the desert ". The vast majority preferred the word "wilderness" to "desert," so that the key phrase in the first verse of our parsha reads "…The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai …"

Although the dictionaries I consulted did not distinguish sharply between "desert" and "wilderness," it is the latter that rings true as the English equivalent of the Yiddish "veesternisht." An empty, confusing, and frightening wasteland.

It was in that wasteland that our ancestors wandered for forty years, and it is that wasteland where we received the Torah.

Why? Why was the Torah given in this wild and chaotic terrain?

Like most questions of this sort, numerous answers have been given over the ages. I would like to share with you an answer which makes great sense to me.

If one reads further than just the first verse of this week's parsha (Numbers 1:1-4:20), he discovers that although the image we have of the wilderness is one of disorder and confusion, the narrative theme of these several opening chapters is one of order and systematic organization. The tribes are divided into 12 distinct units, each one is assigned its own unique flag or banner, and its place in the procession through the wilderness is precisely specified. The entire parsha can be summarized as "making order in the midst of chaos."

It strikes me that the ability to organize one's environment in a beneficial and orderly manner is a basic human skill that every society must first possess before it can proceed toward greater cultural achievement. Having said that, we can appreciate that before the Torah could be given to the Jewish people there was a necessary prerequisite: the establishment of a functional society in which people could get along with each other in a peaceful and productive manner. Only in such a context could the Torah be properly absorbed.

There is an ancient saying which states this idea unequivocally: "Derech eretz kadma leTorah." Literally translated as, "The way of the world precedes Torah." (Midrash Vayikra Rabba, 9:3). More generally, it means first one must have an ethical, just and humane society. Only then can one proceed to Torah.

We can classify this week's Torah portion as the parsha of derech eretz, because in it a nation successfully copes with the trials and tribulations of its environment. It tamed a wilderness by creating a civilization. It dealt with a wasteland by establishing a functioning and equitable society.

That is why it is precisely this parsha that precedes Shavuot. Shavuot is the anniversary of Matan Torah, of the Divine revelation, the giving of the Torah. The Almighty does not reveal Himself to a people who cannot get along with each other in an orderly and civilized manner. He does not express His will to individuals, communities, or nations who, in today's jargon, "can't get their act together."

He does not give His Torah in a wilderness, in a wasteland, in a "veesternisht." He expects us to first act toward each other with derech eretz, respectfully and courteously. He demands that we first tame that wilderness and cultivate that wasteland. Only then are we deserving of His great gift.

Derech eretz kadma leTorah. Humane behavior first, and only afterwards the Torah. That's how it was that very first time in the wilderness of Sinai, and that's how it must be this weekend, when the Shabbat of Bamidbar immediately precedes the festival of Matan Torah.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel
Encyclopedia of Jewish Values*

Jewish Attitude To Pleasure

In the last fifty years, (especially in the last fifty years), many Jews wanting to show their "religiosity" and closeness to God, try to do so by adopting the strictest opinion in following Jewish law, even when a more lenient option is also legitimate. These Jews take the most "difficult to perform" position on any Mitzvah, believing that the word "*Mehadrin*" in any debate signifies "deprivation," "taking the most extreme position," or "more stringent Jewish supervision" when this word actually means to "beautify" Judaism. Especially when it comes to depriving the body of pleasure, these people often feel they are "better Jews" the more they deprive themselves. Is this considered normative Judaism, or is this (large) faction of traditional Jews that has developed in our time mistaken when it comes to physical pleasure?? Does deprivation make a Jew a more devout person and better Jew or not? Believe it or not, this debate is as old as the Torah itself, and its source is in our Torah Portion.

Many Jews in all eras felt that they could come closer to God by depriving themselves of that which is permitted. Rather than letting each Jew choose which laws to take in the extreme and then adopt deprivation, the Torah designed one special Mitzvah-commandment for this purpose. Any Jew who wanted to go "beyond the letter of the Law" would take on one voluntary Mitzvah called Nazir, described in our Parsha. This Jew would vow to deprive himself of alcohol/wine, no haircuts/shaving (usually people then took haircuts about once a week) and avoid cemeteries or other places and situations that were ritually impure. This length of the Nazarite vow was usually for thirty days, and a sacrifice had to be brought in Temple times at the end of this period (**Numbers 6:1-21**). By analyzing how the Rabbis looked at the Nazir, we may be able to examine how Judaism looks upon deprivation of permissible pleasure in all circumstances.

The Clash of Both Approaches - The Talmud discusses this fundamental argument regarding restricting permitted pleasure, in the context of asking whether a Jew who wishes to fast, on a day that is not mandated for other Jews to fast, may do so (**Taanit 11a**.) Shmuel says such a person is a sinner for denying himself or herself the pleasure of eating permitted (kosher) food, even for a day. Why a sinner? Rabbi Elazar Hakapar explains that the Nazir brings a sin offering at the end of his Nazirite period because, he, too, is considered a sinner for willingly denying himself permitted pleasure. On the other hand, Rabbi Elazar (no relation) vehemently disagrees. He says that the Torah calls the Nazarite "holy" *because* he or she willingly restricted himself or herself from permitted pleasures. This opposing view believes that Jews who restrict themselves are holy, and are to be encouraged, while the first view forbids limiting one's permitted pleasures.

This argument about the Nazir continued into the Middle Ages. As mentioned above, at the end of the period of abstention, the Torah commands the Nazir to bring sacrifices. One of the sacrifices is a sin offering. Maimonides (**Maimonides, Hilchot Deot 3:1**) uses this sin offering as proof that the Torah looks at the Nazir as a sinner, because he should not have taken the oath to begin with. Maimonides continues to rail against the entire philosophy of fasting and using other physical denials by Jews to achieve holiness, as a perversion of the intended Torah path, quoting the verse (**Ecclesiastes 7:16**) admonishing the Jew not to be "too righteous." Nachmanides (**Nachmanides commentary on Numbers 6:14**), who believes the Nazir's act is to be praised, explains that the reason for the sin

offering is because when the person *stopped* being a Nazir, he lowered himself from a higher status of holiness to a lower status. In fact, the Torah does call the Nazir holy (**Numbers 6:8**). According to Maimonides and his camp, the only reason the Torah permitted the concept of Nazir is that it recognizes that there are some misguided individuals who think that they can become holy by denying themselves more and more. Rather than letting these people "go on their own," as is often the case where individuals have improper tendencies, the Torah takes these feelings and channels them in the most acceptable and legitimate Torah structure. Thus, the lines of both sides are clearly drawn.

There are numerous Talmudic statements supporting both opinions. On the one hand, the Talmud (**Numbers 6:8**) says that a person will have to answer in heaven for all permitted pleasures he could have partaken of in this world but did not. On the other hand, there is a conflicting statement (**Avot DeRabbi Natan 28:5**) that says that anyone who denies himself the pleasure in this world will receive added spiritual pleasures in the next world and, conversely, he who partakes of physical pleasures in this world will be denied certain pleasures in the next world. Thus, the argument is still not resolved, but both approaches are authentically Jewish.

Is It Proper for Jews to Seek & Experience Permitted Pleasure or not? - Does normative Judaism, then, advocate for Jews to enjoy themselves with pleasures that are allowed within Jewish law? Or, perhaps, a Jew demonstrates his or her devotion to God by refusing permitted pleasures (as reflected in Catholicism's philosophy of life)? Or, possibly, pleasure is tolerated, but not encouraged. There are many sources indicating the Jewish attitude to physical pleasure.

Jewish Attitude to Forbidden Physical Pleasures – Regarding physical pleasures forbidden to Jews by Jewish law, Rabbi Eliezer ben Azaria says in a Midrash (Midrash, Sifra Kedoshim) that a Jew should never say "I hate this pleasure," such as pork or a forbidden sexual partner. Rather, a Jew should say "I greatly desire this pleasure, but what can I do? God forbade it, and, thus, I cannot partake in it." These words are also quoted almost word-for-word by Rashi (**Rashi commentary on Leviticus 20:26**). Maimonides, counter to logical thought, states (**Rashi commentary on Leviticus 20:26**), (based on the Talmud), that the greater a person is spiritually, the greater that person's desire for physical pleasure, and quotes the Mishne in Avot (**Mishne Avot 5:22**) that says, "no pain, no gain," i.e., a Jew will only reach spiritual highs after he or she has battled great physical desires. This seems to be the theme of normative Judaism. Oznaim Letorah, a Torah commentary, similarly writes (**Oznaim LeTorah commentary on Deuteronomy 6:11**) that a Jew should not be ashamed of desiring that which is forbidden. He or she should embrace this desire, as he or she refuses this pleasure. In fact, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (1555-1630) explains (**Oznaim Letorah commentary on Deuteronomy 6:11**) this desire as the reason that the Talmud states (**Chullin 109b**) that God created the world so that every physical taste and every psychical desire has at least a circumstance where it is permitted. By allowing the Jew to taste that which is normally forbidden, the Jew will then understand how great that taste is, and that pleasure feels, and still resist it in other circumstances simply because God commanded it.

SHOULD A Jew Restrict Permitted Pleasures as A Sign of Devotion? - As we have seen, this basic argument continued into the Middle Ages period, with Rambam-Maimonides and Ramban-Nachmanides, whether voluntary deprivation of permitted actions or food is to be admired or despised. Thus, the argument continues. In one area, though, there seems to be an agreement about a Jew indulging in pleasure. On the verse commanding each Jew to be holy, Nachmanides **(Nachmanides commentary, Leviticus 19:2**) articulates one view of the concept of non-holiness. This is the Jew who keeps every aspect of the Jewish law, but, nevertheless, by his or her actions, behaves in an unholy, non-Jewish manner, which is forbidden. The example given is of the Jew who keeps every aspect the minutia of kosher laws, but overdoes his eating, and stuffs himself as a glutton without stop. Nowhere is gluttony specially forbidden in the Torah, but it is unholy and demonstrates this Jew's overriding desire for pleasure (albeit without violating Halacha), and that makes it forbidden for the Jew. We all know an unholy act when we see one, even though it is not articulated specifically by the Torah. It is still a sin and a violation of the precept to be holy. Thus, to one's desire for pleasure in the extreme and in an unholy manner, by purposely skirting Jewish law, is not permitted by any Rabbi.

What about Jewish society today in the 21st who can eat (or will very soon be able to eat) a "kosher cheeseburger" if the meat was made in the lab? On the one hand, most Jews today have no problem with eating Pareve ice cream without milk after a meat meal, even thought when it first came out in the 1960's some Rabbis spoke out out against it. (There is another, non-related, prohibition where a person causes an onlooker to think that he or she is violating Jewish law, when he or she is not, and, thus, by the Jewish law, the container of oat milk should be on the table during a meat meal, but that is not the discussion here), The real question is: should Jews be *encouraged* to taste every new, but kosher food that emerges due to technology and can now be experienced (such as acapella music during the Three Weeks), that it is permitted now, but whose taste or technology was previously forbidden or impossible? There are Rabbis who disagree. Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried, who lived in the later 1800's, quotes as part of Jewish law (**Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 59:19**), what Rabbi Chezkiah stated in the Talmud learned above: that after a Jews dies, he or she will have to give an accounting in heaven for every permitted physical pleasure in this world that he or she did not partake of or eat. This Rabbi, thus, is urging Jews to enjoy permitted pleasures. He also cites Rabbi Elazar in the Talmud, who went out of his way to purchase every permitted food and eat it at least once a year. Thus, both of the sides of the question have strong support, even today.

How does the Shulchan
Aruch, Code of Jewish Law, rule about pleasure? Usually, Shulchan Aruch universally rules in the identical manner concerning every Jewish person. This is based on the Torah verse that there is only one law for every Jew (**Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 59:19**). Sometimes, if circumstances change, Shulchan Aruch will rule differently and more leniently, but, that ruling, again, applies to all Jews in that circumstance equally (poverty or great loss of money, for example. But in our case, in an extremely unusual manner, he changes Jewish law based on the PERSONALITY of each Jew. Referring to the Talmud's original question, whether a Jew can add private fasts not mandated by Jewish law, Rabbi Karo writes (**Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, Hilchot Taanit 571:1**) that if the Jew has the personality where he or she can easily withstand the discomfort of fasting, then this person is called holy. But if a Jew has the temperament that cannot easily stand suffering or denial of pleasure, such as a sick person, then this person (who fasts) is called a sinner. Therefore, the concept of a private fast can either be forbidden or blessed, *depending on one's individual nature and makeup.* So, the argument remains unresolved, and both sides are truly legitimate in normative Judaism. For some Jews, a life of denial of permitted .pleasures is holy, while for others, it is a sin

*** 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

Each Man Under His Banner
Naama Frankel

Rabbanit FrankelIn the first two chapters of the portion of Bamidbar, we are given a description of a census taken in the desert for the purpose of counting the Children of Israel ahead of their entering the Land of Israel. These chapters also give a meticulous account of the very orderly fashion in which the Israelites camped in the desert and the order in which they set forward on their journeys.

"And the Lord spoke unto Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second

year after they were come out of the land of Egypt, saying: Take you the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, by their polls; from twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel: you shall number them by their hosts, you and Aharon… the children of Israel shall camp by their fathers' houses; every man with his own banner, according to the ensigns. They shall pitch their tents from a distance all about the tent of meeting."

The Book of Bamidbar opens with the People of Israel on the eve of entering the Land of Israel. This is their second year in the wilderness and they are as yet unaware that because of their imminent sin with the spies, they will have to face another 38 hard, albeit informative, years of wandering.

Only a short while before, right after the Sin of the Calf, the People of Israel were counted, which led the exegetes to ask – why must the people be counted again in our portion? No war had taken place in the interim, nor any plague, so there shouldn't have been any demographic change since the previous census was taken.

Rashi, in his well-known commentary on this matter, says as follows: "Because of His [God's] great love for them, he keeps counting them. When they left Egypt – He counted them; when they were smitten following the Sin of the Calf – He counted them to see how many remained; when He came to dwell in their midst – He counted them. On the first day of the month of Nissan the Mishkan was erected, and on the first day of Iyar He counted them."

Rashi says two things here. Firstly, God counts the people because He loves them. Much like a man who has something he loves and keeps examining it. Secondly, the people are counted every time something significant happens: after the exodus from Egypt – the moment of their "birth"; after the Sin of the Calf – a moment of crisis; and now when God's glory is about to descend and dwell in the midst – a formative moment of newly-gained maturity and a higher level of spirituality that had not existed beforehand.

The Sefat Emet offers a different explanation for this population count:
"As to the count of every head… every Jew has the knowledge and the ability to grasp the greatness of God according to his level; and each person's awareness is unique. This is in keeping with what is written in the Mishnah – we give praise to the Creator for creating each human unique, different in form and feature from all others, although all are descendants of Adam. And in the Midrash on the portion of Pinchas it is written thus: in much the same way that no two people's features are identical, so, too, their minds and intellect are distinct, and each person perceives things differently…"

According to the Sefat Emet, the aim of the census was to give expression to the greatness and uniqueness of the People of Israel. The census taken here was like no other population count – which is usually done for the purpose of counting the number of warriors in the event of a war, or for determining the size of the population in order to establish its needs and the resources required for its upkeep etc. However, the population count in our portion, says the Sefat Emet, is very different: it is personal; it focuses on the family; it is a part of a greater calling.

"Take the sum of all the congregation of the Children of Israel…
…by their families
…by their fathers' houses
…every head of each person
…every man unto his banner…"

All the circles of mankind are present here: the individual, the family, the tribe, etc.

The Sefat Emet teaches us that every child of Israel has a great purpose; every person radiates something of the Divine light which no one but him can bring to the world. Every person perceives things differently, and has a unique calling in this world.

There is a lovely excerpt from HaRav Kook which can serve to highlight this very notion: "A person who learns Torah gives an individualistic expression to the Torah's wisdom, as it is imprinted in his own soul. Surely, the new light that is formed when the Torah connects to one person's soul is unlike the light that is formed when it connects to another individual's soul. This means that any time a person studies, the Torah is glorified further. And since it is the Almighty's will that the Torah be exalted eternally, the most appropriate way to study Torah is out of the love one feels for the great Divine light. For it is God's will that man discover His presence, which becomes further glorified every time an individual connects to it. All the more so, when one is able to bring to light new Torah insights – in such case the Torah is glorified doubly so."

In other words, HaRav Kook teaches us that every person who learns Torah has an obligation to introduce new ideas to the world through his Torah learning, and offer new insights of Torah. The reason being that every individual has life circumstances and experiences that are unique to him; no man's social or family background is identical to another's; nor are any individual's strengths or weaknesses utterly indistinguishable from those of another individual.

It follows then, that should the individual Torah learner not bring to light his personal insights, he would be failing to fulfill a significant obligation – making God's presence in the world manifest on every possible level. For none but he can illuminate God's presence and the Torah through the unique light with which he was blessed.

Rabbi Soloveitchik expands on this idea: "Only if we accept the notion that every individual has a mission and a special calling, can we begin to understand why every human being is born into special life circumstances, at a specified time, and lives in a specific period of time, in a distinct location. Only God knows where to place each individual, and at which time, so that he might fulfill his calling, despite his shortcomings, with the energies and capabilities given him. Individual circumstances are not random; they are predetermined and customized so that the individual can best fulfill his life's calling."

Rabbi Soloveitchik teaches us that the profoundness of God's presence is this world is not only manifest through the learning of Torah. The population count was conducted in the fashion that it was in order to remind the People of Israel, a moment before they enter the Land, that this was not a mere settling down in the hope of finding some tranquility; nor did entering the land simply entail the worship of God. Rather, every individual has a unique mission and no person is replaceable at any given time or place. When one fulfills his calling, he exposes another angle of God's divine light in this world.

Let me end with a verse that appears at the beginning of chapter two of our portion: "The children of Israel shall camp in accordance with their fathers' houses; every man with his own standard, according to his ensigns. They shall pitch their tents from a distance all about the tent of meeting."

Rashi explains: "'…his own standard, according to his ensigns'- every standard, or flag, had its own unique emblem, with its special color, which was the same color as the tribe's gem on the choshen [the gem-filled breastplate worn by the High Priest], so that one tribe could be distinguished from the other. Another explanation: '…in accordance with their fathers' houses; every man with his own standard' – in accordance with the signs and symbols passed down by Yaakov their father, when they took him and brought him down to Egypt. As is written (Bereishit, 50): 'And his sons did to him as he had commanded them…'".

Rashi, in his commentary, hints at the fact that not only does the individual have a significant and exclusive role to play, but so does every tribe. Besides the fact that each tribe had its own flag, which also symbolized the tribe's essence, each tribe had its own calling, passed down from one generation to another, going all the way back to Yaakov Avinu. In fact, every tribe or clan, or any group comprised of connected individuals, has the ability to fulfill

much more than any individual calling, by the virtue of its unity and connectedness. A group of connected individuals can create numerous circles of impact that serve to enhance and enrich God's light in this world.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Hashem's Embrace
Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger

Over the last few weeks, irrespective of the joy inherent in any given Shabbos, we recited "Av horachamim", recalling the many kedoshim killed for their allegiance to Torah. This minhag, rooted in the pogroms egged on by the post-Pesach blood libels as well as in the mourning of Rabbi Akiva's students, all create a despondent mood over the month that should joyfully conjoin the redemption of Pesach to the charge of Shavuos. That Hashem chose this season to confirm our return to Israel and to miraculously return to us Yerushalyiam and the surrounding mountains should strengthen our prayers that we be the generation that welcomes messianic times.

This timing finds expression in tomorrow's haftorah, as we should come to realize that we have witnessed yet another prophecy of ancient times come to life (Hoshea 2:16), "Assuredly, I will speak coaxingly to her and lead her through the wilderness and speak to her tenderly. I will give her her vineyards from there..." Which wilderness? How does Hashem coax us? How does he lead us tenderly? Surely, this is another prophecy that we have witnessed and now understand in a way that no previous generation could. Yalkut Shimoni explains to us that it is the wilderness of Yehuda, the area whose return to our people fifty-five years ago we celebrated last week. Thus we now realize that the miracles of its return to us comprises the coaxing tender words that Hoshea foresaw.

Additionally, what troubled earlier times as seemingly disconnected pesukim so accurately describe our times (Hosea 2, 14-15), "I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees...I will turn them into brushwood, and beasts of the field shall devour them. Thus will I punish her for the days of the Ba'alim, on which she brought them offerings; when, decked with earrings and jewels, she would go after her lovers, forgetting Me - declares the L-rd. Assuredly, I will speak coaxingly to her and lead her through the wilderness... and I will espouse you forever...with righteousness and justice...and with goodness and mercy..."

Without attributing the about face to any deed, desire, or deal, we are simply told that Hashem changed course, abruptly embracing an undeserving rebellious generation. We, too, lived through the abruptness of the miracles of the Six Day War and can certainly not venture to find rhyme or reason for them. Yet we did see it and did witness one of the greatest teshuva movements since the time of Yoshiyahua Hamelech which reverberates to this day, over half a century later.

Indeed, we would now opt for the heart-warming interpretation of the Metzudas simply because we saw it come to life. In contrast to many earlier commentators who saw the metaphor of being led into the wilderness as being pushed into a barren and foreboding place, Metzudas sees this new phase as finding ourselves in a serene desert isle with our Father. According to Metzudas, this phase does not describe further and appropriate distance and confrontation, but rather a seeming almost impulsive rapprochement, finding ourselves connected and alone with Hashem. Is there a better description of the aftermath of those six days in June 1967?

Finally, our new perspective sheds commentary on the parsha which finds us in a desert on our journey from galus Mitzrayim to our redemptive entry into Israel. Now we understand that the midbar-desert, which is the context of the fourth of the five books, is not the desert of distance but rather the desert isle of desire and delivery.

May we all merit to continue to witness the prophecies of old come alive for the good and appreciate that privilege with increased faith and commitment which will speed up the wheels of geula.

Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet
BAMIDBAR 5783

Weekly Parsha BAMIDBAR
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The book of Bamidbar is perhaps one of the saddest, so to speak, of all of the Holy Scriptures. Whereas the book of Shemot, which records for us the sin of the Golden Calf also gives us pause, it concludes with the final construction of the Mishkan and God's Presence, so to speak, resting within the encampment of Israel. But the book of Bamidbar, which begins on a high note of numerical accomplishment and the seemingly imminent entry of the Jewish people into the Land of Israel, ends on a very sour note. It records the destruction of the entire generation including its leadership without their entrance into the Promised Land.

The narrative of the book of Bamidbar tells us of rebellion and constant carping, military defeats and victories, false blessings, human prejudices, and personal bias. But the Torah warned us in its very first chapters that "this is the book of human beings." And, the weaknesses exhibited by Israel in the desert of Sinai, as recorded for us in the book of Bamidbar, are definitely part of the usual human story and nature.

Over the decades that I have taught this book of Bamidbar to students and congregants of mine, invariably many of them have then asked me incredulously: "How could the Jewish people have behaved in such a manner?" I cannot speak for that generation of Jews as described in the book of Bamidbar, but I wonder to myself "How can so many Jews in our generation relate to the existence of the State of Israel in our time so cavalierly?

How do we tolerate the cruelties that our one-size-fits-all school system inflicts on the 'different' child? How do we subject our daughters to the indignities of the current matchmaking process? How, indeed!?" And my answer to myself always is that for the great many of us, human nature trumps common sense, logic, and true Torah values. I imagine that this may have been true of the generation of the book of Bamidbar as well.

One of the wonders of the book of Bamidbar is that the count of the Jewish people at the end of the forty years of living in the desert was almost exactly the same as it was at the beginning of their sojourn there. Though the following is certainly not being proposed by me as an answer or explanation to this unusual fact, I have always thought that this is a subtle reminder to us that that no matter how great the experiences, no matter how magnificent the miracles, no matter how great the leaders, human nature, with all its strengths and weaknesses, basically remains the same.

It is not only that the numbers don't change much, the people and the generations didn't and don't change much either. Human nature remains constant. But our task is to recognize that and channel our human nature into productive and holy actions and behavior – to bend to a nobility of will and loyalty. Only by recognizing the propensity of our nature will we be able to accomplish this necessary and noble goal.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

The Sound of Silence
BAMIDBAR
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Bamidbar is usually read on the Shabbat before Shavuot. So the Sages connected the two. Shavuot is the time of the giving of the Torah. Bamibar means, "in the desert". What then is the connection between the desert and the Torah, the wilderness and God's word?

The Sages gave several interpretations. According to the Mechilta, the Torah was given publicly, openly, and in a place no one owns because had it been given in the Land of Israel, Jews would have said to the nations of the world, "You have no share in it." Instead, whoever wants to come and accept it, let them come and accept it.[1]

Another explanation: Had the Torah been given in Israel the nations of the world would have had an excuse for not accepting it. This follows the rabbinic tradition that, before God gave the Torah to the Israelites, He offered it to all the other nations and each found a reason to decline.[2]

Yet another: Just as the wilderness is free – it costs nothing to enter – so the Torah is free. It is God's gift to us.[3]

But there is another, more spiritual reason. The desert is a place of silence. There is nothing visually to distract you, and there is no ambient noise to muffle sound. To be sure, when the Israelites received the Torah, there was thunder and lightning and the sound of a shofar. The earth felt as if it were shaking at its foundations. But in a later age, when the Prophet Elijah stood at the same mountain after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal, he encountered God not in the whirlwind or the fire or the earthquake but in the kol demamah dakah, the still, small voice, literally "the sound of a slender silence" (1 Kings 19:9-12)." I define this as the sound you can only hear if you are listening. In the silence of the midbar, the desert, you can hear the Medaber, the Speaker, and the medubar, that which is spoken. To hear the voice of God you need a listening silence in the soul.

Many years ago British television produced a documentary series, The Long Search, on the world's great religions.[4] When it came to Judaism, the presenter Ronald Eyre seemed surprised by its blooming, buzzing confusion, especially the loud, argumentative voices in the beit midrash, the house of study. Remarking on this to Elie Wiesel, he asked, "Is there such a thing as a silence in

Judaism?" Wiesel replied: "Judaism is full of silences … but we don't talk about them."

Judaism is a very verbal culture, a religion of holy words. Through words, God created the universe: "And God said, Let there be … and there was." According to the Targum, it is our ability to speak that makes us human. It translates the phrase, "and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7) as "and man became a speaking soul." Words create. Words communicate. Our relationships are shaped, for good or bad, by language. Much of Judaism is about the power of words to make or break worlds.

So silence in Tanach often has a negative connotation. "Aaron was silent," says the Torah, after the death of his two sons Nadav and Avihu (Lev. 10:3). "The dead do not praise you," says Psalm 115, "nor do those who go down to the silence [of the grave]." When Job's friends came to comfort him after the loss of his children and other afflictions, "they sat down with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, yet no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great." (Job 2:13).

But not all silence is sad. Psalms tells us that "to You, silence is praise" (Ps. 65:2). If we are truly in awe at the greatness of God, the vastness of the universe and the almost infinite extent of time, our deepest emotions will indeed lie too deep for words. We will experience silent communion.

The Sages valued silence. They called it "a fence to wisdom" (Mishna Avot 3:13). If words are worth a coin, silence is worth two (Megilla 18a). R. Shimon ben Gamliel said:

"All my days I have grown up among the wise, and I have found nothing better than silence."

Mishna Avot 1:17

The service of the Priests in the Temple was accompanied by silence. The Levites sang in the courtyard, but the Priests – unlike their counterparts in other ancient religions – neither sang nor spoke while offering the sacrifices. One scholar, Israel Knohl, has accordingly spoken of "the silence of the sanctuary." The Zohar (2a) speaks of silence as the medium in which both the Sanctuary above and the Sanctuary below are made.

There were also Jews who cultivated silence as a spiritual discipline. Bratslav Hassidim meditate in the fields. There are Jews who practise ta'anit dibbur, a "fast of words". Our most profound prayer, the private saying of the Amidah, is called tefillah be-lachash, the "silent prayer". It is based on the precedent of Hannah, praying for a child.

"She spoke in her heart. Her lips moved but her voice was not heard."

1 Sam. 1:13

God hears our silent cry. In the agonising tale of how Sarah told Abraham to send Hagar and her son away, the Torah tells us that when their water ran out and the young Ishmael was at the point of dying, Hagar cried, yet God heard "the voice of the child" (Gen. 21:16-17). Earlier when the angels came to visit Abraham and told him that Sarah would have a child, Sarah laughed inwardly, that is, silently, yet she was heard by God (Gen. 18:12-13). God hears our thoughts even when they are not expressed in speech.

The silence that counts, in Judaism, is thus a listening silence – and listening is the supreme religious art. Listening means making space for others to speak and be heard. As I point out in my commentary to the Siddur,[5] there is no English word that remotely equals the Hebrew verb sh-m-a in its wide range of senses: to listen, to hear, to pay attention, to understand, to internalise and to respond in deed.

This was one of the key elements in the Sinai covenant, when the Israelites, having already said twice, "All that God says, we will do," then said, "All that God says, we will do and we will hear [ve–nishma]" (Ex. 24:7). It is the nishma – listening, hearing, heeding, responding – that is the key religious act.

Thus Judaism is not only a religion of doing-and-speaking; it is also a religion of listening. Faith is the ability to hear the music beneath the noise. There is the silent music of the spheres, about which Psalm 19 speaks:

"The heavens declare the glory of God
The skies proclaim the work of His hands.
Day to day they pour forth speech,
Night to night they communicate knowledge.
There is no speech, there are no words,
Their voice is not heard.
Yet their music carries throughout the earth."

Tehillim 19

There is the voice of history that was heard by the prophets. And there is the commanding voice of Sinai that continues to speak to us across the abyss of time. I sometimes think that people in the modern age have found the concept of "Torah from Heaven" problematic, not because of some new archaeological discovery but because we have lost the habit of listening to the sound of transcendence, a voice beyond the merely human.

It is fascinating that despite his often-fractured relationship with Judaism, Sigmund Freud created in psychoanalysis a deeply Jewish form of healing. He himself called it the "speaking cure," but it is in fact a listening cure. Almost all effective forms of psychotherapy involve deep listening.

Is there enough listening in the Jewish world today? Do we, in marriage, really listen to our spouses? Do we as parents truly listen to our children? Do we, as leaders, hear the unspoken fears of those we seek to lead? Do we internalise the sense of hurt of the people who feel excluded from the community? Can we really claim to be listening to the voice of God if we fail to listen to the voices of our fellow humans?

In his poem, 'In memory of W B Yeats,' W H Auden wrote:

In the deserts of the heart

Let the healing fountain start.
From time to time we need to step back from the noise and hubbub of the social world and create in our hearts the stillness of the desert where, within the silence, we can hear the kol demamah dakah, the still, small voice of God, telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced by God's everlasting arms, we are not alone.[6]
[1] Mechilta, Yitro, Bachodesh, 1.
[2] Ibid., 5.
[3] Ibid.
[4] BBC television, first shown 1977.
[5] Koren Shalem Siddur.
[6] For more on the theme of listening, see parshat Bereishit, "The Art of Listening," and parshat Eikev, "The Spirituality of Listening."

Shabbat Shalom: Bamidbar (Numbers 1:1 – 4:20)
Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – "Count the heads of the entire witness-congregation of Israel" (Numbers 1:2).
The Book of Numbers opens with a most optimistic picture of a nation poised for redemption. The Israelites have been freed from Egypt with great miracles and wonders. They have received the Revelation at Sinai which provides them with a moral and ethical constitution for a soon-to-be-established sovereign state along with a faith commitment which establishes their mission to the world. The nation is now structured into 12 uniquely endowed and individually directed tribes who are united around the Sanctuary. Physical and spiritual defenses are organized with a standing army for military might, and the tribe of Levi dedicated to teaching Torah and arranging the sacrificial service. Everything seems ready for the conquest and settlement of the Promised Land of Israel!
Instead what follows is total degeneration. The Israelites become involved in petty squabbles and tiresome complaints, the reconnaissance mission advises against entering Israel (Numbers 13:27-29), Korah, Datan and Aviram stage a rebellion against Moses, and a prince of one of the tribes publicly fornicates with a Midianite woman. The result is that the entire generation that left Egypt is condemned to die in the wilderness, and only Moses' successor, Joshua, and the new generation which has been born in the desert may live in the Promised Land.
What happened, and why? How can a nation so committed to becoming a "kingdom of priest-teachers and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6) lose their idealistic sense of purpose and "gang up" against the very person who was their great liberator and law-giver?
This fourth Book of the Bible is called "Numbers," or "Sefer Pikudim," – The Book of the Censuses – referring to the two population counts which are taken between its covers.

Indeed, our Book opens with a command to count the Israelites, stipulating as follows:
"Count the heads of the entire witness–congregation of the children of Israel, in accordance with their families, with their household parents, with the number of names of each male body, from 20 years of age and above, everyone eligible for army conscription…" (Numbers 1:2, 3).
These are the details required for the census at the beginning of our weekly portion, when the Israelites are still imbued with a sense of mission and "manifest destiny," and when we they still expect to wage a war for the liberation of the Land of Israel.
Twenty–five chapters later, however, after the scouts' refusal to conquer Israel, after the various rebellions against Moses culminating in Prince Zimri ben Sadon's shameful public adultery with the Midianite in the presence of Moses himself, a second census is ordered. But you will notice that the identification of each Israelite for the purpose of this census is radically different from the way it was in the previous one:
"Count the heads of the entire witness-congregation of the children of Israel, from twenty years of age and above, with their household parents, everyone eligible for army conscription…" (Numbers 26: 2).
The first count included "the families (providing everyone's tribal affiliation harking back to Jacob, Isaac and Abraham), the household parents, and the individual personal names". The second time, the tribal affiliation and the personal names of each were excluded, providing only the names of the household parents of each individual!
These significant omissions may help to explain the degeneration of the Israelites, and why the Midrash called it The Book of the Censuses. In the first census, taken during the heyday of the generation of the exodus, each individual Israelite felt connected to his tribal parent, to his Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs. But by the time of the second census, that connection was woefully gone. Each individual related only to their immediate biological parents.
The Book of Exodus, our birth as a nation, is built upon the foundations set out in the Book of Genesis; our origins as a very special family. The patriarchs and matriarchs were originally chosen by God because of their commitment to "compassionate righteousness and moral justice," traits and ideals which they were to "command their children and their households after them" (Genesis 18:19). This unique Hebraic culture was to be nurtured, and expressed in the Land of Israel, which is the very "body", the physical matrix, of our eternal covenant with God. The towering personalities of the Book of Genesis develop, falter, repair, sacrifice, persevere and ultimately prevail on these twin altars of commitment to land and law, to righteousness and Israel. They set the foundations for the continuity of an eternal nation through whom the entire world will eventually be blessed at the time of ultimate redemption.

"Yichus," lineage or pedigree, has little to do with privilege and special rights, but it has everything to do with responsibility and ancestral empowerment. Grandfather Jacob-Israel blesses his grandchildren, the sons of Joseph, that "they shall be called by his name and the name of his ancestors, Abraham and Isaac" (Genesis 48:16). This does not only mean naming them Abe, Ike and Jackie, but, much more importantly it means linking them to the ideals, values, and commitments of their patriarchs and matriarchs.

It also means endowing and empowering them with the eternal promise they received from God that their seed would inherit the Land of Israel and would eventually succeed in conveying to the world the message and blessing of Divine morality and peace.

Tragically, the desert generation lost its connection to the Book of Genesis, with the mission and empowerment, with the dream and the promise, of the patriarchs and matriarchs of their family. As a consequence, the second census no longer connects them as the tribal children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This loss of connectedness to their forebears results in a disconnect from the God of the patriarchs as well, from the promise and the covenant of that God, from faith in their ability to carry out the unique message and mission of Israel. That generation lost faith in itself, declaring: became in "We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes and so we were they in their eyes" (Numbers 13: 33). In this way, they lost the courage to conquer the land.

By disconnecting from their past, they lost their future. They did not even merit individual names, names which could only be counted if they were linked with the proud names of the founders of Jewish eternity.

Shabbat Shalom

The Numbers Game

Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: Pie r Squared

Yanki is supposed to be watching his weight and therefore needs to figure out how many calories are in the pie he beholds. To figure out how big the pie is, he measures the diameter of the pie, and divides in it half to get the length of its radius. He then multiplies the length of the radius by itself to get "r squared," and multiplies the result by three so that he knows the area of the pie's surface. Is there anything wrong with his calculation?

Question #2: Puzzled by the Pasuk

"How can the pesukim tell us that the relationship between the circumference of a circle and its diameter is three-to-one, when simply taking a string and measuring around a circle demonstrates that the circumference is noticeably longer than three times the diameter?"

Question #3: Performing Mitzvos Accurately

"How accurate a calculation must I make when determining the size of an item to be used for a mitzvah?"

Introduction:

In numerous places, both Tanach and Chazal approximate certain mathematical values, such as evaluating the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter as three to one. The problem is that we can demonstrate mathematically that the ratio is greater than three and is almost 3 1/7. This leads to the following questions:

(1) Why would Chazal calculate using inaccurate approximations?

(2) When making halachic calculations, may we rely on these estimates, or do we need to be mathematically more accurate?

(3) A corollary question is: When providing an estimate, one must allow for a margin of error. Does halachah require a margin of error, and, if so, how much?

The Slide Rule versus the Calculator

Let me begin our discussion with a modern analogy, if something I remember can still be considered "modern." When I first studied sophisticated mathematical estimates, I learned to use a slide rule, which today is as valuable to an engineer as his abacus. Relative to the calculator, a slide rule does not provide accurate measurements, and someone using a slide rule must allow for a fairly significant margin of error.

Today, complex computations are made with calculators, which provide far more accurate results that can be rounded off, as necessary, to the nearest tenth, millionth, quadrillionth or smaller. Of course, using a calculator still requires one to round upward or downward, but because it is much more precise, the margin of error is greatly reduced.

How Irrational Are You?

Numerous halachic questions require mathematical calculations that involve what we call "irrational numbers." An irrational number means one that cannot be expressed in fractional notation. Another way of explaining an irrational number is that its value can never be calculated totally accurately, but can only be estimated. The two most common examples of irrational numbers that show up in Chazal are:

Pi

(1) The ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter, which we are used to calling by the Greek letter ∏ (pronounced like the word "pie," and spelled in English "pi"). Since the 19th century, the letter pi has been used to represent this number, because the Greek word for periphery is peripherion, which begins with the letter ∏. Hundreds of years earlier, the Rambam (Commentary to the Mishnah, Eruvin 1:5) noted that the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter is an irrational number that can only be approximated, and that the scientists of his era used an estimate of 3 and 1/7, which is actually slightly greater than the value of ∏. The Rambam explains that since there is no accurate ratio, Chazal used a round number, three, for this calculation.

The Diagonal of a Square

(2) The length of a diagonal of a square, which is equal to the side of the square multiplied by the square root of two (√2). Chazal calculated the length of a diagonal of a square to be 1 and 2/5 times its side, which is slightly smaller than the value of the √2. (Another way of expressing this idea is that the ratio between the diagonal and the side is 7:5.) The fact that Chazal's figuring is somewhat smaller than the mathematical reality is already proved by Tosafos (to Sukkah 8a s.v. kol).

Since both pi and the square root of two are irrational numbers, they can only be estimated but can never be calculated with absolute accuracy.

Based on the above-quoted statement of the Rambam, we can already address one of our earlier questions: "Why would Chazal have used inaccurate evaluations for calculation?" The answer is that any computation of the correlation of the circumference of a circle to its diameter will be an estimate. The only question is how accurate must this estimate be for the purpose at hand.

Chazal or Tanach?

Although the Rambam attributes the rounding of pi to Chazal, in actuality, there are sources in Tanach that calculate the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter as three-to-one. Both in Melachim (I 7:23) and again in Divrei Hayamim (II 4:2), Tanach teaches that the Yam shel Shelomoh, the large, round pool or mikveh that was built in the first Beis Hamikdash, was thirty amos in circumference and ten amos in diameter, which provides a ratio of circumference to diameter of three-to-one. Thus, we can ask a question of the Rambam: Why does he attribute this ratio to Chazal, rather than the source for Chazal's calculation, the pesukim?

The commentaries there, however, already ask how the verse can make a calculation that we know is not accurate. The Ralbag suggests two options: either that the numbers used are intended to be a very broad estimate, or, alternatively, that the diameter is measured from the external dimensions of the mikveh, whereas the circumference is measured from its inside, which makes the estimate closer to mathematical reality. According to the second approach, we have no Biblical source that uses an estimate of three-to-one as a substitute for pi. This will explain why the Rambam attributed the estimation of pi as three to Chazal, rather than to the Tanach. The Rambam was fully aware that one could interpret the verses according to the second approach of the Ralbag, in which case, there is no proof from the verse. He, therefore, attributed this estimate to Chazal.

Gemara Eruvin

However, the Ralbag's approach seems to conflict with a passage of Gemara. The Mishnah in Eruvin states that if the circumference of a pole is three tefachim, its diameter is one tefach, which means that the Mishnah assumes a ratio of three-to-one.

The Gemara questions how the Mishnah knows that the ratio is three-to-one, and then draws proof from the above-quoted verse that the Yam shel Shelomoh was thirty amos around and ten amos across. The Gemara then debates whether the calculations of the Yam shel Shelomoh indeed result in a ratio of three-to-one, because one must also include the thickness of the pool itself, which offsets the computation. The Gemara eventually concludes that the verse was calculating from the inside of the pool, not its outside, and therefore the thickness of the pool's containing wall is not included in the calculation (Eruvin 14a).

However, this Gemara's discussion leaves the mathematician dissatisfied, a question already noted by Tosafos. If the internal diameter of the Yam shel Shelomoh was ten amos, its circumference must have been greater than thirty amos, and if its circumference was thirty amos, then its internal diameter must have been less than ten amos.

A Different Question

The Rosh, in his responsa, is bothered by a different question, based on Talmudic logic rather than on mathematical calculation. He finds the Gemara's question -- requesting proof for the ratio between a circle's circumference and its diameter -- to be odd. The ratio between a circle's circumference and its diameter is a value that one should calculate. By its nature, this is not a question that requires a Biblical proof or source.

In the literature that we have received from the Rosh, he asks this question in two different places. In his responsa (Shu"t Harosh 2:19), we find a letter that he wrote to the Rashba, in which he asked a series of questions that the Rosh notes bother him tremendously and to whom he has no one else to turn for an answer. One of the questions the Rosh asks is: "Why does the Gemara ask for a Biblical source for a mathematical calculation?"

It is curious to note that a later commentary mentions that, in all the considerable literature that we have received from the Rashba, we have no recorded answer of the Rashba to this question of the Rosh (Cheishek Shelomoh to Eruvin 14a).

Another Rosh

As I mentioned above, there is another place where the Rosh asks why the Gemara wanted a Biblical source for a mathematical calculation, but in this second place the Rosh provides an answer to the question. In his Tosafos Harosh commentary on Eruvin, which was published for the first time fairly recently, the Rosh provides the following answer: Since the calculation of three-to-one is not accurate, the Gemara wanted a biblical source as proof that we are permitted to rely on this estimate.

(It is curious to note that the Cheishek Shelomoh whom I quoted above provided the same answer to this question as did the Rosh in his Tosafos. The Cheishek Shelomoh never saw the Tosafos Harosh, which had not yet been printed in his day.)

Curiousity about the Tosafos Harosh

There is an interesting historical point that can presumably be derived from this statement of the Rosh. As I mentioned, in the Tosafos Harosh, the Rosh does answer the question that he raised, and accredits this answer to himself. This should be able to prove which work the Rosh had written earlier, and also whether he ever received an answer to his question from the Rashba. This analysis is based on the following question: Why did the Rosh cite an answer in his Tosafos, but not in his responsum, which was addressed as a question to the Rashba. There are three obvious possibilities:

(1) Although the Rosh wrote this answer in his Tosafos, he was dissatisfied with it, and therefore wrote a question to the Rashba. I would reject this possibility because, if it is true, then, in his correspondence to the Rashba, the Rosh would have mentioned this answer and his reason for rejecting it.

(2) The Rosh indeed received an answer, either this one or a different answer, from the Rashba. I reject this approach also, because, were it true, the Rosh would have quoted the Rashba's answer in his Tosafos and, if need be, discussed it.

(3) Therefore, I conclude that the Rosh, indeed, never received an answer to the question he asked of the Rashba and subsequently reached his own conclusion as to how to answer the question, which he then recorded in the Tosafos Harosh. This would lead us to conclude that the Tosafos Harosh were written later in his life than his responsa, or, at least, than this responsum.

Mathematical Accuracy

At this point, we can address one of earlier questions. "When making halachic calculations, may we rely on these estimates, or do we need to be mathematically more accurate?" We might be able to prove this point by noting something in the Mishnah in Eruvin. The Mishnah there ruled that, under certain circumstances, an area that is fully enclosed on three of its sides and has a beam, a tefach wide, above the fourth side, is considered halachically fully enclosed, and one may carry inside it. The Mishnah then proceeds to explain that if the beam is round and has a circumference of three tefachim, one may carry inside the area because, based on the calculation that the relationship of its circumference to its diameter is three-to-one, the beam is considered to be a tefach wide. However, as the Rambam notes, the beam is actually less than a tefach in diameter, and therefore, one should not be permitted to carry in this area!

The Aruch Hashulchan (Orach Chayim 363:22; Yoreh Deah 30:13) notes this problem and concludes that one may carry in this area. He contends that this is exactly what the Gemara was asking when it requested Scriptural proof for a mathematical calculation. "Upon what halachic basis may we be lenient in using this estimate of three-to-one, when this will permit carrying in an area in which the beam is less than a tefach wide? The answer is that this is a halachah that we derive from the verse."

To clarify this concept, the Chazon Ish notes that the purpose of mitzvos is to draw us nearer to Hashem, to accept His reign, and to be meticulously careful in observing His laws. However, none of this is conflicted when the Torah teaches that we may use certain calculations, even if they are not completely mathematically accurate. In this instance, relying on these estimates is exactly what the Torah requires (Chazon Ish, Orach Chayim 138:4). As expressed by a different author, the Gemara (Eruvin 4a; Sukkah 5b) teaches that the measurements, the shiurim, required to fulfill mitzvos are all halachah leMoshe miSinai, laws that Moshe Rabbeinu received as a mesorah in Har Sinai. Similarly, these estimates of irrational numbers mentioned above are all halachah leMoshe miSinai that one may rely upon to fulfill mitzvos, whether or not they are mathematically accurate. The same Torah takes these calculations into consideration when instructing us which dimensions are required in order to fulfill these specific mitzvos (Shu"t Tashbeitz 1:165).

In the context of a different halachah in the laws of Eruvin, the Mishnah Berurah makes a similar statement, contending that we can rely on Chazal's estimates, even when the result is lenient. However, the Mishnah Berurah there vacillates a bit in his conclusion, ruling that one can certainly rely on this when the issue is a rabbinic concern (Shaar Hatziyun 372:18). In a responsum, Rav Moshe Feinstein questions why the Mishnah Berurah limits relying on this approach, and Rav Moshe rules unequivocally that the rule permitting one to rely on these estimates holds true even germane to de'oraysa laws and even leniently (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah Volume 3 #120:5).

How Straight Are My Tefillin?

Personally, I find the context of Rav Moshe's teshuvah very interesting. There is a halachah leMoshe miSinai that requires that the boxes of the tefillin, the batim, must be perfectly square. In a responsum dated 21 Adar II, 5736, Rav Moshe was asked whether there is a halachic preference to use scientific measuring equipment to determine that one's tefillin are perfectly square. Rav Moshe rules that there is neither a reason nor a hiddur to measure the tefillin squareness this accurately. Since Chazal have used the calculation of 1.4 or a ratio of 7:5, which we know is an estimate, to determine the correct diagonal of a square, there is no requirement to make one's tefillin squarer than this, and it is perfectly fine simply to measure the length of each of the sides of one's tefillin and its two diagonals to ascertain that the ratio between the diagonal and the side is 7:5.

In the above-cited responsum, Rav Moshe notes that he had heard that the Brisker Rav, Rav Yitzchak Ze'ev Soloveichek, had ruled that it was preferable to check one's tefillin in the most scientific method available. Rav Moshe

writes that he finds this suggestion very strange and disputes its being halachically correct (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah Volume 3 #120:5).

Thus, according to these authorities, we have answered our previous question regarding the halachic significance of estimated values: Indeed, the purpose of Chazal's making these estimates was that observing halachah does not require that these calculations be mathematically precise, provided they meet the criteria that the halachah established.

An Alternate Approach

Although the majority of late authorities conclude that the calculations of Chazal are indeed part of the halachos of shiurim, this is not a universally held position. The Tashbeitz, a rishon, wrote a lengthy responsum on the topic, in which he presents two ways to explain why Chazal used estimates that are not precisely accurate. His first approach reaches the same conclusion as we have already found in the later poskim, that these measurements are included within the halachos of shiurim that are part of the halachah leMoshe miSinai.

The second approach of the Tashbeitz, however, differs with the above-mentioned halachic conclusion. In his second approach, he contends that all the above estimates were meant for pedagogic, but not halachic reasons. The rounding of pi to three and the diagonal of a square to 1.4 were provided to make the material easily comprehensible to all students, since every individual is required to know the entire Torah. Thus, when Chazal used these estimates in calculating the laws, their intent was to enable the average student to comprehend the halachic material, not to provide the most accurate interpretation. When an actual halachic calculation is made, it must be totally accurate, and any halachic authority involved would realize that he must use a highly accurate mathematical computation and then round either upward or downward as necessary for the specific application. (A similar position is held by Chiddushim Uviurim, Ohalos 5:6.)

Conclusion:

Certainly, the majority of late halachic opinions conclude that the estimates of Chazal are meant to be halachically definitive, and not simply pedagogic in nature. However, I leave it to the individual reader to ask his or her posek what to do when a practical question presents itself.

Weekly Biblical Thoughts

Rabbi Ben-Tzion Spitz

Commentary based on the Bat Ayin

The Trap of Sustenance (Bamidbar)

It is too difficult to think nobly when one thinks only of earning a living. -Jean Jacques Rousseau

At the opening of the Book of Numbers, we have a noteworthy confluence of space and time. The Torah describes how God spoke to Moses. It tells us that it was in the desert of Sinai, in the Tabernacle, starting from the more general geographic description (desert) and then giving us the very specific location (Tabernacle). The verse continues to tell us that it was on the first day of the second month of the second year of the Exodus, namely the very specific day of the month, followed by the more general month of the year and the even more general year.

The Bat Ayin on Numbers 1:1 wonders why in describing space, the Torah starts with the general coordinates and narrows to the more specific location, but in describing time, it starts with the specific day and expands outward to the more general markers of month and year.

He answers that it has to do with man's ongoing challenge of making a livelihood.

He explains that there is a trap laid in front of every person, the trap of having to make a living. We are ensnared by the belief that "the strength of my arm" is what provides sustenance. Believing exclusively in our own efforts, our own intelligence and our own guile, easily leads to the temptation of cutting corners, be it ethical or legal. The constant pressure of having to provide for ourselves and those in our charge makes it very easy to justify immoral behavior. If my income, my livelihood, and my family's financial security are wholly dependent on my winning in the capitalistic game we find ourselves in, then the ends may justify the means, and we allow ourselves to lie, cheat, steal or otherwise engage in corrupt activities.

The solution, the Bat Ayin suggests, is hinted at in the structure of the verse. The nation of Israel starts off in the desert of Sinai, where they demonstrate the first stages of faith, of believing in God, and a willingness to accept and follow His commandments. They then progress to the next stage of building a Tabernacle for God to dwell amongst them. The order of the dates in the verse makes similar hints. The second month reminds us of the second month of the first year of the Exodus, when Israel receives the heavenly bread, the Maan, on a daily basis. That starts to build Israel's confidence and reliance on God. The second year is when the Tabernacle is built, and having a tangible sense of God's presence creates an even greater level of confidence.

Hence the solution to the trap of sustenance is to increase our faith and confidence in God, in stages. When we realize that it is God who ultimately determines our success and part of His desire is for us to be ethical, law-abiding citizens, then we can be more relaxed in our material pursuits. God has brought us to the specific place and circumstances we find ourselves in. We need to make our own responsible efforts, but ultimately, God decides as to the results of those efforts.

May we develop our faith and confidence in God's sustenance, step by step.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To my friend, Rabbi Alan Haber, on the launch of his new educational initiative, Am Levadad. Highly recommended. https://rabbihaber.net/am-levadad/

Yom Yerushalayim: "Jerusalem" does not appear in the Torah – why?
Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Why does the name of Jerusalem not appear in the Torah?
On 21 separate occasions in the book of Devarim we are told about,
"bamakom asher yivchar Hashem," – "the place which God shall choose,"
and we all know that it's Jerusalem.
Similarly in the book of Bereishit, Malkitzedek who came out to welcome Abraham is described as the king of 'Shalem', which was Jerusalem. Abraham sought to sacrifice his son Yitzchak at the akaidah on 'Har Hamoriah' (Mount Moriah) which is Jerusalem. It seems as if the Torah's going out of its way not to mention Jerusalem by name!
The Rambam in his Moreh Nevuchim, his Guide to the Perplexed, gives three reasons for this, and the third, which he states is the most powerful, is in order to preserve the unity of the Jewish people.
As the nation came, under the leadership of Joshua, into the Promised Land to possess it, says the Rambam, had they known exactly where Jerusalem was, there was a danger that there could be civil war – each tribe could fight against the others in an attempt to gain control over that city, and ultimately rule the whole people. Therefore, Jerusalem was hidden from them. The Rambam further says that it was only once a king would be appointed and anointed to rule over the entire people that Jerusalem would be established as the eternal capital of the Jewish nation.
It is clear that King David was aware of the way in which Jerusalem would serve to unify the people. That is why, when he bought the city from Arana the Jebusite, he raised 50 shekels from each of the 12 tribes towards the 600 shekel cost: he wanted them all to have a 'chelek', a portion in it, so that it would belong to all.
In addition, through all the 'mishmarot', the procedures of the Temple service, there were always representatives of all tribes to guarantee that the temple service ran collectively. We had the half shekel contribution which came from every individual to ensure that Jerusalem and its Temple service would always belong to the entire nation.
No wonder therefore that in Psalm 122 we are told,
"Yerushalayim habenuyah k'ir shechubra la yachdav." – "Jerusalem is built as a city which is joined up by all of its parts."
The hilltops, the mountains, the valleys, they all join up in order to produce one single city representing the unity of the entire people of Israel.
As we now focus our attention on Jerusalem in anticipation of Yom Yerushalaim, the glorious festival of Jerusalem Day, let us also focus our attention on Jewish unity so that we should be 'chubra la yachdav' – totally connected as one entity always. I wish you all chag sameach.
Shabbat shalom.
Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

Drasha
By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Bamidbar
Love Child
This week, Moshe is commanded to count each tribe and tally the numbers — thus the name of the Sefer BaMidbar is appropriately translated as The Book of Numbers. In a separate counting, the tribe of Levi is also enumerated. However, before the Torah counts the members of the tribe of Levi it reckons a subdivision of that tribe, the four children of Ahron who were designated as Kohanim (priests).
The Torah mentions those children by name, Numbers 3: 1-3: "These are the offspring of Ahron and Moshe on the day that Hashem spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai. These are the names of Ahron's children: Nadav, Avihu, Elozor and Isamar. These are the names of the children of Ahron who were Kohanim (priests), who were anointed to serve and minister."
An obvious question arises: the four children are also identified as sons of Moshe. They were not. In fact, Moshe's offspring are not mentioned in this section at all.
Moshe's mention as a forebearer of Ahron's children is in the context of a phrase that is seemingly out of place. "These are the offspring of Ahron and Moshe on the day that Hashem spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai." What does speaking to Moshe at Sinai have to do with Moshe's relationship to his nephews?
The Talmud in Sanhedrin 19b derives from this verse that if one teaches someone else's children Torah it is as if he bore them. Thus, it is understandable that the Torah considers the children of Ahron, Moshe's offspring, "on the day that Hashem spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai."
Yet it is troubling. Why is Moshe considered a parent because he taught Torah to his nephews? Is that the greatest reason for the adulation that is due Moshe? He led the Jews, his nephews included from, Egypt. He orchestrated the splitting of the sea, and he saved them from heavenly retribution time and time again. Why is he considered as a parent only in the role of an educator? Why can't Moshe be considered as a savior or a patron, "as if he bore them?"
Rav Lazer Gordon, the Telshe Rosh Yeshiva, had a man visit his Yeshiva to find a suitable match for his daughter. The man pointed to a boy who seemed very steeped in his studies and inquired about him. "Oh," said Reb Laizer. "He is my Yankele. He is one of the most brilliant students in Telshe."

The man assumed it was the Rav's son and gestured toward another student. "That is my Dovid'l. He has extremely fine character." The man was puzzled until he kept hearing from the Rav a description of each boy was preceded with the words, "my." "My Avrohom. My Meir. And My Chaim'l."

"Are all these students your family?" he asked.

Rav Lazer smiled, "everyone who is in my Yeshiva is a dear child. That is the only way I will have it."

The Torah is not telling those who are being taught Torah, "consider your teacher as if he were your father." There are many sorts of role models who may be considered as dear as a parent.

The Torah is telling a message to the teacher of Torah. It is impossible to mold a student and teach him the greatness of Torah unless you love him and treat him as if he were your child.

A teacher in our Yeshiva was asked, "Rabbi, how are your children?" In all sincerity he replied, "do you mean the ones I see at night or the ones who I see by day?"

Moshe is identified as a forebearer of Ahron's children in a very specific context: when he had to show supernatural love for them. When teaching them Torah.

If you don't love your student as your own child, you may have read to him. You may have lectured him. But you certainly did not teach him.

Dedicated by Berny and Tova Fuchs in memory of Chana Mindel Fuchs

Good Shabbos!

---

https://en.yhb.org.il/revivim1044/

Advocacy Instead of Coercion

May 12, 2023

Revivim

RABBI ELIEZER MELAMED

There is an inherent conflict of values between the liberal camp and the traditional-Jewish camp, between the values of freedom, and the values of Judaism and conservatism • The values of Judaism require a certain element of coercion in the public sphere, but there is no place for coercion in the private sphere • The solution begins with the mutual recognition of the two groups in the importance of each other's values • In depth, the two perceptions complement and inspire one another

The Clash of Values

As part of the debate surrounding the need for a deep overhaul of the legal system, concerns arise from the opponents of the reform, namely, that those who support the reform which will simultaneously strengthen the Jewish identity of the state, strive to dictate religious laws by force and coercion while suppressing liberal values, primarily, freedom of the individual. The concern stems from the perception that there is a fundamental conflict between traditional Jewish values and liberal values that are considered secular. However, the truth is that the value of freedom, which is the foundation of liberalism, is one of the most basic values in Judaism. So the real question is: how can we give room in the State of Israel to the entirety of Jewish values – on the one hand, the traditional values recognized as sacred, such as Talmud Torah, family, Shabbat and kashrut, and on the other hand, the value of freedom and human rights, which are also sacred Jewish values?

The problem is that the majority of the people who emphasize the accepted values as sacred in Judaism tend to give less consideration to the values of freedom, human dignity, and social reform, and even tend to consider them as secular values. On the other hand, those who emphasize the liberal position tend to reduce the place of the values accepted as sacred in Judaism to the sphere of the individual alone, in contrast to the Jewish vision which strives to express them in the public, and national sphere.

Traditional Jewish Values Require Coercion

The problem is deep, because in reality, the values conflict. If we want Shabbat to be present, and afford all the people of Israel a day in which everyone, rich and poor alike, can rest from work, enjoy the fruits of their labor with their family members, and delve into the meaning of life and values – then it is necessary to create comprehensive restrictions on the labor market, businesses, and public transportation. Because only when an entire society ceases to work, is it possible to create a deep, Shabbat culture that encompasses rest, pleasure, equality, and spiritual development reflected in study of Torah.

The same holds true for the mitzvot that express faith in God, such as kashrut. When these mitzvot are performed in the public sphere, they preserve and emphasize the uniqueness of the Jewish nation and its heritage and strengthen the Jewish national identity, which is an important value for all those with Jewish identity. The same applies to other mitzvot, as well. However, when these values are relegated only to the individual sphere and groups interested in it, society as a whole loses its Jewish character, is dominated by market forces and universal cultural values, and the great vision of the Jewish people for Tikkun Olam (improvement of the world) vanishes.

The Sacred Value of Freedom Greatly Restricts Coercion

On the other hand, the value of personal freedom is also sacred, since it is one of the main expressions of the image of God in man because only a person who freely chooses to identify with sacred values, can truly devote himself to the improvement of society and the world. Moreover, without freedom, man is unable to reveal the broad talents God has instilled within him, to creatively express his full ambitions, and thus, participate with God in adding goodness and blessing to the world.

Because of the tremendous importance of the value of freedom, we commemorate it during the Pesach holiday, 'Ze'man Herutainu' (the season of our freedom), which is

the national holiday of freedom of the people of Israel, and the holiday of the personal freedom of man, for in the Exodus from Egypt it was revealed that man is a free person, and not a slave.

Accordingly, there is no place for coercion in the private sphere, and even in the public-national sphere, there is no place for coercion without broad agreement, and maximum consideration for minority groups. Because, ultimately, the objective of Torah and mitzvot is to benefit every individual to the greatest extent, and it is unfitting in the name of the Torah to cause grief to those who do not identify with its mitzvot.

Public Responsibility Requires Advocacy and Protest, Not Coercion

Indeed, it can be argued that religious duty obligates forcing others to observe the mitzvot in farhesia (the public sphere), for example, keeping Shabbat in the public sphere, and preventing recognition of a relationship not according to Jewish law. This is not the place to expand on this, but it seems this religious obligation exists when there is a broad public acceptance of religious lifestyle, and even a person who transgresses religious mitzvot agrees in principle it is appropriate to observe mitzvot, but that his urge to sin, overpowers him. However, in a situation like ours, the value of freedom takes precedence, and the obligation remaining for those who keep Torah is the obligation of protest, i.e., reasoned criticism against positions and phenomena contrary to Jewish law, and education and striving for as broad an agreement as possible for strengthening Torah life. All this, while respecting and appreciating the good deeds, individual and national, of those who do not observe mitzvot according to the command of the Torah, but rather, perform their good deeds out of moral consciousness.

No Formula for the Solution Exists, But There is a Direction

It seems we can agree there is no single formula for solving the numerous dilemmas created as a result of the clash between traditional values and the value of freedom, but the beginning of the solution is recognition that, indeed, these are two important sets of values, both in terms of their sanctity in Jewish tradition, and in terms of their human, moral value stemming from freedom of choice. For this reason, in many cases internal Jewish dialogue, and not only secular liberal, can lead to a religious position that does not necessitate coercion and infringement of freedom. On the other hand, a secular liberal dialogue that understands the need to emphasize the spiritual and religious tradition of the Jewish people, in order to realize the vision of Tikkun Olam in Jewish heritage, can lead to a position that supports giving adequate expression to Jewish identity in the public sphere.

Enrichment and Reconciliation between Obligation and Freedom

On the surface, conflicts arise between these two sets of values, but on a higher and deeper level, they enrich and complement one another. The fact is, all of society already shares numerous values, both religious and secular, such as human dignity, preservation of life, helping the poor and the sick, justice, Shabbat and Jewish holidays, circumcision, the Hebrew calendar, the Hebrew language, and self-sacrifice for the nation, and humanity. Everyone sees these values as the heritage of Judaism – some as a divine instruction revealed through the Jewish nation, and others, as an inspiration revealed in human, moral choice.

The more people who understand the shared values and the mutual enrichment that can exist between them, the more public representatives will be able to find agreements and arrangements that will give maximum room to both types of values, in a way that will improve each other, and avoid excessive grief from one of the groups. In this way, the words of our Sages will be fulfilled by us (Avot 5:17): "Every dispute that is for the sake of Heaven, will in the end endure," in the sense that the values of both sides will be fulfilled, and enrich one and other for generations.

More on the Value of Freedom

Incidentally, one can also learn about the value of freedom from this week's Torah portion Behar, which deals with the mitzvah to free a Hebrew slave. In other words, even in a period when slavery was passed down from generation to generation, and upon which economic life was based, the Torah stipulated that it is a mitzvah for every slave to be freed at the end of six years, or at the very latest, in the Yovel (Jubilee) year, and that slavery is not inherited by children. Similarly, the Torah forbids abusive work practices of a slave, rather, commands giving him living conditions similar to that of his master. From the totality of these mitzvot, it emerges that slavery is a be-di'avad (ex post facto) situation, i.e., only in times when it is impossible financially to exist without it, the Torah gave the option for slavery under limited conditions, in accord with morality. Consequently, when it is possible to live without slavery, it is a mitzvah to cancel it (see, "Peninei Halakha: Shevi'it ve'Yovel" 10:11-11).

A Canaanite Save

Even in relation to a Gentile slave (called an 'eved Kenaani', or Canaanite slave), whose status was apparently similar to the status of other slaves in the world – i.e., his slavery was indefinite, and even his descendants after him are slaves – the Torah commanded to preserve the image of God within him. For when a Jew bought a male or female slave, they had to agree to accept upon themselves the mitzvot of the Torah in front of a Beit Din (court of Jewish law), including circumcision for males, and immersion in a mikvah for both, and thus, they became Jews (SA, YD, 267: 5). If at the time of their purchase they debated whether they agreed to convert and accept the mitzvot, the master was permitted to keep them with him only for up to twelve months, in hope they would agree to convert and

accept the mitzvot. If they did not agree, it is the duty of the master to sell them to a non-Jew.

We see then that all of a Jew's slaves were converted, and when they were freed (over the course of the generations they were all freed), they immediately became complete Jews.

The Right of Slaves to Observe Mitzvot and Immigrate to Israel

Since the slaves and maidservants were converted, the master was obligated to allow them to observe mitzvot; therefore, it was forbidden to sell them to a Gentile, because they would not be able to observe the mitzvot properly. And if he sold them to a Gentile, our Sages fined him that he would have to redeem them at a price of up to ten times their value, and after that, be obliged to release them (SA, YD 267:80).

Likewise, it is forbidden for a master who lives in the Land of Israel to compel his servants to go with him abroad, because by doing so, he disqualifies them from the mitzvot of Yishuv Ha'Aretz (settling the Land of Israel), and anyone who resides outside of Eretz Yisrael is considered as though he is engaged in idol worship (Ketubot 110b). And if they did not agree to go with him, he is obligated to sell them to a master who lives in Eretz Yisrael, or to release them (Gittin 43b; 44a; SA, 167: 82).

Furthermore, a slave or maidservant who was bought abroad can demand from their master to immigrate to Israel in order to fulfill the mitzvah of Yishuv Ha'Aretz, and then, either the master immigrates with them, or he sells them to a master who lives in Israel, or he frees them (Ketubot 110b). And if the master did not agree and the slave ran away and immigrated to the Eretz Yisrael, the Torah commanded that he not be returned to his master who lives abroad, as written: " You shall not turn over to the master a slave who seeks refuge with you from that master. Such individuals shall live with you in any place they may choose among the settlements in your midst, wherever they please; you must not ill-treat them" (Deuteronomy 23: 16-17). Rather, the master must release him with a get shichrur (bill of release), and if he did not agree to release him, the Beit Din invalidates his ownership of him, and the slave is free to go (Gittin 45a; SA, 267: 84-85).

It is worth noting that in ancient times, it was customary to mark the slaves and maidservants by removing two front teeth from their mouths, or cutting off their ear or one of their fingers. However, the Torah commanded that the master must not inflict a serious injury on his slaves, and if he inflicts an injury on one of his slave's limbs that cannot be healed, the slave is thus freed (SA 267: 27-35; 40).

This article appears in the 'Besheva' newspaper and was translated from Hebrew.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Bamidbar

Rallying Round the Mishkan Is a Prerequisite for Rallying Round the Flags

Rallying Round the Mishkan Is a Prerequisite for Rallying Round the Flags

Sefer Bamidbar is referred to in the Medrash as the "Chomesh HaPekudim" (Book of Numbers). The sefer begins with the census of Klal Yisrael in Parshas Bamidbar and it (sort of) ends in Parshas Pinchas at the end of the 40 years in the desert, also with a census.

Following the enumeration of Klal Yisrael here at the beginning of Bamidbar, the Torah says: "Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: But you shall not count the tribe of Levi, and you shall not take their census among the Children of Israel." (Bamidbar 1:48-49) Rashi explains that this was because they are the "legion of the King" and because a decree was to go forth that all who were counted would die in the wilderness (as a result of the aveira of the Meraglim – the sin of the Spies) and He did not want the Bnei Levi, who did not err with the Egel Hazahav (Golden Calf) to be included in that decree.

Then Hashem further commands Moshe: "And you shall appoint the Levites over the Mishkan Ha'Eidus, over all of its keylim (utensils) and over everything that belongs to it. They shall carry the Mishkan and all its keylim and they shall serve it; and they shall encamp around the Mishkan." (Bamidbar 1:50) The Leviim were given a specific job: "When the Mishkan journeys, the Levites shall take it down, and when the Mishkan encamps, the Levites shall erect it, and an alien who approaches shall be put to death." (Bamidbar 1:51)

Then the very next topic is the "Degalim" (flags). Each of the four camps contained three shevatim (tribes) within them and each shevet had its own flag. The Leviim were not included in any of these camps, but rather they were assigned the encampment immediately surrounding the Mishkan. Finally, after discussing all of the shevatim, their leaders, their encampment locations, and their population, at long last – by Chamishi – the Children of Levi are counted, including an enumeration of the families of Levi, the population of each family, and an assignment of the specific job of each Levitical family (who carried the Aron, who carried the boards of the Mishkan, who carried the keylim, etc., etc.)

This seems like a very strange way to write this parsha. Why insert the commandment to not count the Leviim and describe their jobs in the middle of the counting? If we would edit (chas v'Shalom) this parsha, we would have said "Don't do it like that!" First finish counting the people. Then after the people are counted (obviously without Shevet Levi because they are not mentioned among the 12 shevatim whose numbers are specified), specify the details of the flag formations and how they traveled. Then after that, introduce and say "Now count the Leviim" and list the specific jobs of every part of Shevet

Levi. Why does the Torah insert the commandment not to count the Leviim and describe their jobs in the middle of the counting? First finish the counting and the Degalim. Then say to count the Leviim and list their jobs. What is the point of inserting pesukim 48-54 at the end of the first perek?

The sefer Shemen haTov cites a beautiful observation here by Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky. The first perek of Sefer Bamidbar occurs on the first day of the second month of the second year, counting from yetzias (the exodus from) Mitzrayim (Egypt). They have been travelling on the road for about a year! Why didn't Hashem tell Klal Yisrael as soon as they left Mitzrayim how they should travel? This business of dividing the people into camps and setting up a system of flags for each shevet should have been spelled out in Sefer Shmos! Why did Hashem wait an entire year before spelling out these basic details of their travel configuration?

Rav Yaakov says that the flags were a wonderful innovation (as we shall soon see). However, the phenomenon of tribal flags divides everyone into different groups. It indicates that everyone is different. "I am somewhat different from you. I am in this camp and I have this color flag. You are in that camp and you have that color flag." This can lead to competition, chauvinism, and an "I am better than you" attitude.

To just give an example of this: There are five branches of the United States military service – the Army, the Navy, the Marines, the Air Force, and the Coast Guard. (This was before the creation of the United States Space Force.) Each one of these branches has its own flag. Is there competition between the branches? You bet there is! Is there a certain chauvinism that 'we are better than you'? Yes, there is! At West Point, on the roof of one of the buildings, there is a large sign which reads: Beat Navy! This is standard procedure. Ask an Air Force pilot "Who are better pilots – the Air Force or the Navy"? The Air Force person will say "Of course the Air Force pilot. That is our job!" Ask a Navy pilot the same question. He will tell you "Anybody can land on a regular runway. Try landing on an aircraft carrier that is bouncing up and down in the water! We are the real pilots!"

Everyone is fighting for the good of the United States of America, but the Navy holds that the Air Force can't fly and the Marines hold that the Army can't fight and so on.

Rav Kamenetsky says – the only reason the military can exist like this is because at the end of the day, they are all fighting for the good of the United States. There is something central that binds them all together.

Similarly, he says, the reason that when they left Mitzrayim they couldn't be divided into groups with flags is because they did not yet have such a central unifying entity to rally around. That was all true until they built the Mishkan. Once they built the Mishkan, which traveled in the midst of the camp, the Mishkan became the glue that held everyone together. "Yes, you have your job and I have my job but at the end of the day, we need to cooperate." There is a higher purpose over here that unifies everyone who travels around the Mishkan.

Therefore, there could only be division by camp and flags in the second year after they left Mitzrayim, after the Mishkan was already constructed and erected and had taken its central position in the midst of the camp. By that time, they understood that the Mishkan unified them all.

Those are the words of Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky. The Shemen HaTov writes that this is why the Torah inserts the reminder to Klal Yisrael that they have within them a Shevet Levi, who need to be counted by themselves and whose job is to supervise the assembly and disassembly of the Mishkan, into the middle of this parsha (between the census and the flags) – where it really does not belong. The insertion was a reminder of the central role the Mishkan played in unifying Klal Yisrael and allowing them to configure themselves by independent camps and flags.

Even though in terms of streamlining the narration, it would have been just as well to skip this section that will be repeated later on in the parsha, the Torah wants to make a point here that we must remember the central motif that binds us as a single nation. Therefore, right before the flags, the Torah inserts the Mishkan and its supervisors (the Leviim).

Raising a Person's Flag Up the Flag Pole To Create Group Identity

The Medrash Rabbah in Parshas Bamidbar says that when Hashem's Presence descended upon Har Sinai (which we will reenact a week from this Shabbos on Shavuos morning), 22 rivivos (units) of 10,000 malachim (angels) descended with Him – each with flags. This is a strange statement because a flag is a physical item and malachim are entirely spiritual. Klal Yisrael saw this sight and – the Medrash adds – they began to passionately long for flags for themselves. Hashem responded that since they longed for flags, He would grant their wish. Therefore, He gave them the flags.

The question, of course, is: What is so great about flags and especially the nuance of the language of the Medrash – "they passionately longed for Flags" (nis'avee'sem)?

The answer is that flags represent a person's tachlis (purpose). Even though malachim are spiritual beings, when it says they each had their own flag, it really means that each had their own purpose. Chazal say in many places that every malach has only one purpose. They only do one thing at a time – that is their sole focus. Every malach knows its job and its designated role in existence. When the Medrash says that Klal Yisrael "passionately longed" for flags, it does not mean physical flags. They longed for the ability to know their purpose in life and their designated mission.

This is one of the greatest gifts that a person can have in this world – to know what he is supposed to do. In Parshas

VaYechi, when Yaakov Avinu takes all his children beside his death bed and gives them his "blessing," we are often left wondering – what kind of blessings are these? Many of them are not really blessings. The answer is that he tells them about their techunas ha'nefesh – the inner qualities of their souls – their essence. He tells them about their strengths and their weaknesses. He tells them what they are supposed to be doing. That is the biggest bracha in life – to know what you are supposed to do.

People talk about "having to find themselves." It is a major challenge. I don't know if the way many people try to go about "finding themselves" is always correct, but the fact that they want to "find themselves" is very understandable and natural. That is why sometimes people work at a job for ten, twenty, or thirty years and then suddenly completely switch jobs and find themselves happier than they have ever been. They feel that they have wasted thirty years of their life, because they were not doing what they were "supposed to be doing."

So, the source of the envy that Klal Yisrael had for the malachim was that they saw that every malach understood and was focused on their dedicated mission. This is the attribute for which they longed. Hashem said "This is what I am going to do. I am going to give you flags as well and group you with others who have the same tachlis (purpose) and the same tafkid (role). This is a great blessing.

I would like to conclude with an interesting story brought down by the Tolna Rebbe, which speaks to this point.

There was a Yekkishe Yid (Jew of German descent) named Rav Avrohom Hoffman, who lived in Yerushalayim (Jerusalem) and worked for the government. He was in Eretz Yisrael both before and during World War II. After the war, when Holocaust survivors began arriving in Eretz Yisrael, Gerer Chassidim (from Poland) were among those who came. The first time Rav Hoffman saw Gerer Chassidim walking down the streets of Yerushalayim, he saw that their pants were tucked into their socks. For him, this was the strangest thing in the world. Why stick your pant legs into your socks?

He met two Gerer Chassidim and he asked them about this strange practice. They explained, "In Poland the streets were not paved. The roads were muddy. Socks cost less than pants. If something has to get dirty, better the socks should get dirty than the pants. That is why we wear our pants inside our socks."

Rav Hoffman said, "I have news for you. This is not Poland. The streets in Yerushalayim are not muddy and there is no reason to wear your socks in your pants anymore." This logical observation made no impression whatsoever upon them. Sometime after that, Rav Avrohom Hoffman met the Gerer Rebbe (the Beis Yisrael). He figured that since he could not get a satisfactory answer from the chassidim, he would ask the Rebbe himself about this strange custom.

The Rebbe answered: "This is our flag!" This is part of the identification uniform of a Gerer Chassid. When he wears his pants in this fashion, he is proclaiming "I am a Chossid of the Gerer Rebbe." This is my group and this is my tachlis. That is what I am proud of and that is the way I fly my flag – by wearing my pants inside my socks.

This is what flags are all about – being part of something that is bigger than the person himself, being part of a group, knowing the tachlis of the group and knowing one's tafkid within a specific group.

Good Shabbos and Good Yom Tov.

Who Owns Judaism?

Why Give the Torah in a Desert, Not in Five-Star Resort?

Rabbi YY Jacobson

The Desert

This week's Torah portion, named "Bamidbar," which means "in the desert," is always read preceding the holiday of Shavuos, when we celebrate the giving of the Torah at Sinai, more than 3,300 years ago, in the year 1313 BCE. [1]

One reason for reading this portion as a preparation for Shavuos is because the Torah was given "bamidbar," in a desert. It was at Mt. Sinai in the Sinai desert where the newly liberated Hebrew slaves were molded into a nation and given the blueprint for repairing the world. But that only carries the question over: Of all places, why indeed was Torah given in a wilderness?

What is more, our sages describe Sinai as the marriage between G-d and His people;[2] whoever heard of getting married in a barren desert? The Torah should have been given in a splendid environment, perhaps in the Hilton or the Waldorf-Astoria, not in a desolate wilderness!

Let us introduce one more question: Why was it necessary for the Jewish people to wander 40 years in this desert before entering the Promised Land? Was 210 years in Egypt, including more than 80 years of hard labor, not enough? Why liberate them from Egypt only to put them through another 40 years in the wilderness? [3]

There are many explanations for the unique relationship between Torah and the desert. Here are three.

Absolute Sublimity

1) Had the Torah been given in a civilized city or community, people might have defined it as a product of a particular culture, milieu, and environment. Sophisticated academics would explain to us the particular "genre" of Torah, as if it were an outdated, modern, or post-modern, piece of literature, an epic or lyric, a work of history, law, tragedy, or philosophy. They would enlighten us as to whether Torah belonged to the time of the Athenians, the Hellenistic age, the Greco-Roman period, the Byzantine age, or another period of civilization. Torah would be labeled, classified, and qualified. It would be "put into perspective."

But Torah cannot be put into a particular cultural or artistic perspective. Torah is not culture, literature, art, history, law, or fiction. Torah embodies the eternal truths about existence, life, and destiny that speak in every language, in every culture, in every age, and to every soul. The Torah cannot be reduced to a particular time frame or reference point. It benefits all the arts but never competes with them.

Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel (himself a scion of the great Chasidic masters) put it thus: [4] "Why does the Bible surpass everything created by man? Why is there no work worthy of comparison with it? Why is there no substitute for the Bible, no parallel to the history it has engendered? Why must all who seek the living G-d turn to its pages?

"Set the Bible beside any of the truly great books produced by the genius of man and see how they are diminished in stature. The Bible shows no concern with literary form, with verbal beauty, yet its absolute sublimity rings through all its pages. Its lines are so monumental and at the same time so simple that whoever tries to compete with them produces either a commentary or a caricature. It is a work we do not know how to assess. Other books you can estimate, you can measure, compare; the Bible you can only extol. Its insights surpass our standards. There is nothing greater. In three thousand years it has not aged a day. It is a book that cannot die. Oblivion shuns its pages."

"Absolute sublimity." Such a work must be taught and transmitted in a desert. A desert is not associated with any particular culture or form of living. A desert is barren, raw, and plain. A desert is not sophisticated; it is real and simple. [5]

Ownerless

2) Had the Torah been given in a particular city or community, its inhabitants would have claimed copyrights on it. Had the Torah been given in Boro Park, Crown Heights, Williamsburg, Lakewood, or Monsey, these communities would claim "ownership" of the Torah. "We know how to interpret Torah, how to assess it, how to appreciate it. It belongs to us." The same would hold true if the Torah was given in Teneck or the Upper West Side.

The desert, on the other hand, is ownerless. Nobody wants the desert. It belongs to nobody. Torah, too, is ownerless. It belongs to every Jewish soul on earth. Nobody holds any "rights" to the Torah. It is the living, vibrant conversation of G-d with every living Jew. [6] No group, denomination, or community "owns" it more than anyone else. (Of course, those privileged to study Torah and adhere to its integrity and formula ought to teach and inspire; but nobody owns it.)

Life in the Fast Lane

3) Had the Torah been given in a civilized and splendid terrain, we might have believed that its objective was to guide the beautiful life and the splendid heart.

But that is not Torah.

Torah does not tell us that life is easy and that faith is bliss. On the contrary, we were placed in a personal and global wilderness, and life is a battle. And it is precisely this battle that G-d intended us to face, day in and day out. Do not be disturbed or demoralized, the Torah teaches, by your traumas, challenges, inconsistencies, and weaknesses. Do not be shaken when you do not live up to your highest aspirations, and often do not actualize or maintain your inspiration. Do not be discouraged; because the Torah was given precisely to help us pave a road in the barren desert of the human psyche, to create a highway in the jungle of history and in the personal jungle of our anxiety-ridden brains. Had the Torah been given in a beautiful city, then all we would have is a guide on how to live in beauty, in ecstasy. But Torah came to teach us how to confront our wilderness and to transform a desert into a paradise.

That is how the spiritual masters explained the reason for the Torah being given on a mountain. Why a mountain, and not flat land?

A mountain is essentially elevated earth. That is the profound message of Torah: With earth, gravel, dirt and mud, you must battle. That is intrinsic to the human condition and the reality of our world. Yet you must remember that your mission is to elevate the earth, to introduce holiness and G-dliness into a mundane and soiled world.[7]

G-d did not desire holy people doing holy things; he wanted people who think they are unholy doing holy things; to disentangle themselves from the voices that tell them they are anything but whole and one, derivatives of infinite oneness. [8] He desired that earthly human beings become mountains of moral dignity and divine grace.

(Please make a small and secure contribution to help us continue our work. Click here.)

[1] Rambam Hilchos Tefilah 13:2. Tur and Schulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 428:4

[2] Mishnah Taanis 26b. Midrashim and commentaries on the Song of Songs. Cf. Rambam Hilchos Teshuvah chapter 10

[3] The Bible records that the wandering 40 years was a punishment for the sin of the spies who persuaded the people to reject their mission of entering the land of Israel. But certainly, G-d could have punished them in different ways. Why did He choose this particular consequence?

[4] G-d In Search Of Man pp. 240-242

[5] A similar idea is expressed in Midrash Rabah Bamidbar 19:26 and Midrash Tanchumah Chukas 21

[6] Yalkut Shemoni to Yesro Remez 275

[7] Sefer Hamaamarim 5655 p. 188

[8] See Tanya chapters 27; 36

Parshas Bamidbar

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in commemoration of the yahrzeit of Todros ben Shlomo, Theodore (Teddy) Groll,

Ethics of Our Fathers

They proved their lineage according to their families and their fathers' houses (Bamidbar 1:18).

Rashi (ad loc) explains that every individual in Bnei Yisroel was required to bring proof of his lineage at this time, establishing the shevet to which he belonged. Yalkut Shimoni (Bamidbar 1-684) states further that the nations of the world actually asked Hashem to give them the Torah as well, but Hashem refused to grant their request because they were unable to establish their own genealogy. Why is the establishment of genealogy a prerequisite to receiving the Torah?

Torah emphasizes the importance of maintaining moral and ethical standards because the ultimate goal of the Torah is to properly develop and refine one's character. Unfortunately, in today's society, we are constantly inundated by influences that run counter to this ideal.

For example, contemporary culture not only values the notion of amassing great wealth, but, in particular, it idealizes the concept of amassing wealth without working for it. This shift in values is evidenced by the great success of Ponzi schemes, which have netted countless victims. The reason so many people are taken in by these con artists is not that people have become less intelligent; rather, it is that they have absorbed the message of society that work is not a prerequisite for making a living. The appeal of these schemes lies in their promise of massive profits without the need to invest any time or effort. Thanks to the influences of modern society, people tend to wish so desperately for those promises to be true that they become willing victims of the purveyors of any such hope.

How can a person develop an inner moral compass that will help him resist the temptation to search for shortcuts or worse – cheating and stealing? For this purpose, it is crucial to have role models at home. Thus, Hashem told the nations of the world that since their genealogy was uncertain – they did not even know who their own fathers were – it was impossible for them to have grown up with proper role models. This made them unworthy of receiving the Torah.

This understanding should serve as the source of a tremendous insight into the significance of parental influence and teach us how we must deal with our own children. The key to raising good children is being an honest and moral person. External displays of frumkeit are merely the trimmings; the essence of a person is measured by his moral compass. Unfortunately, this is a fact that is lost even on members of the "religious" community. Many families have no issue breaking the spirit of the law as long as they aren't breaking the letter of the law.

An example of this is buying something that you intend to use but with the knowledge that after using it you will return it to the place of purchase for a full refund. Or amassing many tens of credit cards (sometimes hundreds) in order to receive all the incentives offered by each credit card issuer without ever intending to use the cards. In fact, in many ways this is more devastating to a child's moral development than growing up with parents who steal outright. Eventually, a child might learn that stealing is wrong, but he will almost certainly never learn that breaking the spirit of the law is wrong.

The only hope for developing a child's moral character is with strong parental guidance. This is why a strong family structure is crucial to the process. If a child grows up without the proper role models then he will not have an example to guide him through life. Even if some individual children can overcome this disability, an entire nation without a strong family lineage cannot overcome this as a society. That is the reason Hashem didn't want to give the Torah to those nations that were unable to establish a proper family lineage.

Misplaced Giving

Nadav and Avihu died before Hashem when they brought a strange fire before Hashem in the Sinai desert, and they did not have children (Bamidbar 3:4).

The Torah's comment that Nadav and Avihu had no children appears to be a curious non sequitur in the account of the sin that cost them their lives. According to Chazal, however, it is very much in place.

The Gemara derives from this possuk that had they indeed had children, Nadav and Avihu would not have died. As a result, the Gemara concludes that a person who does not attempt to fulfill the mitzvah of "be fruitful and multiply" is liable to the Heavenly death penalty (of course, this means that they were not married; had they been married and simply not blessed with children, then they certainly would not have been blamed for their lack of progeny).

This is very difficult to understand in light of the fact that the Torah explicitly identifies their sin as the act of bringing "a strange fire." How can the Gemara contend that they incurred the death penalty because they did not attempt to have children?

The answer to this question lies in understanding the nature of their sin. Why, in fact, did Nadav and Avihu bring a "strange fire" to the Mishkan? What is the source of the temptation to commit such a sin?

Imagine the following scenario: One Friday morning, a woman receives a phone call informing her that one of her neighbors is ill. The unfortunate woman, she is told, has been bedridden and does not have food for Shabbos. Naturally, the altruistic neighbor decides to help out.

There are two theoretical ways for such a situation to be handled. One is for the woman to prepare Shabbos food for her neighbor in her own kitchen, package it, and deliver it to the recipient's door. The other is for the woman to be invited to her neighbor's home, where the recipient of her largesse will place her own kitchen and supplies at her disposal so that she can prepare the Shabbos meals. Is there any question as to which option the neighbor would prefer? Cooking in her own home and sending the food to her neighbor makes her a benefactor; cooking in her neighbor's

home, in contrast, would mean that she is simply playing the role of a maid. Any ordinary human being would naturally wish to be perceived as a benefactor and not as a servant.

This explains the motivation for Nadav and Avihu's actions. Rather than bringing a fire of their own making, they were commanded to allow the korbanos to be consumed by a fire sent from above. But Nadav and Avihu knew that by doing so, they would be relating to Hashem merely as "servants" with assigned tasks to perform. Their true desire, however, was to play the role of "benefactors," which they felt they could do by offering a contribution of their own – a fire of their own creation. Rather than simply performing a service, doing so would mean that they would actually be bringing a gift. Unfortunately, they were misguided in their efforts, for Hashem's true intent was indeed for them to play the role of His servants, not to act as His benefactors.

Since Nadav and Avihu lacked children of their own, they did not have a way to express their need to act as benefactors within an appropriate and healthy context. Instead, they sought to fulfill that need in their relationship with Hashem, a context that was highly improper. The natural drive to be a giver was thus channeled in an unhealthy and sinful way.

Hence, when the Gemara teaches us that Nadav and Avihu would not have died had they had children, it reveals to us the underlying motivation of their sin. This is even reflected by their very names; the name Nadav itself means "benefactor," and the name Avihu is a contraction of the phrase avi hu, "he is my father," referring to the epitome of a giver. In this possuk, then, the Torah explains the root cause of their fatal error: the channeling of a natural human need into a wholly inappropriate context.

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parsha Insights
For the week ending 20 May 2023 / 29 Iyar 5783
Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com
Parshat Bamidbar
You Are Not Everybody Else

"In the desert" (1:1)

It is the late 1800's.

A simple farmer is tilling his field and then he hits the motherlode. Gold! And a lot of it.

A wealthy financier in the big city offers him a fortune for his field. The financier sends him a nice advance and asks to meet him at his office where they will close the deal. The big city is a two-week trip by horse from his village. But he's heard of this newfangled invention called the train.

He goes to the central train station to buy a ticket. The lady behind the ticket counter asks him what type of ticket he wants: first, second or third class. She sees he's not too sure, so she says, "Third class tickets get you a place on the train but nothing more. You may also have to stand for the entire trip. Second class guarantees a seat, but it costs more." Giving him a quick once over, she figures that there's no point in describing first class.

"And first class?" he inquires indignantly. Rolling her eyes, she explains the luxuries of first class travel. She concludes, "It's only for the very, very wealthy." Sensing her condescension, he juts out his chin and tells her, "First class for me!" and pays the exorbitant price.

The farmer heads for the platform as the train pulls into the station. It's still early and most people haven't arrived yet, but he notices some passengers boarding the very last car on the train. Not wanting to stick out, he follows them in. He sees them looking around furtively and then squeezing beneath the benches, so he does the same. He gets into a cozy position and in no time falls asleep.

The next thing he knows, he is being woken by a furious man who is kicking him and pulling him out from under the bench. Startled and disoriented, he stumbles to his feet and confronts his attacker. "Who are you?" The man smirks, grabs his shirt, and speaks right into his face. "I am the conductor. That's who. And you, lowlife, are trying to hitch a free ride." "No, I'm not! I paid top dollar for this first class seat!" he responds, which elicits peals of laughter from the other passengers, who are relishing the free entertainment.

He starts fishing around in his pockets, and, to their utter surprise, pulls out, just as he said, a first class ticket. The conductor studies the ticket, realizes it is authentic, and then, speaking in the hushed tones reserved for the very wealthy, asks the farmer, "Sir. You have a first class ticket. Why were you under the bench?" The farmer's face flushes in embarrassment, "But that's what everybody else was doing?" To which the conductor tells him, "Sir, you are not everybody else."

In the Book of Devarim, the Torah is described as "a great sound that does not cease" (5:19). The Torah was given in a desert, and does not cease to be given in the desert. There are many kinds of desert. There are physical deserts and there are moral and spiritual deserts. We are living in a type of desert where the self-evident axioms of morality and decency are under constant and overwhelming onslaught. Our only salvation is to remember that "we are not everyone else." We are members of the greatest family in the world – the Jewish People.

We have a first class ticket that takes us where nobody else can go.

**Sources: Based on a story in Positive Vision by Rabbi Avrohom Neuberger*

לע״נ

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

Ruth: The Unseen Redeemer

A New Commentary on the Book of Ruth

Introduction:

This commentary focuses on the personal and social message of the book of Ruth, and specifically on the personality or Ruth and her relationships with Naomi. My working assumption is that Naomi was a unique and brave woman, and that Ruth, her daughter-in-law, recognized these qualities in her and admired her. When Naomi's world collapsed following the death of her husband and children, Ruth decided to pull her out of the depression into which she has sunk. Since Ruth knew that Naomi will refuse to feel dependent and needy by receiving help from others, she worked behind the scenes, to the extent of erasing her own personality, in order to give Naomi the feeling that she rehabilitated her world through her own efforts and with the guidance of God. The story is written by a master, and as we shall see, the verbs associated with movement such as come, go, return, get up, and sit, are guiding verbs. Additionally, there are verbs and expressions which repeat themselves in a mirror structure, and as a transition from the negative to the positive, as well as such which predict later actions and processes. Since this is the focus of my commentary, I will not dwell on the question of Halakhic accuracy in the book of Ruth in issues such as the laws of conversion and the Levirate law. However, I will call the readers' attention to these problems, each one in its place.

Chapter 1:1. And it happened in the days when the Judges ruled[1], that there was a famine in the land, and a man went from Bethlehem[2] to sojourn in the Plains of Moab[3], he and his wife and his two sons. 2. And the man's name was Elimelech[4], and his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Khilyon, Ephrathites, from Bethlehem of Judah. And they came to the Plains of Moab and they were there[5]. 3. And Elimelech Naomi's husband died, and she together with her two sons were left. 4. And they took for themselves Moabite wives. The name of one was Orpah[6], and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelled there some ten years. 5. And the two of them, Mahlon and Khilyon, died as well, and the woman was left[7] of her two children

[1] This alludes to the expression "in those days there was no king in Israel, and each person did as he wished", which appears three times in the book of Judges (17:6; 18:1; 21:25; and with slight differences in 19:1). In Judges the expression appears in association with transgressions of idolatry, robbery, murder, promiscuity, rape, civil war, and kidnapping, and its appearance here signals that Elimelech's action is negative, and that it happens in a context of total mayhem and disrespect for the law.

[2] Bethlehem's name means the house of bread.

[3] A house is a permanent place whereas a field is a temporary shelter. He leaves the house which promises bread and goes to a field, with the purpose of being a temporary visitor, a sojourner. It is interesting to note that the reason for the commandment to reject the Moabites is that they did not welcome the Israelites with bread. Elimelech act is presents as illogical, as he moves from a place called "House of Bread" to a place known for its reluctance to give bread.

[4] The names are symbolic. **Elimelech** – strength and kingship; **Naomi** – pleasantness; **Mahlon** – disease. **Khilyon** – annihilation.

[5] They came to be sojourners but eventually were there, meaning that their entities belonged to Moab, they were permanently there.

[6] **Orpah** - she who turns her back; **Ruth** - I believe it is connected to the root רוה, to satiate one's thirst, as we will see later (1:20; 4:15). At this stage we still do not know which of the women married which of the sons.

[7] Naomi w**as left**, as a remnant, after her family members were yanked from her life one after another. As we shall see later, she perceives those events as a blow directed at her by God, a blow which in her opinion was exaggerated and unjustified.

and of her husband. 6. And she rose[8], and her daughters-in-law, and turned back[9] from the Plains of Moab, for she had heard in the Plains of Moab that the Lord has singled out His people[10] to give them bread. 7. And she went out[11] from the place where she had been[12], with her two daughters-in-law, and they went[13] on the way[14] to go back to the land of Judah. 8. And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, go back[15] each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal faithfully[16] with you as you have done with the dead and with me. 9. May the Lord grant to you

[8] Rising is an act which requires courage. She had to shake off the passiveness which engulfed her, rise, and go back to Bethlehem.

[9] She is the one who rises and goes back, but her daughters-in-law, in her mind, do not belong in this journey, and she will later try to convince them to leave her alone.

[10] She is not part of the people because she abandoned them and went to the Plains of Moab.

[11] She rescues herself; she pulls herself out of Moab. Though initially she shuts herself in her house in Bethlehem, and her return to the city seems pointless, the move of getting out of Moab proves to be the beginning of her redemption. Note that even though she is accompanied by Ruth and Orpah, the verb ותצא – she went out, refers to her alone.

[12] In Hebrew אשר היתה שם - she came to be a sojourner but became a part of the place.

[13] The combination of the roots שוב;הלך - to go and to turn back, go back or return, is a recurring motif in the plot. The irony is that her daughters-in-law cannot return to Judah because they were never there, and Naomi will later use that as an argument against them joining her.

[14] The confrontation between Naomi and her daughters-in-law will soon take place on the road, neither Moab and Judah, and a place where none of the three women belongs.

[15] Naomi tells her daughters-in-law that they cannot return to Bethlehem because it is not their place, and that their true place is each at her mother's house.

[16] In Hebrew – חסד. We usually translate this word as charity or loving kindness but its original significance in the Bible is trustworthiness or loyalty. For example, in Psalm 86:2 David says that he awaits God faithfully for he is a חסיד. This is also the etymology of the Hebrew word for stork – חסידה, as the stork returns loyally to its nest every year (See Jer. 8:7). Naomi praises Ruth and Orpah for being loyal to their dead husbands and to her.

that you find a settled place[17], each of you in the house of her husband. And she kissed them, and they raised their voice and wept. 10. And they said to her, but with you we will go back to your people[18]. 11. And Naomi said, go back my daughters, why should you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb who would be husbands to you? 12. Go back my daughters, go[19], for I am too old to have a husband[20]. Even had I thought I have hope, this very night I shall have a husband and bear sons. 13. Would you wait for them till they grew up? Would you become imprisoned by them[21] and not marry others? No, my daughters, for it is far more bitter for me than for you [alt. translations: I feel very sorry for you / I am bitter because of you][22] because the Lord's hand has come out

[17] After praising Ruth and Orpah, Naomi transitions to a blessing with hidden criticism, and perhaps it is frustration with the fact that her sons married Moabite women: May you find rest – with me you cannot find rest. You will only settle down at the house of your future husbands. She says that they are done with being loyal to their dead husbands. The word מנוחה – rest, appears again in 3:1, this time in a positive sense, as Naomi seeks true rest – מנוח, for Ruth. This happens when Naomi recognizes the turn of events for the better, and tells Ruth that she wants the best for her.

[18] Ruth and Orpah respond to Naomi's argument that they do not belong in Bethlehem, by saying that they belong with Naomi and her people. They joined the people when they married Naomi's sons.

[19] Naomi repeats the verbs go back and go to reiterate her hopelessness.

[20] Naomi rejects their argument by saying she has no more sons for them to marry. It seems as if she is speaking of the levirate law, but that law does not apply to a brother born after his brother's death. Rather, Naomi emphasizes her feeling of misery, and maybe hints that Ruth and Orpah are opportunistic and cling to her with the hope of marrying her children. She then tells them to go back, rejecting their argument that they belong with her people, and adds, why would you go with me, arguing that they do not belong with her personally.

[21] The root עגנ is unique in the bible, and it stems from the bi-radical root עג which means creating a circle. The significance of the root here is that Ruth and Orpah are warned not to draw a circle in which they will be imprisoned while waiting for their future husbands.

[22] I translated the original Hebrew כי מר לי מאד מכם, in three ways: A) it is far more bitter for me than for you – this claim of greater suffering is very common among people who

against me.[23] 14. And they raised their voice and wept once more, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, and Ruth clung to her[24]. 15. And she said, look, your sister-in-law[25] has gone back to her people and to her gods[26], go back after your sister-in-law. 16. And Ruth said, do not plead with me[27] to forsake[28] you, to turn back[29] from you. For wherever you

---

share an experience of grief and loss, such as the death of a relative or surviving disasters, each one claims that his or her suffering is greater. B) I feel very sorry for you – Naomi shows her concern for Ruth and Orpah. C) I am bitter because of you – Naomi accuses her daughter-in-law in being the cause of her suffering. If her sons would not marry Moabite women, perhaps they would still be alive. This also explains the reluctance of Naomi to take them back with her, as they are a bitter reminder of her past and of her sons' possible transgression.

[23] Naomi repeats this claim in verses 20-21. She feels that God singled her out and punished her unproportionally (See Lam. 3:12-13).

[24] Ruth's reward for clinging to Naomi appears in 2:8 when she is told by Boaz to cling to his maidens.

[25] In Hebrew יבמתך - the root יבמ appears in the Bible in three contexts: in the story of Tamar and Onan (Gen. 38:1-10), in the discussion of the levirate law in Deuteronomy (25:5-10), and here. Our story is unique because the noun יבם usually describes the relationship between the surviving brothers and the widow, whereas here Ruth and Orpah are called each other's יבמה. Previously, Naomi addressed an alleged attempt by Ruth and Orpah to continue Elimelech's dynasty, but did not use the root יבם, rather arguing that there is no chance for success. Now she tells Ruth that her יבמה has returned, meaning that Orpah has turned her back on the idea of the levirate law.

[26] This is the third step in Naomi's description of Orpah's return: in verse 8 she spoke about returning to her mother's house, in verse 9 she spoke about returning to the man, the future husband, and now she says that Orpah returned to her people and her gods, meaning that Orpah's claim "we will return with you to your people" has been proven false. Naomi continues and tells Ruth return follow in the footsteps of her יבמה, her sister-in-law. There is a sensation of scorn or bitterness, as if Naomi says, "now you have proven who you are loyal to."

[27] In Hebrew אל תפגעי בי - do not try to convince me but also, similarly to modern Hebrew, do not attack or offend me. Naomi's attempt to convince Ruth to return to Moab hurts her, and Ruth's reward for being so stubborn appears in 2:22, when Naomi's

go I will go[30], and wherever you lodge I will lodge. Your people is my people and your God is my God.[31] 17. Wherever you die I will die and there will I be buried. So may the Lord do to me or even more[32], for only death will part you and me[33]. 18. And she saw that she was insisting on

---

describes Boaz's protection of Ruth with the words "they will not attack you in another field."

[28] the verb עזב is another recurring motif. Here Ruth tells Naomi that she will never abandon her. In 2:11 Boaz praises Ruth for abandoning her father and mother and following Naomi. In 2:16 Boaz commands his servants to let Ruth gather wheat as she wishes, using that verb – ועזבתם, and in 2:20, when Naomi transitions from despair to hope, she says that God did not abandon His faithfulness.

[29] The verb שוב appears here to describe the movement which Ruth refuses to do: she will not turn back from Naomi, she will not turn back in the footsteps of Orpah's, and she will only turn back with Naomi to Bethlehem, to Naomi's people.

[30] I shall go wherever you go - הלכ is the second half of the pair לשוב וללכת which repeats throughout this chapter: Elimelech goes to Moab, Naomi goes on the road, Naomi tries to convince Ruth to go away from her, and now Ruth declares that she will go wherever Naomi goes.

[31] Your people is my people and your God is my God - here Ruth pledges allegiance to Naomi as a response to Naomi's argument that Ruth should return, like Orpah, to her people and to her gods. The midrashic commentary is that Naomi tried to prevent Ruth from converting to Judaism, but the text offers no basis for this interpretation. Rather, this is a spontaneous and heartfelt proclamation which shows that Ruth anticipated of Naomi's arguments. She practically tells Naomi that there is no point in arguing with her, because she will cling to Naomi, like glue, until the day she dies. It seems that Naomi is unhappy, but it is possible that Ruth's words touched her deeply. Ruth's approach is essential when trying to help a person who feels despair, deep agony, and loneliness following loss. The first step is to give that person the feeling that he is not alone.

[32] Now that Ruth has accepted upon her the God of Israel, she can make an oath with the unique name, YHWH, and prove her loyalty to Naomi.

[33] Death will part us - this is a commitment to friendship and loyalty till the last moment, as well as a proclamation that this loyalty does not depend on Naomi's ability to bear sons or Ruth's hope to marry one of them.

going with her and she ceased speaking to her.[34] 19. And the two of them went until they came[35] to Bethlehem, and as they came to Bethlehem that the whole town was astir over them, and the women said, is this Naomi?[36] 20. And she said to them, do not call me Naomi, call me Mara![37] For Shaddai has dealt great bitterness to me. 21. I went out full, and empty did the Lord bring me back.[38] Why should you call

[34] The meaning of the root אמצ is usually strong, or in the combination אמצ-לב, stubborn or brave. Naomi understands that Ruth is determined and stops talking to her. She not only stops trying to convince Ruth to leave her, but rather stops talking altogether, completely detaching herself and showing unwillingness to accept Ruth. She keeps walking with Ruth silently, which probably hurt Ruth deeply, but Ruth keeps quiet and adheres to her mission, to restore Naomi's soul.

[35] The verb הלכ which appears also in the previous verse, is used to describe their walking the long road and their arrival at Bethlehem. The verb used is not שוב – return, but rather בוא – to come or arrive, as if they have come to Bethlehem for the first time in their lives. This is true for Ruth but apparently not for Naomi, but their reception explains this anomaly.

[36] The news about her their arrival spread rapidly, but when the women saw Naomi, they did not recognize her. This Naomi, different and tormented, did arrive at Bethlehem for the first time in her life, and that is why previously it is written that they came, and not returned to Bethlehem. Meanwhile, Ruth is completely ignored, another blow to the young widow.

[37] The new and different Naomi seeks also a new name – מרה, bitter, a name which conveys her bitterness, which is directed at God who made her life extremely bitter, above and beyond what she thought she deserved. The name Mara is also the name of the bitter to which the Israelites arrived following the parting of the Red Sea (Ex. 15:22-27) This is the allusion that led me to write that the name of Ruth is derived from רוה, to satiate one's thirst, because Ruth taught Naomi not to be bitter and to drink from the sweet water of life.

[38] Here there is a chiastic parallelism, ABC in the first half of the verse, BCA in the second half. In the first half Naomi is active and in the second half it is God, in the first half Naomi is full and in the second she is empty, in the first half we find הלכ – to go or walk, and in the second half שוב – to go back. Again, we see the pair הלכ ושוב – to go and go back.

me Naomi when the Lord has borne witness against me,[39] and Shaddai has done me harm? 22. And Naomi came back and her daughter-in-law with her, who was coming back from the Plains of Moab,[40] and they had come to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Chapter 2[41]: 1. And Naomi had a kinsman[42] through her husband, a man of worth from the clan of Elimelech, and his name was Boaz[43]. 2. And

[39] This, apparently, is an acceptance of the verdict, but Naomi immediately says "Shaddai has done me harm" meaning the she thinks that God has caused her greater harm than she deserves. Later, we will see how Ruth orchestrates events to make Naomi to announce that God has never abandoned her (2:20).

[40] The verb שוב appears twice in the verse and both appearances relate to Naomi alone. We should read the verse thus: Naomi returned, she who returned from the fields of Moab, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her. The proof for that reading is the end of the verse: "and they came to Bethlehem" meaning that only Naomi returned to Bethlehem, but when we use the verb בוא, to come, we can say that both of them came.

[41] Introduction to chapter 2: This chapter holds the key to Ruth's plan, which she probably formed even before leaving Moab. Ruth knew that Naomi is a noble spirit who sank into the abyss of depression because of the tragedies she has experienced. Naomi seeks to blame someone for these tragedies, and she might have accused her husband who took the family to Moab, her sons who married Moabite women, her daughters-in-law, she herself for letting all these happen, and even God who punished her exceedingly. Ruth understood that as long as Naomi is trapped in the cycle of despair, agony, and blame, she will not be able to rehabilitate herself and become Naomi that Ruth once knew. Ruth also knows that Naomi is a proud woman and will not accept from anyone, let alone her daughter-in-law, whom she blames for her son's death and whom she tried to prevent from coming with her to Bethlehem. Ruth therefore Works stealthily and with

Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, let me please go[44] to the field, and glean from among the ears of grain after I find favor in his eyes[45]. And she said to her, go my daughter[46]. 3. And she went, and she came[47], and

great sophistication, in order to bring Naomi to a situation where she will initiate a process of rising and being redeemed, unaware that Ruth has been the one pulling the strings.

[42] The word relative or kin in Hebrew is derived from the root ידע – to know or recognize. It is a verb which symbolizes not only family relationship but also a more personal and intimate connection, and perhaps it hints to the future marriage of Boaz and Ruth. The rootידע and its synonym הכיר, are central to the story (see הכיר in 2:10; 2;19; and ידע in 2:11;3:2; 3:11; 3:14; 3:18; 4:4).

[43] The chapter opens with information about Naomi's relative Boaz. The name is a symbolic – there is strength in him. The man is described as a worthy man, in 3:11 he calls Ruth a worthy woman, and in the blessing to both after their marriage in 4:11 it says and be worthy in Bethlehem. The information about Boaz reveals Ruth's plan to us. She knows about Boaz and plans to reach his field and contact him, in order for him to marry her and reestablish the estate of her dead husband, but she does it with great sophistication.

[44] The verb הלכ - to go, appears twice in this verse, when Ruth asks Naomi for permission to glean in the fields, and in Naomi's answer "go my daughter".

[45] Ruth said that she will glean after the one in whose eyes she finds grace, but she already knows it is going to be Boaz. This is demonstrated in verse 10 - after the first stage succeeded and Boaz paid attention to her, she asks "why did I find grace in your eyes". After he answers, she replies with "I will find grace in your eyes" in verse 13, as if stating a fact.

[46] Naomi answers Ruth's long request with two words, since for her it makes no difference. As much as she is concerned, she returned to Bethlehem to hide at home and wait for death and burial. It is true that in 3:3 we read that Naomi sold her field, which seems to suggest that she returned to a life of action and involvement, but as I will explain there, it means that the field is about to be sold, and that until that moment no one wanted to buy Naomi's field.

[47] Ruth embarks on her journey with the intention to arrive at Boaz's field, but she knows that asking for his field will attract unnecessary attention and right and raise suspicions that she is trying to establish contact with him. That is why she went and came – ותלך ותבוא, the keywords we have encountered in the first chapter are used here to show a deliberate action by Ruth. She went from one field to another, not asking questions and

she gleaned in the field behind the reapers, and her chance was chanced[48] that she came upon the plot of Boaz, of the clan of Elimelech. 4. And Boaz was coming from Bethlehem, and he said it to the reapers. may the Lord be with you! And they said, may the Lord bless you! 5. And Boaz said to his lad who was stationed over the reapers, whose is this young woman?[49] 6. And the lad stationed over the reapers answered and said, she is a young Moabite woman, who came back[50] with Naomi from the Plain of Moab. 7. And she said, please let me glean[51] and gather from among the sheaves behind the reapers. And she has come

waiting to find out who the owner is. She repeats the process until she chances on Boaz's field.

[48] In Hebrew ויקר מקרה – and her chance has happened. It was her chance, she owned it and it was a coincidence. If it were, the correct word would have ותקרה אל שדה בעז – she happened on Boaz's field. Though it seems that this was the first field in which she arrived that day and the first day she spent in the fields in general, it is probable that she needed several days to find Boaz's field. The proof to that is in verse 2:19 Naomi asks "where did you glean today", and Ruth answers "the name of the man with whom I work today", which means that there were other days as well.

[49] The question is perplexing. Why does the owner of the field care about the poor girls who glean the fallen sheaves? The answer is that Ruth made sure she stands out to attract Boaz's attention. Maybe she did not change her Moabite garments, and maybe she looked different than the local girls of Bethlehem, but most probably she caught his attention by being passive. The other girls gleaning in the fields might have had dubious reputation. It could be that they would fight over the falling grains, or that they were too friendly with the reaping men, as alluded in verses 2:9, 2:22 and 3:10.

[50] Here, for the first time, there is a recognition of Ruth's return to Bethlehem. Even though she was never there, the lad is the first to proclaim that she does belong with Naomi and she does return to Bethlehem.

[51] This is strange, since the Torah commands the owner of the field to let the poor people glean, so why does she ask for permission? The answer is that Ruth wanted to eb noticed. She approaches the lad in the morning and asks for permission to glean, but then she stands still most of the time.

and stood[52] since the morning till now, and she barely gathered anything to take home[53]. 8. And Boaz said to Ruth, hear my daughter[54], do not go to glean in another field, and also do not pass on from here, and so shall you cling to my young women. 9. Your eyes be on the field in which they weep and go after them. I have commanded the lads not to touch you,[55] and should you be thirsty, you should go to the pitchers and

[52] The lad pays attention to her and remembers her, and comments to Boaz ותבוא ותעמוד - she came and stood. The first verb, בוא, describes motion, and we are familiar with it from the first chapter, while the second verb, עמד, describes passiveness and lack of movement.

[53] In Hebrew זה שבתה הבית מעט - the commentators struggle with these words, and I believe that the intention of the lad is to say that Ruth gleaned very little and she does not have enough food to take back home with her. However, the author uses this strange combination deliberately, so two keywords in the book could be used. The first is the root שוב, to return, which was central to the first chapter. This root will be used again at the end of the book, to say that the son who was born to Ruth restores, or returns, the soul and life of Naomi. The second word is בית - house or home. This word appears in the book in key location and develops gradually from the negative to the positive. The first two appearance, which are negative, are found Naomi's description of her daughters-in-law true loyalty. In 1:8 she says that each belongs in her mother's house, and in 1:9 she says that each belongs in her husband's house. Then there is our verse, in which the house is neutral and no ownership is indicated. Finally, there are three occurrences in 4:11-12, where we read of your [Boaz's] house, the house of Israel, and the house of Perez. Those three occurrences show how Ruth has evolved from building the house of Boaz, whom she got to know in the field, to building the house of Israel, and then the house of Perez which is related to the dynasty of the house of David. Another dimension of the combination שבתה הבית - return and house, is stability and calmness, such as in Psalms 27:4 "I shall return to [also dwell in] the house of the Lord", and Psalms 68:7 "God brings people back home". This dimension has not been yet fulfilled for Ruth, as she does not have rest and calmness, hence the use of the word מעט - minimal or lacking.

[54] Boaz addresses Ruth with the affectionate term "my daughter", and asks her to not go glean in other fields. We see again the keyword הלכ – go. Cling - compare to 1:14 and the commentary there.

[55] The fact that Boaz had to command his lads not to touch Ruth indicates that such incidents were common.

drink[56] from what the lads draw from the well. 10. And she fell on her face and bowed to the ground and said to him, why should I find favor in your eyes[57] to recognize me when I am a foreigner?[58] 11. And Boaz answered and said to her, it was indeed told me,[59] all that you did for your mother-in-law after your husband's death, and that you left your mother and your father in the land of your birth to come to people that you had not known before. 12. may the Lord reward your actions, and

[56] Drink - it seems trivial to us, but in the past such a gesture showed tremendous generosity, because drawing water was an arduous task, as we can see with the story of Abraham's servant and Rebecca (Gen. 24), and story of Jethro's daughters and Moshe (Ex. 2). By instructing his lads to share their water with Ruth, Boaz elevates Ruth from a poor girl gleaning in the fields, to a level higher than that of his maid servants, one who deserves to drink the water drawn by the lads.

[57] Ruth knows the answer, but she wants him to express it in order to make it more forceful and embed it in his mind. Her question is carefully phrased, and corresponds to verse 2 above. She does not ask, the way Jacob asks Esau, "why would I find grace in the eyes of my Lord" (Gen. 33:15), because that question assumes that one does not deserve or does not need that special treatment. Ruth rather asks "why have I found grace" – please explain your behavior! Tell me what exactly do you see in me which is special? This is another stage in her path towards conquering Boaz.

[58] The word foreigner - נכריה, is derived from the same root as to להכירני – to recognize me, but has an opposite meaning. Ruth emphasizes her otherness, a fact which makes Boaz's attention to truly stand out. The word נכריה also echoes the complaint of Rachel and Leah about their father (Gen. 31:15). They say that he treated them as foreigners, has sold them, and has taken their inheritance. They claim that a foreigner has no rights, and that would entitle Boaz to sell her away and take her possessions. Instead, he treats her respectfully, and elevates her to a status of one who is protected.

[59] I was told – in Hebrew הוגד הוגד לי – the doubling of the verb is official and reminds us of the way God addresses the nation through the prophets. He continues to describe her actions in a way which resembles the commandment of God to Abraham to leave his homeland. Ruth now discovers, together with the readers, that her coming to Bethlehem reverberated throughout the city. Previously, the only reaction recorded in the book is that of the women's choir, asking "is this Naomi?", but now it turns out that Boaz knows about Ruth. He was told about her actions, and he describes them as a sacrifice Ruth made for Naomi, abandoning her family and heritage.

may your recompense[60] be complete from the Lord, God of Israel, under whose wings[61] you have come to shelter.[62] 13. And she said, may I find favor in the eyes of my Lord, for you have comforted me and have spoken to the heart of your servant,[63] when I could scarcely be like one of your slave girls. 14. And Boaz said to her at mealtime, come here and eat of the bread,[64] and dip your crust in vinegar. And she sat alongside the reapers and he picked roasted grain for her[65] and she ate, and she was

[60] In Hebrew משכורתך – it is interesting to note that Boaz uses this word which is found only three other times, all in the context of the exchange between Lavan and Jacob (Gen. 29:15, 31:7, 31:41). Boaz tells Ruth, who said that she is a foreigner, like the daughters of Lavan, that he would not be like Lavan and that she will be fully rewarded.

[61] Here Boaz praises Ruth for coming to find shelter under the wings of God, and later in 3:9 she will ask him "please spread your wing over your maidservant". The word wing – כנף, has a symbolic meaning of loyalty and continuing the legacy (see Num. 15:38, I Sam. 15:27, Ibid. 24:4, and Zech. 8:23), as well as a meaning of intimate relationship (see Deut. 23:1 and Ezek. 16:8). Both meanings are insinuated here.

[62] It is not explicitly mentioned that Ruth went through an official conversion process. It is probable that in Biblical times those interested simply accepted the commandments and joined the nation, and that there was no official procedure regulated by the courts, or even the concept of conversion. At a certain point, the new members of the nation would immerse to enter the Temple, and the men among them would also perform circumcision so they could eat of the Pesah sacrifice. Later, in the Rabbinic period, the rabbis established the process as we know it today. We find a reminiscent to such practices in the rabbinic discussion about one who converts by himself (Tosefta, Shabbat 8:5).

[63] Ruth's response to Boaz is an expansion and deepening of his words. In addition to gratitude for his praise of her actions and his blessing her, she says "I will find grace in your eyes" – stating it as a fact. She further says that he comforted her, admitting that she felt mournful and depressed and that he elevated her spirit. By saying that, she makes him a savior and a hero and creates a stronger bond with him, even though she concludes with humility that she does not deserve to be among his maidservants.

[64] Ruth's passiveness and shyness encourage Boaz to be more proactive towards her. He calls her to sit and eat with the reapers, which is another elevation in status.

[65] She comes and sits next to them, but does not eat, demonstrating restrain, and also showing that she feels undeserving. Boaz encourages her to eat, and as she does not

sated, and left some over.[66] 15. And she rose[67] to glean, and Boaz commanded his lads, saying, among the shaves also she may glean[68], and you shall not harass her.[69] 16. And you will also pick for her sheaves, and leave behind, and she will glean, and you will not scold her. 17. And she gleaned in the field until evening, and she beat out[70] what she had gleaned, and it came to almost an ephah of barley. 18. And she carried it[71] and came to town, and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned, and she took out and gave to her what she had left over after being sated.[72] 19. And her mother-in-law said to her, where did you

respond, he himself serves her the food. Thus, Ruth manages to produce, by her passiveness, an act of bonding and intimacy.

[66] At this point we still do not know why she leaves food aside.

[67] The verb קום - to rise, echoes Naomi's action after the death of her husband and sons, as she rose and got out of Moab.

[68] Though Ruth rises to glean, Boaz knows that she will not glean much, and commands his servants to help her indirectly by leaving sheaves behind, and also directly by picking up sheaves for her.

[69] His protection of her expands from commanding his servants not to touch her, to the admonitions to not harass and not scold her. Boaz now protects Ruth from physical, verbal, and emotional violence.

[70] Ruth beats the wheat in the field. This is uncommon. Usually, the right to beat out the wheat in the field signaled ownership and was therefore reserved to the landlord. (see Jud. 6:11). Ruth pretends to not know the custom, testing the boundaries of Boaz's protection, and making herself, as if it were, a partner of Boaz. Ruth was thus able to bring home an ephah of ready to grind grains (between 15-28 lbs.).

[71] In Hebrew ותשא - the root נשא appears previously in 1:4 in the context of marriage, and then in 1:9 in the description of Ruth and Orpah crying. There is here a transition of the verb from the tragic context of Naomi's children's marriage, their death, and the departure of Orpah, to a positive context of abundance.

[72] At the end of the first chapter we read about Naomi coming back empty handed, and by contrast, Ruth comes now with her hands full. Naomi immediately notices the tremendous amount of barley gleaned by Ruth, but before she has a chance to respond, Ruth surprises her by taking out the leftovers from her meal and offering them to Naomi. We now understand why Ruth did not finish her food - she wanted to intensify Naomi's feeling of gratitude by providing ready to eat food. Usually, the poor people gleaning in

glean today and where did you work, may he who recognized you be blessed.[73] And she told her mother know whom she had worked with, and she said, the name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz.[74] 20. And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law blessed is he to the Lord,[75] who has kept His faithfulness with the living and with the dead.[76] And Naomi said to her, the man is related to us, he is of our redeeming kin.[77] 21. And Ruth the Moabite said, moreover, he said to me, to my lads should you cling[78] until they finish[79] all the harvest that is mine. 22 And

---

the fields would arrive home at night with grain that had to be beaten, ground, and sifted before they were able to bake bread. Here, Ruth not only brings Naomi a great amount of already beaten barley, she has ready to eat food for her.

[73] Naomi is Indeed filled with gratitude and tells Ruth "may he who has recognized you be blessed". She bestows that blessing on Ruth's benefactor even before she knows who this person is, because his generosity towards Ruth already makes him an acquaintance. For the first time Naomi speaks in a positive spirit, and she uses the term להכיר – to know or recognize (see above 2:1 and 2:10).

[74] Ruth pretends she does not know that Boaz is a relative of Naomi.

[75] Naomi's excited reaction shows the revolutionary transition she underwent. She is now emerging out of the abyss of despair and sees hope. Whereas in the previous verse she was just living the moment, happy for being shown generosity and receiving food, here she sees a glimpse of redemption and starts planning accordingly.

[76] She states that God did not abandon his faithfulness with the living - herself and Ruth, and the dead – Mahlon and Khilyon. This is a reversal of Naomi's words in the beginning of the book, according to which Ruth and Orpah are the ones who remained faithful to the living and the dead, while God abandoned Naomi.

[77] She believes that Ruth does not know who Boaz is, and explains that he is not only a relative but a potential redeemer. This statement prepares the readers for the conclusion of the story and the theme of redeeming the fields and the name of Elimelech's clan.

[78] Boaz told Ruth "cling to my girls", but she tells Naomi that he told her to cling to the lads, and Naomi responds "it is good that you go out with his girls". In Midrash Ruth Rabbah, Rabbi Hanin ben Levy interpreted Ruth's words negatively, saying "she is definitely a Moabite!" and accusing her of eyeing Boaz's lads, though Boaz and Naomi stressed that she must cling to the girls. Rabbi Hanin's interpretation, however, contradicts Ruth behavior and character traits, as Boaz's praise to Ruth in 3:10 for not following the lads. On the other hand, some Bible scholars who were troubled by the

Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, it is good my daughter that you shall go with his young women, and that they not trouble you in another field. 23. And she clung to Boaz's maidens to glean till the barley harvest and the wheat harvest were finished, and she sat[80] [at home] with her mother-in-law.

Chapter 3: 1. And Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, my daughter, I seek for you a settled place,[81] so it will be well for you.[82] 2. And now

---

incongruency of Ruth's words suggested to correct them to say girls instead of lads, just as in the words of Boaz and Naomi. But according to my interpretation, Ruth's words are accurate and carefully chosen. Ruth wanted Naomi to think she is the one who initiates the connection between Boaz and Ruth. Ruth therefore changes Boaz's words, who told her to cling to his girls, and commanded the lads to not touch her, perhaps with the hope of becoming the redeemer and marrying her. Instead she tells Naomi that she will cling to the lads. Naomi responds by rebuking Ruth or nudging her slightly towards companionship with the girls, which will allow her later to pursue marriage with Boaz. Naomi now believes that she saved the day and reserved Ruth for Boaz.

[79] The root כלה – to finish or end, runs through the book and develops gradually from negative to positive. In the opening of the story it is found in the name of Khilyon, symbolizing his annihilation. In our verse it describes the process of Ruth's familiarization with Boaz. In 3:3 it appears in the context of the bold move, initiated by Naomi, to get Ruth and Boaz together. In verse 3:18 Naomi says that Boaz will end this matter today, "the matter" being the redemption of the field, and with it, the redemption of Ruth and Naomi.

[80] Ruth sits with her mother-in-law - she pretends she has no plans and sits quietly with her mother-in-law, waiting for her to take initiative.

[81] in this chapter Naomi is proactive. She tells Ruth that she seeks for her peace of mind and settling down – מנוחה. This is her own response to her argument, in the beginning of the book, that Ruth and Orpah can only settle down in the house of their future husbands.

[82] this is the second time Naomi uses the root טוב - good (previously in 2:22) and it expresses the change she is going through since the time she complained "Shaddai has dealth harshly with me" (1:21).

Boaz, our kinsman,[83] with whose young women[84] you were, is winnowing[85] the barley threshing-floor tonight.[86] 3. And you should bathe and anoint yourself, and put on your garments,[87] and go down[88] to the threshing floor. Do not let yourself be known[89] to the man till he is finished eating and drinking.[90] 4. And when he lies down, you should

[83] see above 2:1.

[84] see above 2:2.

[85] There is a connection between the act of winnowing, spreading seeds, and the sexual act which leads to having descendants, since the word זרע in Hebrew means both seeds and descendants. The rabbis interpreted in that spirit the verse "sow your seed in the morning, and do not let off in the evening" (Eccl. 11:6 and Avoth deRabbi Nathan, chapter 3).

[86] Boaz might have done it at night for practical reasons, such as the cooler weather, or because of the nightly breeze which helps in separating the wheat from the chaff. It is also probable that it was customary to perform such activities at night for good omen, as people believed that seeing the stacks of grains could cause the blessing of abundance to disappear. The We find this belief in the Talmud (Bava Metzia, 42:2): "one who is about to measure his granary should pray that it will be blessed before he sees it".

[87] Naomi asks Ruth to groom herself, get down to the threshing hold, and entice Boaz to marry her. This request contradicts Ruth's modest behavior as we have known her so far.

[88] The written form is וירדתי - I will go down, but it is read as וירדת - you shall go down. Some scholars say it is an influence of the Aramaic, but it could be a Freudian slip by Naomi, who subconsciously would have wanted to marry Boaz, as she said in 1:12 "would I marry a man tonight", and note that in both verses the word הלילה – tonight, is mentioned. This is also true in the next verse where it written ושכבתי - and I will lie, but it is read ושכבת - you will lie.

[89] Here again is the root ידע – to know. Though Naomi uses it in the sense of Ruth introducing herself to Boaz, one cannot ignore the biblical connotation of ידע, which is more intimate.

[90] Naomi's plan is carefully detailed. She tells Ruth not to get close to Boaz while he is still active in winnowing the threshing floor, or while eating, but rather after he ate and drank wine, when he is at ease and she can control the situation. We can hear an echo of the story of Lot and his daughters, a story which also brings about the birth of Moab, but the stories are different. In Lot's story his daughters got him drunk and deceived him, while here Boaz drinks voluntarily, and his conversation with Ruth is under control. Lot

know the place where he lies down, come in, uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you[91] what you should do.[92] 5. And she said to her, whatever you say to me[93] I will do. 6. And she went down to the threshing floor and did all that her mother-in- law commanded her. 7. And Boaz ate and drank, and he was of good[94] cheer, and he came and laid down at the edge of the stack of barley. And she came stealthily and uncovered his feet and lay down. 8. And it happened at midnight[95] when the man trembled and twisted, and [he saw that] a woman was lying at his feet. 9. And he said, who are you. And she said, I am Ruth, your servant, may you spread your wing[96] over your servant for you are redeeming kinsman[97]. 10. And he said blessed are you to the Lord my daughter.[98] You have done better[99] in your latest faithfulness than in the

---

is unaware of the incestual relationships, while Boaz id fully alert and nothing happens between him and Ruth.

[91] In Hebrew יגיד, as in 2:11 above – הוגד הוגד לי, I have been told. Ruth's reward for her wonderful deeds, which were told to Boaz, is that Boaz will tell her what to do, meaning that he will plan their marriage.

[92] Naomi thinks that Ruth is passive and must wait for Boaz to tell her what to do.

[93] The word me, אלי, is read but not written. Maybe it alludes to the fact that Ruth erases her personality – there is no "me". Ruth completely subjects herself to Naomi's will and lets, and this message is repeated in the next verse.

[94] see comment on the root טוב – good, in 3:1 above.

[95] In Hebrew ויהי בחצי הלילה, a dramatic expression which appears in the Bible only once more (Ex.12:29) on the eve of Israel's redemption from Egypt. Perhaps it is an allusion to the personal redemption of Ruth and Elimelech's clan which is about to take place.

[96] See above 2:12.

[97] Ruth deviates from Naomi's instructions. Naomi told her to remain passive and do whatever Boaz tells, and according to these instructions she should have simply answered "I am Ruth". But Ruth keeps on talking and asks Boaz to spread his wings over her, and not only as a husband but as a redeemer as well. Ruth is not willing to put her plan at risk. Ruth takes this initiative because she does not want Boaz to offer to take her as a maidservant or even as his wife, but rather must have it done in context of redeeming the field and establishing descendants for her dead husband.

[98] This echoes Naomi's words in 2:20.

first,[100] for not going after the young men whether poor or rich. 11. And now my daughter do not be afraid. Whatever you say I will do for you[101], for all my townspeople[102] know that you are a worthy woman. 12. And now though in fact I am redeeming kin,[103] there is also redeeming kin closer than I.[104] 13. Spend the night here, and it shall be in the morning, should he redeem you he will do well to redeem, and if he does not want to redeem you, I myself will redeem you as the Lord lives. Lie here till morning.[105] 14. And she lay at his feet till morning,

---

[99] See above 3:1.

[100] Ruth's first act was showing faithfulness to her dead husband and to Naomi, and her last act of faithfulness is following Boaz, also for the sake of her dead husband and Naomi her. The first act is expressed by walking – ותלך, after Naomi, and the last by not walking - לא הלכת, after the young men.

[101] The emphasis is on "to you" or "for you". Boaz now understands that Ruth is the one pulling the strings and he is impressed by her. Boaz is willing to do as she says and gives her the lead, in contrast to the obedient image she projects earlier when Naomi speaks to her (3:1-4).

[102] Townspeople – in Hebrew, literally, the people at the gate. Boaz expresses willingness to perform the judicial process which takes place at the gate of the city, where the elders and the judges sit.

[103] The Hebrew כי אמנם כי גואל אנכי is cumbersome and should have been אמנם גואל אנכי. The superfluous words might reflect Boaz's concern that the other redeemer will accept the offer and will marry Ruth, and this concern cause him to hesitate and speak inaccurately.

[104] The word קרוב means close and relative. closer than me – previously (2:20) Naomi said that this man is close to us. Ruth probably knew of the other, closer relative, but she did not go to his field. It is possible that Ruth focused her efforts on Boaz because she heard Naomi speak about him, and correctly assumed that he is the one with the right character quality traits of a redeemer, who is willing to marry a widow and have his sons attributed to her late husband. Indeed, Boaz proves himself as a resourceful person and was able to convince the other redeemer to give up his right. The closer redeemer is presented as one who would like to have the inheritance of Naomi, but not take upon himself the commitment of establishing a name for the dead man. The author of the book does not grant that redeemer honor and does not even mention him by name.

[105] Boaz is probably concerned about Ruth and does not want to send her alone at night.

and she arose[106] before a man could recognize[107] his fellow man. And he said, ley it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor. 15. And he said give me the shawl that you have and hold it out. And she held it out, and he measured six shares of barley,[108] and he put it on her, and he came into town.[109] 16. And she came to her mother-in-law[110] and she said,[111] who are you my daughter.[112] And she told her all that the man had done for her.[113] 17. And she said theses six shares of barley he

[106] This is the third time the word ותקם is mentioned in the book. In 1:6 Naomi rose with her daughters-in-law in what the first step towards getting out of their desperate situation. In 2:15 Ruth rose to glean, getting herself out of poverty and hunger, and finding grace in Boaz's eyes. Here, her rising in the morning marks the day in which she will be redeemed. The root קום - to get up, rise, will be mentioned again in verses 4:4 and 4:10 in the context of establishing the name of the dead man over his inheritance and achieving redemption. Ruth was present in the first occurrences of ותקם, and she is also the one whose initiative and merit brought about the last rising - establish the name of her dead husband.

[107] See above 2:10 and 2:19.

[108] Great quantity, between 30-45 lbs.

[109] Some want to correct and read ותבוא העיר - **she** came to town, to make it consistent with the flow of verbs speaking of Ruth, but the meaning is that Boaz left early and came to town before Ruth, and again the verb בוא - to come, is used.

[110] While Boaz comes to the city Ruth comes to her mother-in-law.

[111] Naomi does not recognize her, either because it was still dark outside, or because she lost her eyesight with age. It is also possible that Ruth now looked different, both externally and internally, and for the first time she exposes her inner energy and passion in front of Naomi, perhaps subconsciously.

[112] This reminds us of the Isaac's words to his sons when they bring him offering. In that case, however, Jacob took the blessings from Esau by deception, Ruth is the one who toiled to achieve the blessing, while Orpah abandoned her right long ago.

[113] Ruth does not answer the question because Naomi already understands it is her, and instead tells Naomi what Boaz promised her. Ruth does not tell Naomi about her active part in securing the promise, as she wants to maintain the image of an obedient girl who follows others' orders.

gave me, for he said, you should not come empty-handed[114] to your mother-in-law. 18. And she said, sit my daughter[115] till you know how the matter will fall out, for the man will not rest if he does not settle the matter today.

Chapter 4: 1. And Boaz had gone up to the gate and he sat down there[116], and there the redeeming kin of whom Boaz spoke was passing by[117], and he [Boaz] said, turn aside and sit down here[118] so-and-so[119] and he turned aside and sat down. 2. And he took ten men of the town's elders and said, sit down here, and they sat down. 3. And he said it to the redeeming kin, the parcel of the field that was our brother's[120] Elimelech, was sold by Naomi[121] who came back from the Plain of

[114] She adds, as if innocently, that the man gave her barley so she would not come to Naomi empty-handed, but while this could be a flashback to what Boaz indeed said, it is also possible that Ruth wants to remind Naomi her complaint that God brought her back empty handed. That complaint is now remedied by Boaz who would not send Ruth back empty handed.

[115] Naomi again demands obedience from Ruth and tells her to sit down my daughter and wait, as she is confident that the matter will be concluded on that very day.

[116] Boaz's sitting in the gate is official and full of confidence, and it is the opposite of the way Ruth sits with Naomi at the end of chapter two and three.

[117] As if by chance, and compare to Boaz's words above "do not pass away from here" (2:8).

[118] Boaz is an influential and important man, and the redeemer follows his instructions without questions, as do also the elders in the following verse.

[119] In Hebrew - פלוני - from פלא/פלה, unknown thing, and אלמוני from the אלם - keeping quiet, to signify one whose name is unknown, or is not mentioned.

[120] Not necessarily a brother but rather a relative.

[121] She did not sell yet, but rather put it up for sale. The proof is, as we will see shortly, that the purchase of the field could have been carried out only by a redeemer, who with the field acquires also the wife of the dead landlord.

Moab. 4. And I thought, I shall reveal[122] in your ear and say, acquire it, in the presence of those sitting,[123] and in the presence of the elders of my people.[124] If you would redeem, redeem! And if you will not redeem tell me that I may know, for there is none but you to redeem and I am after you. And he said I will redeem[125]. 5. And Boaz said on the day you acquire the field, from the hand of Naomi, and from the hand of Ruth the Moabite, the wife of the dead [man][126] you will also acquire,[127] to raise up the name of the dead [man] on his estate. 6. And the redeeming kin, said I cannot redeem for me, lest I spoil[128] my estate, you redeem my obligation of redemption, for I cannot redeem. 7. And thus it was in former times in Israel[129] concerning redemption and concerning

[122] In Hebrew אגלה – a wordplay on the verb גאל - to redeem, which appears in the book of Ruth twenty-four times.

[123] Again, sitting in the context of authority and judgment.

[124] It should have been written "the elders of **our** people", or "the elders of **the** people". These words are a premonition that this anonymous man will decline to redeem the field, and thus will exclude himself of the nation. The elders are therefore "the elders of my people", Boaz's people and not of the other redeemer. This also reminds us of the argument between Naomi and Ruth in the beginning of the book, regarding the question of belonging to the nation. In both cases the message is that it is not genealogy which decides who belongs to the nation but rather one's behavior.

[125] Boaz protracted introduction, thirty-six words long, is answered by the redeemer tersely, with two words, since the matter is simple and can be decided without hesitation.

[126] Boaz surprises the redeemer and adds a factor to the sale – Ruth. He does not refer to her just as Ruth, but rather as Ruth the Moabite, the wife of the dead man. This is done deliberately to deter the redeemer. Boaz says that the woman is a Moabite, a foreigner, and the fact that her husband died marks her dangerous.

[127] It is written קניתי – I will have acquired, but we read קניתה – you will have acquired, as in 3:3 and 3:4 above the written form signals the subliminal message of Boaz that he wants to acquire the field, even though he offers it to the redeemer.

[128] אשחית – destroy, the author echoes here the sin of Onan who destroyed his seed – שיחת ארצה, (Gen. 38:9).

[129] At the time of the writing of the scroll the practice of removing the sandal was already obsolete. This is not the removal of the sandal associated the levirate law but rather to the

exchange to fulfill every condition, a man would remove his sandal and give it to his fellow man. And this was the evidence in Israel. 8. And the Redeemer said to Boaz you acquire it, and he removed his sandal. 9. And Boaz said to the elders and to all the people, you are witnesses that I today that I have acquired all that belonged to Elimelech, and to Mahlon and Khilion, from the hand of Naomi. 10. And also Ruth the Moabite, wife of Mahlon[130] I have acquired for myself as a wife, to raise up the name of the dead man on his estate, that the name of the dead we not be cut off from his brothers and from the gate of his place. You are witnesses today! 13. And all the people at the gate and the elders said, we are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman coming[131] into your house like Rachel and like Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel! May you prosper in Ephratha, and make your name be renowned in Bethlehem. 12. And may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, from the offspring which the Lord will give you by this young woman. 13.And Boaz took Ruth the Moabite and she became

act of acquisition. In general, the concept of יבום, the levirate law, is not congruent with the law as written in Deuteronomy. Even if we explain the word "our brother" in 4:3 as saying that Boaz and the redeemer were brothers of Elimelech, the levirate law would apply to Naomi and not to Ruth. Similarly, in the story of Tamar and Judah in (Gen. 32) the levirate law also does not follow the law of the Torah, which demands that one of the brothers of the deceased man will marry his widow, but rather seems to adhere to the laws of inheritance, where the next of kin is both the heir and the one responsible for the levirate law.

[130] Only here we learn who married whom. Khilyon, whose name means annihilation, married Orpah who turned her back on Naomi, while Mahlon's widow Ruth pursues Naomi and her nation, and in a way cures her husband, whose name means disease.

[131] The root בוא – to come, is mentioned several times in the book regarding Ruth, but only now she comes to a resting place, to the house of Boaz. Previously she came to Bethlehem (1:19-22), she came to the field (2:3; 2:7), and she came to her mother-in-law (3:16).

his wife, and he came to her[132], and the Lord granted her conception[133] and she bore a son. 14. And the women said[134] to Naomi, blessed is the Lord[135] who has not deprived[136] you of a redeemer today, and let his name be known in Israel.[137] 15. May he be for you one who restores life[138], and one who supports your old age, for your daughter-in-law, whom you love, gave birth to him, and is better for you than seven sons.[139] 16. And Naomi took the child the placed him[140] in her lap and

[132] The last occurrence of the root בוא – come, completes the circle of Ruth's life and unites her with Boaz.

[133] This might suggest that Ruth was sterile, and if this is so, she is compared by the author to the mothers of nation. There is a special connection to Sarah, because in 1:4 we read that Elimelech's family spent ten years in Moab, and Abram and Sarai lived in Canaan for ten years without having children (Gen. 16:3).

[134] The women's choir, which speaks here in a positive voice, is the remedy and reversal of the negative women's choir in 1:19, the choir which said in wonder "is this Naomi?"

[135] This is also a counterreaction to Naomi's complaint when responding to the choir above.

[136] This is a wordplay on roots ישב/שוב/שבת - to sit and to return, especially in regards to the enigmatic verse זה שבתה הבית מעט (2:7).

[137] We do not know what the name is, but the main thing is that Naomi now has a name in the nation of Israel. Note that the women speak to Naomi and not to Ruth.

[138] This is the climax of the root שוב – return, in the book. Previously the returns were dubious and problematic - can Ruth return to Bethlehem though she was never there? Will she follow in the footsteps of Orpah who returned to her nation, to her gods, to her mother, and to her husband? But now, the newborn brings new life and restores Naomi's soul. The combination "return" and "soul" reminds us of the words of Ruth's grandson (Ps. 116:7) שובי נפשי למנוחייכי – return, my soul, to your resting place.

[139] This reminds us the words of Hannah's prayer "the sterile one bore seven children, and the mother of many has become miserable" (1 Sam. 2:5). Naomi is both women - she had sons, lost them, and became miserable, and she also merited having seven children, represented by Ruth, who also brought her new life.

[140] In Hebrew ותשיתהו. The root שית – to put, appears in 3:15, when Boaz puts the barley on Ruth's shoulders. There he does not want her to come to Naomi empty handed, and here Naomi's hands are filled by the child given to her by Ruth and Boaz.

became a nurse for him. 17. And the neighboring women[141] called him a name, saying, a son is born to Naomi,[142] and they called his name Oved, who was the father of Jesse father of David. 18. And these are the descendants of Perez. Perez begat Hezron. 19. And Hezron begat Ram, and Ram begat Aminadav. 20. And Aminadav begat Nahshon, and Nahshon begat Salma. 21. And Salmon begat Boaz and Boaz begat Oved. 22. And Oved begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David.

Epilogue:

The Rabbis said in the Midrash (Bava Batra 14:2) that Ruth's name is derived from רוה – to satiate thirst, because she was the grandmother of David, who satiated God's thirst for songs and praises. According to the interpretation I suggested here, Ruth was the first one to satiate thirst. Ruth helped Naomi, who became so embittered that she renamed herself Mara, like the bitter lake the Israelites encountered in the desert, to find the sweetness of life. Just as Moshe threw into the water of Mara a piece of wood without special qualities, in order for the Israelites to find the sweetness of the water, so Ruth threw away any selfishness or special character traits she had, in order for Naomi to discover, as if it were through her own efforts, the sweetness in her life. Perhaps because David had the merit to sit on his grandmother Ruth's knees, and hear from her how one could always find the strength to see good and never give up, he was able to open his book with Ashray and seal it with

[141] The child becomes a child of the whole city of Bethlehem as everybody is excited about the dramatic and romantic story, and especially the happy end.

[142] This is the final proof that Ruth was willing to sacrifice everything to redeem Naomi of her depression. Ruth's son is attributed to Naomi and Ruth does not protest. She is happy that she was able to redeem Naomi, who obviously was a special woman, and restore her soul.

Hallelujah, despite all the tragedies and difficulties of his life, which he does not fail to mention between those two joyous bookends.