BS"D
June 6, 2024
Friday, June 7 is the 45th Day of the Omer

Potomac Torah Study Center
Vol. 11 #35, June 7-8, 2024; 1-2 Sivan 5784; Bemidbar; Shavuot. See note below
Friday is Rosh Hodesh Sivan. Shavuot starts Tuesday evening and continues Wednesday & Thursday

Note: Because of travel and then Shavuot, I may not be able to prepare and post Devrei Torah next week for Naso. If you do not receive a posting from me next week, you may wish to check my archives for Naso at PotomacTorah.org

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.

Hamas continues to manipulate the media while pretending to negotiate with Israel. Hersh Polin Goldberg, cousin of very close friends of ours, remains a captive. We continue our prayers for the hostages and all our people stuck in Gaza. Israel is being roundly condemned for causing a fire at a humanitarian tent camp in Rafah, despite the fact that intelligence indicates it was the fault of Hamas. For more information, see
https://mail.yahoo.com/d/folders/1/messages/ABuU1xg-JoTtZliKAwH70IO8PXo
May our people in Israel wipe out the evil of Hamas, protect us from violence by anti-Semites around the world, and restore peace for our people quickly and successfully – with the continued help of Hashem.

Josh Udler is sponsoring the Devrei Torah this week in memory of his father, Allan Udler, z"l, Avrum Shaya ben Hermon haKohen, whose yehrtzeit is 8 Sivan, immediately after the end of Shavuot.

Shavuot always comes very shortly after parshat Bemidbar. I follow the custom of many commentators in devoting one weekly posting to Shavuot and combining Bemidbar and Naso. The census that starts in Bemidbar continues and takes up much of Naso, so this approach makes sense. This year, with my travel for this weekend and then Shavuot taking up half of next week, I am likely to miss posting next week and return for Behaalotecha.

One may consider Shavuot as the culmination of Pesach. We count the Omer for forty-nine days, seven full weeks, starting on the second night of Pesach. After completing the full forty-nine days, we celebrate Shavuot. This day coincides with the date on which Hashem gave the Aseret Dibrot (Ten Statements) to our ancestors on Har Sinai. The experience of Hashem's voice and loud thunder frightens the people, so they ask Moshe to receive Hashem's words and present them (after the first couple of statements). We know from Behar and tradition that God presented all the mitzvot,

both the written and oral Torah, to Moshe at Har Sinai. This background explains why the primary significance of Shavuot is the Torah. A significant tradition is to stay up all night learning Torah and then davening the morning services as early as possible – to show that we look forward so much to receiving the Torah that we want to perform the mitzvot as soon as possible.

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander, President of Ohr Torah Stone, observes that most Jewish holy days are for God (Torah study) or for us (eating and drinking). Shavuot, unlike the other festivals, does not have special symbols for the holiday. Instead, the custom is to eat, drink, and interact with family and friends. Following the teaching of Rav Tzadok Hakohen, Rabbi Brander observes that we must find holiness in every one of our actions – meals, work, and interactions with others. The key to Shavuot is to focus on ways to bring holiness into our daily activities.

Rabbi David Fohrman, as usual, follows interconnections in the Torah to find additional insights. Rabbi Fohrman teaches that the first laws for B'Nai Yisrael are Paro's laws in Egypt. When Moshe and Aharon go to Paro to request a few days for the people to go into the midbar to pray to hashem, Paro by calls the time off "hishbatem" – the verb form of "Shabbat." Paro calls the slaves lazy and orders the Egyptians no longer to provide straw for the slaves but requires them to search for the straw needed to make bricks – and the daily quota ("chok") per slave remains the same. Paro's word "chok" is the word the Torah uses for a law that does not change.

Rabbi Fohrman continues by noting that Paro orders the slaves to produce "d'var yom beyomo" – a daily quota of bricks. The next time we hear this phrase is when Hashem tells Moshe that He will send down manna from heaven every night, "d'var yom beyomo" – a daily quota of one omer per person. We count the omer for forty-nine days, from Pesach to Shavuot.

Following Rabbi Fohrman, there is a pattern here. Paro institutes laws, quotas, and punishments that to torture B'Nai Yisrael. Even the delicious bread that the Egyptians give to the Jews is a punishment – an energy source to enable the Jews to work as hard as possible until they cannot work any longer. Miss a daily chok (quota), and the result is physical beating.

Rabbi Fohrman connects Paro's punishments to Hashem's gifts to our ancestors. Manna is a tikkun for the bread that Paro gave to enable the Jews to perform harsh physical work. Manna from Hashem is a pure gift, and the doubling every Friday provides food for Shabbat – in contrast to Paro's increasing quotas with taking away the straw. "Chok," which started as a daily quota of bricks to enable harsh physical labor, under Hashem becomes laws focused on making life better for the Jews. "Hishbatem," the request for a few days to set aside to meet with Hashem, becomes "Shabbat" – a requirement that the Jews rest and enjoy life for one day out of every seven. Paro's bread of affliction (so the Jewish slaves could perform harsh labor) becomes manna, a pure gift of delicious food for every Jew for the entire time of their wanderings in the desert.

The Torah emphasizes that an important goal of the plagues and Exodus is to teach B'Nai Yisrael and the world that Hashem loves B'Nai Yisrael and provides for us as long as we obey the mitzvot. God specifically takes the most important mitzvot, ties them to Paro's specific punishments, and uses His mitzvot to teach our ancestors that He loves each of us. Go back to Yitro's reaction when Moshe tells him of Hashem's love for each Jew. Yitro already knows about the plagues, Exodus, crossing of the Reed Sea, and destruction of the Egyptian army. What amazes Yitro is that such a powerful God loves and cares for each individual Jew. No previous religion in the world had a god who cared about individual humans.

Perhaps because Shavuot lacks the obvious symbols of Sukkot, lulav, etrog, Seder, and matzot, it seems to be significantly less well known than the other festivals. As these connections show, Shavuot connects directly to Pesach, the beginnings of B'Nai Yisrael in slavery in Egypt, Har Sinai, and 613 mitzvot. Perhaps the most important lesson is that Shavuot reminds us to find ways to bring holiness into our daily lives – through eating, drinking, interacting with others, and finding ways to work with Hashem to make the world a better place.

This year, Hamas and anti-Semites throughout the world have done all they could to defeat our attempts to work with God for tikkun olam. Universities and public schools (through grade twelve), which used to be friendly to our people, have become centers of hatred and violence. "News media," even many Jewish publications, have been leading the evil work. Despite the difficulties, are matters starting to improve? Argentina has a strongly pro-Israel president. Mexico has just elected a Jewish president. Can we look forward to improvement in coming months and in 5785?
My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, made every Yom Tov special. He enjoyed having day school students from the Congregation lead much of the service on the first day of Shavuot. He was always proud that numerous children from his congregation went on to become rabbis and leaders of Jewish organizations. Once we understand the significance of special days in our calendar, we must teach what we learn to our children and grandchildren – as well as to others in the community, as Rabbi Yehoshua Gordon, z"l, reminds us in his Devar Torah below.

Shabbat Shalom,

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 Hersh ben Perel Chana (Hersh Polin, hostage to terrorists in Gaza); Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

Parshat Bemidbar/Shavuot: Torah vs. Cheesecake

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * © 5784 (2024)
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.

Unlike the other two major Biblical festivals of Pesach and Sukkot, the upcoming holiday of Shavuot has no specific mitzvot designated for its celebration. No symbolic foods must be eaten, no huts built and no formal seder. Shavuot, from a straightforward reading of the Biblical verses, is a Yom Tov, a simple holiday devoid of any particular rituals.

Even though Shavuot does not come with listed laws or rituals in the Torah, the Talmud in Masechet Pesachim (68b) points to one halakha which is unique to Shavuot. In delineating the rules of the holidays, the Torah at times refers to them as "holidays for you," and at times as "holidays for God." Picking up on this seeming inconsistency, the Talmud suggests that these two terms are in fact complementary, inasmuch as they indicate to us how we are meant to spend our

holidays. R' Eliezer claims that one should choose either to devote one's time and energy over the holidays to the study of Torah ("holidays for God") OR to focus on the eating, drinking, and festivities of the day ("holidays for you"). R' Yehoshua, on the other hand, argues that time must be made for both activities, studying and feasting, over the course of every holiday. Following this argument, the Talmud states that regardless of the view one adopts in the previous debate, it is universally accepted that on Shavuot one must make time for feasting, for Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah.

This last halakhic ruling seems odd. Specifically on the day the Torah was given, we are meant to make time for eating and drinking? Does that make eating cheesecake, marketed in bakeries all over Israel this time of year, a real mitzvah?! We would expect just the opposite: Of all the holidays on the calendar, Shavuot should have been designated to focus purely on Torah study. In fact, in Jewish communities around the world, there is a well-established custom to study Torah all night long!
Rav Tzadok Hakohen (Pri Tzadik, Shavuot #12), offers an amazing interpretation of this ruling. Shavuot is, indeed, the time that we celebrate the giving of the Torah. But the Torah is not merely a text to be studied in the beit midrash, as meaningful as that is. The Torah is a way of life, the core and essence of how we live and breathe within the world. All of life, says Rav Tzadok, emanates from Torah and takes inspiration from it. As such, there is no better day than Shavuot to eat and drink – with the express intent to sanctify our lives and our world through engaging with the physical. Not through relegating celebration through a special mitzvah, like matza or lulav, do we mark the commemoration of the giving of the Torah, but through the act of engaging with the physical, like eating. This is how we recognize the place that the Torah holds in everything that we do.

The Talmud's approach to how we celebrate Shavuot, as interpreted by Rav Tzadok, reflects a fundamental idea in our Jewish observance. The Torah is not restricted to the spiritual or the cerebral, or boxed off into the space in which we perform ritual commands. Rather, the Torah calls on us to find holiness in our every action – our meals, our work, our everyday interactions with others, and beyond. Every part of life offers us the chance to fill the world with the splendor of Torah, by acting in accordance with its letter and with its spirit. The everyday, the mundane – these are not the opposite of holiness, but simply the open space that invites holiness in at every moment. It is about bringing holiness into the mundane and the recognition that without the mundane, holiness is unimportant.

As we once again accept the Torah, let us take it upon ourselves to find new ways to infuse holiness into the routines that make up our daily lives, to feel the presence and the relevance of Torah wherever we may travel, in whatever we may do.

* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

A Lesson from a Date

By Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Shavuos is the holiday on which we celebrate the giving of the Torah to the nation of Israel.Upon examination, one would find that the Torah usually lists exactly what day a holiday begins. For example, by Pesach the Torah tells us)Vayikra 23:6(that *"On the fifteenth day of this month is the Festival of Matzos."* However, come Shavuos we find something different. The Torah writes)Vayikra 23: 15(*"and you shall count for youselves from the day after the Shabbos . . . you shall count 50 days and you shall bring a new Mincha offering to Hashem . . . and you shall convoke on this very day – there shall be a holy convocation for yourselves."* Why does the Torah not tell us the date of Shavuos? Why does the Torah force us to calculate 50 days from the start of our counting of the Omer to figure out when Shavuos is?

The Torah is composed of two parts: The written law, the Torah as we see it written in Tanach, and the Oral law, the elaborations, explanations and clarifications of that found in the Tanach, which we have nowadays as the Talmud. G-d gave both the Oral and the Written law to the nation of Israel at Sinai. The Oral law was transmitted from generation to generation until the point where the Sages were worried that we would forget it. They preserved it first as the Mishna, which was a concise, systematic compilation that was to serve as a memory device for later generations. However, later generations began to forget even more, and the Sages determined that writing down even more was necessary. Today, we have this as Gemora. Hashem gave these two parts of the Torah, as mentioned, to us at Sinai. That we acknowledge and believe that G-d gave the Torah in its entirety to us at Sinai is essential.

It is to illustrate how central a role the Oral Law plays that the Torah does not mention the date of Shavuos. The Torah terms the starting date for the count of the 50 days *"macharas HaShabbos," "the day after the Shabbos."* The Oral law tells us that this is the second day of Pesach, the "Shabbos" referred to in the verse being the first day of Pesach. The Tzedukim, Sadducees, who did not give credence to the Oral law, explained this verse differently. They explained it to mean literally the day after Shabbos. So, they began counting from the first Sunday after Pesach.)See I: 16(

When we celebrate Shavuos on the day that we do, we are simultaneously affirming our belief in the Oral law. After all, it is only with the clarification that the Oral law provides that we know when Shavuos falls. Shavuos, the holiday on which we celebrate the fact that we have the Torah, is the day on which we acknowledge that we received all of the Torah, both oral and written.)See II: 12(To be sure that we recognize the entirety of the Torah, G-d omitted the exact date on which we celebrate from the written Torah. Only by relying upon the Oral law can we celebrate Shavuos in its proper time. This Shavuos, we should all merit inspiration by the realization that G-d entrusted us with an amazing gift: the Torah.

https://torah.org/learning/yomtov-shavuos-vol3no08/

Bamidbar – The Rosh Yeshiva Responds – Conversion Certificate for a Child Born Through Surrogacy

by Rabbi Dov Linzer
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah

> *Take a census 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* (Bamidbar 1:2)

QUESTION — Providence, RI

A couple who could not have children naturally had kids by means of a surrogate (not sure whose sperm or egg or if that's relevant). They're having a *giyur* (conversion) for the child and have requested to use their names, and not Avraham/Sara on the *teudat giyur* (conversion certificate). Do you have thoughts/an opinion about this? Thank you in advance!

ANSWER

If it were both the husband's sperm and the wife's egg then you definitely can, because many authorities say that maternity is defined by whose egg it was (for example, Rabbi Shlomo Goren *(Torat HaRefuah,* pg. 176-177), Rabbi Ovadia Yosef *(HaRishon LeTzion* 1 Even HaEzer 5), Rabbi Shlomo Amar *(Shema Shlomo Even HaEzer* 8:1-3), Rabbi Yaakov Ariel *(Techumin* 16 5756, 171, etc.).

Although I personally incline towards the position that it goes by who is carrying the fetus (see for example *Tzitz Eliezer* 19:40, Rabbi Zalman Nechemia Goldberg *(Techumin* 5, 258), Rav Mordechai Eliyahu, etc.), I think that we can rely on this position for this matter.

If it was not the husband's sperm, but still the wife's egg then, in line with the above, you could still use the mother's name.

If it was the father's sperm and not the mother's egg and it was the egg of a non-Jew, then the husband would not be halakhically related to the fetus.

All of that is a matter of the halakhic status. However, as far as writing names on the conversion certificate or a ketubah, my practice in such cases is to write the father's name and then המגדלו =) המג' (who raised him) and the same with the mother's name.

I would call him up for an Aliyah with the father's name (and the Mother's name if that's your practice) without worrying about any addition/qualifier because what really matters there is just people know who the name is referring to.

* President and Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, Bronx, NY.

https://library.yctorah.org/2024/06/ryrbamidbar/

So Many Holidays These Few Months! What do they ALL mean?

By Rabbi Ysoscher Katz *

With Shavuot only a few days away, it is time to start preparing for the chag, practically, and even more importantly, spiritually.

Calendrically, we are currently in a period dense with holidays and days of commemoration. Within the span of two months we will have celebrated five holidays on the Jewish calendar: Pesach, Yom Ha'Shoah Ve'Hagevurah (Holocaust Memorial Day) Yom Ha'zikaron, (The day of commemoration of Israel's fallen soldiers) Yom Ha'atzmaut, (Israel's Independence Day) and Shavuot.

While Pesach and Shavuot are biblical holidays and the others are modern additions, it is still worth noting that historical coincidence has created this lineup of "springtime" holidays.

What does this series of five festivals teach us?

These holidays can be divided into three sequential categories, Pesach, the middle holidays and Shavuot. They are in dialogue and philosophically complement one another, each representing a different stage in our maturity as a people.

Their organization follows the classic dialectic – thesis-antithesis-synthesis- model.

On Pesach we celebrate our redemption from Egypt. It is a story of utter helplessness and complete dependence on God. We were in exile, oppressed by the Egyptians and needed to be saved. The "thesis" of Pesach is that we are completely helpless on our own and only through God's intervention could we thrive and succeed. This represents the infancy stage of our faith-narrative.

The holidays which come next are the polar opposites of that mode, the "antithesis." The era of the Holocaust and subsequent birth of the Jewish state was a period when we were not cuddled and directly cared for by God. One could say that this represents a rebellious and rejectionist theological state. Many in the Jewish community felt that the Holocaust was a period when we were neglected by God and left to fend for ourselves. This is the rebellious youthful stage of our faith-narrative.

Shavuot, finally, is the "synthesis" phase. It counteracts the radical abandonment felt during the holocaust and introduces a revised notion of our relationship with God. Like Peasch, we are again celebrating our relationship with the divine but the nature of the relationship has changed.

Pesach represents a hierarchical model. We are inferior, needy and despondent, and God intervenes to alleviate our suffering. Shavuot reflects a different paradigm.

On Shavuot we celebrate the receiving of the Torah. Our relationship with God, mitigated through the Torah, is horizontal, not vertical. At Sinai, God entered into a covenant with us that is predicated on mutual dependence. He needs us to fulfill His mitzvot as much as we need Him to keep His promises and commitments to us.

These holidays reflect the ideal religious trajectory. Initially, we want our relationship with the Divine to be hierarchical, where God takes care of our needs, our prayers are answered and we are always protected. As we grow older and realize that this is not always the case, we feel cheated and disillusioned. We are compelled to "go it on our own." Then, as we mature, we moderate our oppositional stance, appreciating the complexity of our relationship with the Divine. In time we

hopefully come to accept that this relationship is horizontal, not vertical; it is based on mutuality, not dependence. We stand in front of God strong and autonomous, not wretched and lost. Now it is not only God who makes demands. Like Abraham, who demanded justice from God in the story of the destruction of Sodom, we too have expectations.

The cluster of holidays we are now celebrating symbolizes this trajectory. They serve as models of the different kinds of relationships with God we have experienced during our history so that we can today incorporate those different modes in our own lives as well.

* Rabbi of the Prospect Heights Shul in Brooklyn, New York. Ordination in 1986 from Rabbi Yechezkel Roth, dayan of UTA Satmer. Long time teaacher at taught at the Ma'ayanot Yeshiva High School for Girls, SAR High School, and daf yomi teacher in Boro Park.

https://library.yctorah.org/2024/06/bamidbar5784/

Confronting the Wilderness: Thoughts on Parashat Bemidbar

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The people of Israel began their experience as a free nation — in the wilderness of Sinai! After their long servitude in Egypt, they might have hoped for a quick transition to a beautiful land flowing with milk and honey; they might have experienced a tremendous surge of optimism on their redemption from slavery.

But instead of a quick and happy transition, they found themselves in a wilderness. In this less than hospitable environment, they had plenty of time to focus on their troubles and fears: how long would it take for them to reach the promised land? What obstacles and dangers awaited them? How many wars would need to be waged? The wilderness is an ideal place for despair and brooding, for serious loss of morale.

The Spanish thinker, Ortega y Gasset, in his book *The Revolt of the Masses,* suggested that feeling lost and forsaken is an essential ingredient in proper human development. *"And this is the simple truth — that to live is to feel oneself lost — he who accepts it has already begun to find himself, to be on firm ground….He who does not really feel himself lost, is without remission; that is to say, he never finds himself, never comes up against his own reality."*

The wilderness was the formative framework for the development of the Israelites — as individuals and as a nation. By feeling "lost," they came up against "their own reality." They had to mobilize their inner resources; they had to strengthen their spirits; they had to think creatively.

This week's Torah portion provides insight into how the Israelites coped with their wilderness experience. They took a census. They organized themselves into tribal divisions, appointing leaders over each tribe. Instead of lamenting their fate, they took meaningful steps to evaluate their strength and to form themselves into governable legions. The Torah emphasizes that they counted the people "by name" – i.e., they focused on the individuality and uniqueness of each person and did not simply lump people together in an impersonal way.

The wilderness experience of the Israelites has continued meaning for us today. When we feel lost, when we feel despair…this is a time for us to grow. The feeling of being in a wilderness is a challenge to us, an opportunity to discover who we really are. When we are complacent and self-satisfied, we lack the stimulus to push ourselves to the limits of our capacities. Like the ancient Israelites, we need to count our friends and allies — upon whom can we depend? Who can really be trusted to stand with us in time of crisis? We need to take specific actions to enable us to cope with real and perceived challenges. We need to see ourselves and others as "names" — not as impersonal ciphers.

But first of all, we need to draw on our own inner strengths. Instead of being frightened or demoralized by the wildernesses we face in life, we need to think quietly and clearly about what we can do to address the challenges before us.

Until we come up "against our own reality," we do not live our lives to their fullest.

* 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 during its current fund raising period. Thank you.

https://www.jewishideas.org/confronting-wilderness-thoughts-parashat-bemidbar

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Jerusalem Undivided: Thoughts for Yom Yerushalayim

By Rabbi Marc D. 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

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Bamidbar-Shavuos: Our Treasure Called Mesorah

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

The Torah was given to us in the desert on the holiday of Shavuos. From that sacred day of revelation at Sinai the Torah has been our national treasure both in study and in practice. Through diligence and personal integrity, we transmit it from generation to generation.

The Chovos HaLivavos delves into the contrast between the quality of “Tradition,” where a person arrives at a conclusion due to the wisdom or revelation of a mentor, and “Inspiration,” where a person arrives at a conclusion due to their own personal journey. Each, of course, has its benefits. Appropriate observance blends the two. For example, when we pray to Hashem, we will usually use formulated prayer, as found in a Siddur or Tehillim. Sometimes, however, we will express ourselves in spontaneous prayer and use words which are richly a personal expression of ourselves.

Interestingly, when we daven Pisukei D’Zimra each morning, Halacha provides guidance of what to skip if we are running late. If a person is presented with a choice to skip the inspiration collection of verses that are part of the “Hodu” section, or to skip a “Halleluka,” Halacha says that it is better to skip the collected verses in Hodu and prioritize the “Halleluka” section. At first this ruling may seem intrusive. We may think, “If I want to recite the inspirational collection of verses, why would anyone stop me?” Indeed, I don’t think anyone would stop you. But Halacha is providing guidance that as inspirational as the collection of verses is, in terms of impact, the “Halleluka” section — recited in the exact sequence that Dovid authored it and the Anshei Kinesses HaGidola codified it — is greater. When we recite formulated prayer, we are not just reciting heartfelt sentences. We are tapping into the energy and connection of the letters, the words, and the sequence of the sentences, corresponding effectively to the heavenly spheres which were known to the great people of the generations. While there is great value in heartfelt, spontaneous prayer, when we connect with Hashem according to the text formulated by those who knew Hashem better than us, we create a greater impact.

The concept of a traditional, formulated arrangement is not just true in prayer. It is true in the study of Talmud as well. When people first encounter Talmud it seems like the authors kept an audio recorder going in the study halls of Babylonia and then transcribed it. While there are certain anchors known as Mishnayos, and there is some degree of organization, to the beginner it seems like one long scholarly conversation that could just as well have taken place at a Shabbos table. Each conversation leads into a different conversation in the style of "Oh, that reminds me of…"

What is remarkable is that the Talmud is actually not an ongoing audio recorder that was transcribed, but rather a calculated method of communication to share the wisdom of Torah through the generations for eternity. The method of communication that the Talmidei Chachomim (scholars) used was the conversation style. Thus, for example, the fact that the blessing, Boruch Sheomar, is not mentioned in the Talmud guides us in Halacha to say that it is not on the same level as Birchas Kriyas Shema. We do not say, "The recorder just wasn't on that day when they discussed it." Instead, we recognize that every section of Talmud was carefully chosen and then communicated in the style of a conversation.

The reason that the Sages chose to communicate the Talmud in the style of a conversation is easy to appreciate. In addition to recording and imparting Torah wisdom, what the Sages really strived to do was to teach us the skill of dialogue called Mesorah. This skill of dialogue and conversation is what enables us to clarify things and to transmit them effectively to the next generation.

Rabbi Nota Greenblatt of Memphis had an ongoing relationship with a young man who was considering becoming more observant. For many months the young man would show up periodically to ask questions. One day the young man came to Rabbi Greenblatt's home and heard screaming coming from inside. Thinking that it was some sort of emergency he walked in without knocking and found Rabbi Greenblatt arguing heatedly with his students about the correct understanding of a Talmudic passage. The young man watched in amazement as the group morphed easily from heated discussion to friendly and collaborative comments, all the while reliving the Talmudic conversations of old in real-time. That moment was the young man's glimpse into the Mesorah, the way the tradition is passed on from generation to generation with both reverence for tradition and personal inspiration. The experience provided him the personal clarity to choose to live a life of observance, to treasure the gift of Torah that was given to us at Sinai on Shavuos.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

* 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 * © 2022

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]ed. note: written during the covid restrictions[, 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.

* Savannah Kollel; Congregation B'nai Brith Jacob, Savannah, GA. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer will become Rosh Kollel next year.

Bamidbar & Shavuot

by Rabbi Herzl Hefter *****

]Rabbi Hefter did not send in a Dvar Torah for Shavuot or for Sefer Bamidbar. Watch this space for his future Devrei Torah[

* 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

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

]The only new Dvar Torah from Rabbi Ovadia for Bemidbar runs to 24 pages -- too long for this format. Watch this space

for his insights most weeks.[

Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright rights to this material.

Chalav and the Power of Permission

By Rabbi Moshe Rube * © 2020

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

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

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

This observation may be the pshat of a famous Gemara that states "One who shows his friend the whites of his teeth, is like giving him a cup of milk to drink." I am sure the Gemara knows that people have varied dietary preferences – so why the emphasis on milk? I propose that the Gemara spotlights milk specifically because it signifies heter and freedom from worries about Kashrus.

Now to people who)like me(study or who have studied in Yeshiva, such a conjencture may fill you with utter horror. Why would the Talmud associate joy when we receive a psak lekula? Should we not reflect the cool and collected attitude of Reb Nechunia Ben Hakaneh who prayed before every learning session "That I not declare what is impure, pure and not what is pure, impure"? The truth of the Torah is simply the truth, and we should strive to eliminate from ourselves any inclination to enjoy going lekula.

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

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

milk.

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

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

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

** Excluding rabbinic gezeiros of Chalav Yisrael.

* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera)Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Knesseth Israel)Birmingham, AL(.

Rav Kook Torah
Shavuot: Longing for Jerusalem

Zalman Shazar, who served as Israel's third president, described an encounter he witnessed as a young boy in the Belarus town of Stowbtsy — an experience that made a lifelong impression on him.

In 1899, the rabbi of the nearby town of Mir, Rabbi Eliyahu David Rabinowitz-Teomim, was invited to serve as chief rabbi of Jerusalem alongside the aging Rabbi Shmuel Salant.

Rabbi Rabinowitz-Teomim, known by his acronym 'Aderet,' agreed to take the prestigious position. He left the town of Mir accompanied by an entourage of rabbis, including his son-in-law, Rav Kook.)Rav Kook at that time was rabbi of Bauska; five years later he would join his father-in-law in Eretz Yisrael, when he was appointed chief rabbi of Jaffa(.

Their journey took them to the town of Stowbtsy, where the train made a stop. Out of courtesy to the local rabbi, the travelers paid a visit to the rabbi's home.

When the news spread that eminent rabbinical scholars were visiting the town, community leaders and townspeople gathered to greet the important guests.

The rabbi of Stowbtsy offered refreshments to the crowd. Lifting his glass, he toasted the health of Rabbi Rabinowitz-Teomim: *"To the Rabbi of Mir!"*

Those assembled were surprised to see one of the rabbis objecting to the toast.

Rav Kook sprang to his feet, eyes blazing with zealous pride. *"What, the Rabbi of Mir? To the Rabbi of Jerusalem!"*

Rav Kook said the word "Jerusalem" with such awe and reverence, such fervor and love, that the entire assembly was

deeply moved.

Many years later, Zalman Shazar testified: *"That childhood encounter — hearing Rav Kook's passionate outburst of 'Jerusalem!,' full of reverence and love for the holy city — that was my first Eretz-Yisrael experience."*

)Adapted from *Melachim Kvnei Adam* by Simcha Raz, pp. 217-218.(

https://ravkooktorah.org/AHAVAT-ZION-81.htm

Bamidbar: The Two Journeys (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.]emphasis added[

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."*]1[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.

FOOTNOTE:

]1[Megillah 10b.

LIFE-CHANGING IDEA

Remember your destination. This will help you to distinguish between an opportunity to be seized and a temptation to be resisted.

https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bechukotai/we-the-people/ Because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail or saved in my archives at PotomacTorah.org, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar.

Bemidbar: We Must Share Our Torah Knowledge -- Life Lessons From the Parshah

By Yehoshua B. Gordon, z"l * © Chabad 2024

The third chapter of Bamidbar begins with: *"These are the descendants of Aaron and Moses on the day that the L rd spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai. These are the names of the sons of Aaron: Nadab the firstborn, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar."*

A number of perplexing questions immediately arise when reading these verses.

> This was not, in fact, the day that G d spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai.
>
> The Torah states *"These are the descendants of Aaron and Moses"* but then only enumerates Aaron's sons, and does not mention Moses'!

Spiritual Descendants

Rashi, quoting the Talmud, explains that by virtue of the fact that Moses taught Torah to Aaron's sons, in a spiritual sense, he is considered their father.

This idea is the subject of an entry in Hayom Yom, which is connected to this Torah portion. The Rebbe, quoting his father-in-law, the Sixth Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, writes:

> *"My revered father, the Rebbe Rashab]the Fifth Rebbe[, related that he heard from his father, the Rebbe Maharash]the Fourth Rebbe[, that the Tzemach Tzedek]the Third Rebbe[heard the Alter Rebbe]founder of Chabad[referring to himself as the son of the Maggid of Mezritch and the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov."*

The Alter Rebbe was the disciple of the Maggid, who in turn was the disciple of the Baal Shem Tov. This clearly aligns with the above-mentioned teaching of our sages that *"whoever teaches Torah to the son of his fellow man, Torah regards it as if he had begotten him."*

This also explains *"… the day that the L rd spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai."* Moses didn't simply speak the words of the Torah to Aaron's sons; rather, he taught them the Torah precisely as he learned it from G d on Mount Sinai. Studying with

Moses in this manner caused a spiritual transformation in Aaron's sons to the extent that they became Moses' spiritual children.

We Are All Teachers

So, what does it take to be a Torah teacher? Are there qualifications? Contrary to popular misconception, anyone and everyone can be a Torah teacher!

Do not think that to teach Torah to another, you must first spend many years studying in a great yeshivah, that you must first be ordained as a rabbi, or that you must first become a great Torah scholar. There is no need to study the entire Talmud multiple times, to memorize it, and to know it backwards and forwards before becoming a teacher.

Not at all.

All you need is to care enough to share your Torah knowledge.

A person can attend a Torah class or listen to a Torah thought online and then turn around and share the subject matter with someone else. That person is now a Torah teacher! And sharing a Torah thought you just learned with someone else does not only make that person your student, *rather "whoever teaches Torah to the son of his fellow man, Torah regards it as if he had begotten him."*

Imagine the potential we have! Find someone and teach them Torah! You're not a "certified" Torah scholar? Share with that person the last Torah thought you studied. You become their teacher, and you can literally transform their life.

As the Rebbe often said, *"If you know aleph-bet, teach aleph-bet. And if all you know is aleph, then teach aleph!"*

Be Your Soul

The 32nd chapter of the book of Tanya — the fundamental text of the philosophy of Chabad, written by the Alter Rebbe — is known as the *"heart of Tanya."* The Hebrew word for heart is lev, spelled lamed bet, whose numeric equivalent is 32. The subject matter of chapter 32 is ahavat Yisrael, the love that we are required to have for our family — our fellow Jews.

How is it possible to develop a genuine love for another? The Alter Rebbe explains that there are two components to a human being: the G dly soul and the animal soul. A person must distinguish between these two souls, focus on the G dly soul, and become less sympathetic to the desires of the animal soul.

I had the privilege to study this chapter many years ago with my father, Rabbi Sholom B. Gordon, of blessed memory.

My father's message throughout was: How can you truly love another person? This is accomplished by minimizing the importance of the body and maximizing the importance of the soul. If we look at ourselves as a body, it's not going to work. If we look at ourselves as a soul, it is going to work!

If you are your body, life is a zero-sum game; if there's only one piece of cake, only one of us can win. But if you are your soul, there is no competition! When there is a mitzvah to be done, I want you to have a share in it as much as I want it for myself — because it's not about me. It's about G d.

If I am my body, then my needs and wants are physical. Come what may, you're a threat to my happiness. But if I'm my soul, then my desires are spiritual; they are G dly — if I put on Tefillin, I want you to as well; if I give to charity, I want you to as well; if I pray, I want you to as well; if I study Torah, I want nothing more than to share it with you. Come what may, you're a part of my happiness.

If we view ourselves as bodies, ahavat Yisrael cannot happen; if we view ourselves as souls, ahavat Yisrael will abound.

A Heavenly Argument

The first mishnah in Bava Metzia outlines a scenario where two litigants are arguing over the ownership of a garment:

> *If two people came to court holding a garment; and this one, the first litigant, says: I found it, and that one, the second litigant, says: I found it; this one says: All of it is mine, and that one says: All of it is mine; how does the court adjudicate this case? This one takes an oath that he does not have ownership of less than half of it, and that one takes an oath that he does not have ownership of less than half of it, and they divide it.*

Chassidim would say that this mishnah describes Jewish outreach efforts, and the privilege of teaching Torah to a fellow Jew:

> *Two souls are arguing over a third soul who found its way back to a Torah way of life. The first one says, "I was the one who merited to inspire him because I had him over for a Shabbat dinner." The second one says, "I merited to inspire him because I taught him aleph-bet." How does the Heavenly Court adjudicate this case? They each take an oath that they do not have less than half of the merit, and then they happily agree to share it!*

This, chassidim would say, is how they teach this mishnah in Heaven.

A Spiritual Famine

In his introduction to *Tanya*, the Alter Rebbe discusses the profound connection between a Rebbe and a chassid)disciple(.

There were chassidim — including my father — who memorized the Alter Rebbe's introduction to *Tanya*)called the Compiler's Forward(and recited it by heart each day.

I remember walking with him to the synagogue on Shabbat morning and hearing him quietly talking to himself. When I asked what he was saying, he explained, *"I am reciting the words of the Alter Rebbe's introduction to Tanya; it's what connects a chassid to a Rebbe."*

In it, the Alter Rebbe instructs those who have questions about what is written in Tanya to seek guidance from others in their community. He then requests that those who are able to answer these questions should not exhibit *"false modesty and humility,"* writing: *"It is well known how bitter is the punishment of he who 'withholds food']i.e., who withholds Torah knowledge from one who seeks it[, and also how great is the reward]granted to one who shares such knowledge[."*

"G d forbid," says the Alter Rebbe, *"that someone should refrain from sharing his Torah knowledge with another person."* Can you imagine if someone had storehouses filled with grain during a time of famine and withheld food from starving people? Certainly not. Well, we are experiencing a spiritual famine! People are starving for Torah knowledge, and we are responsible for sharing whatever we have. And if all we have is an aleph, we must share that aleph.

We Cannot Say No

The Hebrew words for *"How bitter is the punishment of he who 'withholds food,' and how great is the reward granted …"* are *"onesh hamar, al mone'ah bar, vegodel hasechar."*

One morning, as my father recited these words, he shared with me that when he first memorized them as a small child, he thought to himself, *"Wow, that rhymes! Is this poetry?"*

These poetic words, which have been with me since I was a young boy, played a key part in my decision to broadcast the daily Torah classes online at Chabad.org.

For many years, we had a wonderful class on the daily Chumash and Tanya portions locally at Chabad of Encino following our morning services. It's hard to keep a good thing secret, and word of our classes reached the rabbis and staff at Chabad.org. When they asked if I would agree to broadcast these classes online, I politely declined. I explained that we have a good thing going here, we have a great group, and we have a good time. I really was not interested in turning the classes into a commercial production and broadcasting them via the internet. I worried that it would introduce a level of formality that would take away from the terrific dynamic of our class.

Again and again, over several years, I was asked to change my mind, and my answer was always the same. I really had no intention of changing my mind until one day the rabbi from Chabad.org called again, and I turned him down once more. *"Rabbi Gordon!"* he said, in a last-ditch effort, *"Don't you know what the Alter Rebbe writes in his introduction to the Tanya – onesh hamar, al mone'ah bar, vegodel has'char?! It's a pretty serious thing to say no to a request like this, and there's a pretty great reward waiting for you if you say yes!"*

"You got me!" I responded — as memories of that pivotal conversation with my father as a young boy washed over me. *"I'm in,"* I said. *"When do we start?"*

This is the argument that persuaded me to take the leap and broadcast these classes on the internet.

The Alter Rebbe says, if you have the ability to share these teachings, you must share them. You're not perfect? Nobody's perfect. You know an aleph? Teach an aleph!

Let us all strive to be Torah teachers — each of us on our own level — and may we all be blessed with an abundance of spiritual sons and daughters. May our efforts in sharing our Torah knowledge hasten the arrival of our righteous Moshiach and the era of the Ultimate Redemption, a time when — as the Alter Rebbe concludes the above referenced section in the Compiler's Forward, quoting the Prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah — *"'no longer will one man teach another…]to know Me[, for they will all know Me…' 'for the knowledge of G d will fill the earth as the waters fill the sea.' Amen. May this be His will."*

* Rabbi Yehoshua Gordon directed Chabad of the Valley in Tarzana, CA until his passing in 2016. Adapted by Rabbi Mottel Friedman from classes and sermons that Rabbi Gordon presented in Encino, CA and broadcast on Chabad.org. "Life Lessons from the Parshah" is a project of the Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon Living Legacy Fund, benefiting the 32 centers of Chabad of the Valley, published by Chabad of the Valley and Chabad.org.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6445434/jewish/Torah-The-Great-Antidote.htm

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Bemidbar: Good Neighbors

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

Good Neighbors

The families of the clan of Kehat camped to the south of the Tabernacle.)Num. 3:29(

Korach, whom we will meet later, as the instigator of the mutiny against the authority of Moses, was a Levite of the tribe of Kehat. Most of his fellow mutineers came from the tribe of Reuben, who also camped south of the Tabernacle, near the clan of Kehat. They were thus exposed to Korach's negative influence and subsequently got caught up in his mutiny.

Moses and Aaron camped on the east side of the Tabernacle. The tribes of the camp of Judah, who also camped on the

east side of the Tabernacle, constantly witnessed Moses' and Aaron's devotion to the Torah, and this inspired them to become great Torah scholars themselves.

We learn from this the importance of good neighbors. We can also see that a bad neighbor is one who, like Korach, promotes dissension and discord, while the best possible neighbors are those who, like Moses and Aaron, inspire others to study the Torah, for "its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace."

— from *Daily Wisdom 3*

May G-d show more and more great miracles in the Holy Land.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

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Covenant and Conversation
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

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

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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] *[5776]*

[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: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"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.

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

An Ode to the Desert

We were exhausted, burned out. We felt that we needed a break.

There were just two of us: me and my study partner, Yisrael. We were both not quite twenty years old, students in the post high school program in our yeshiva, committed to a morning and an afternoon session of intensive Talmud study from Sunday to Thursday every week.

Besides our yeshiva program, we were both enrolled in a local college, taking advanced secular courses two evenings a week. The end of the spring college semester was drawing near. Final exams were looming, and term papers were soon due.

Also looming was the festival of Shavuot, which we were expected to spend at the yeshiva. There, the festival was not all about feasting. Quite the contrary. We were to remain awake the entire first night of the holiday, engaged in Talmud study. After early morning prayers and a light meal, we had an opportunity to rest but then spent a significant portion of the second night and day of the holiday participating in a rigorous oral examination administered by the dean of the yeshiva.

So, we felt that our need for a break was legitimate. But we were at a loss to determine what would constitute an appropriate break for two exhausted yeshiva bachurim.

Predictably, we chose an activity which we would find relatively relaxing but not compromise the "yeshiva bachur" image with which we both identified. We decided to spend a day off, browsing the Jewish bookstores which then dotted the Lower East Side of Manhattan where our yeshiva was located.

It was in one of those bookstores that we met a man who was to influence us to this very day. I should say that we did not actually meet that man but rather were introduced to his writings. His name was Rabbi Yosef Lipowitz, of blessed memory.

The nature of the bookstores of long ago was such that the storekeeper was more than just a salesperson. In the case of the bookstore of which I speak, the salesperson was a woman, a Mrs. Rabinowitz as I recall, who was familiar with every book on the vast shelves and an exquisite connoisseur of her customers and their varied interests. It is no wonder that soon after we entered the store, she approached us with a small volume in her hand, a warm smile, and this greeting: "Have I got a book for you!"

Keep in mind, dear reader, that during the approaching festival of Shavuot, a biblical text is read in the synagogue, and it is a text that resembles a delightful short story much more than a somber religious treatise. I refer, of course, to the Book of Ruth.

The book that Mrs. Rabinowitz held before us, in Hebrew, was a commentary on the Book of Ruth entitled Nachlas Yosef, by Rabbi Yosef Lipowitz. A superficial perusal of the opening paragraphs of the book was "like cool water upon an exhausted soul." It combined profound erudition and sound guidance with soothing poetry. Both Yisrael and I were immediately taken by the book and its author. Right then and there, I vowed to find out more about the author and his writings and use them as a wellspring from which to fetch "cool water" whenever my soul felt exhausted.

Permit me to recommend an adaptation of this commentary on Ruth by Rabbi Aaron Lopiansky, entitled Seed of Redemption, and Rabbi Hillel Goldberg's Between Berlin and Slobodka: Jewish Transitional Figures from Eastern Europe, which contains an excellent biography of Rabbi Lipowitz.

In order to exemplify Rabbi Lipowitz' ability to assist exhausted souls to refresh themselves, allow me to share with you a sample of his reflections on this week's Torah portion, Bamidbar (Numbers 1:1-4:20).

Bamidbar, Hebrew for "in the desert," is not just the title of this week's parsha. It is the title of the entire Book of Numbers, the Chumash Bamidbar. The setting of the entire narrative that we will be reading for the next many weeks is the midbar, the desert.

The desert, of course, is a dry, barren, sandy region, naturally incapable of supporting almost any plant or animal life. What a fitting symbol for the story we will begin to read this Shabbat. And what an apt metaphor for an exhausted soul.

In his book, Rabbi Lipowitz proceeds to forcefully demonstrate that it is precisely the desert that is most receptive to beneficial influence. He quotes the beautiful phrase in King Solomon's Song of Songs which reads: "Who is this rising from the wilderness like plumes of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense more fragrant than all the merchant's powders?" (Song of Songs 3:6), upon which the Midrash comments, "All lofty matters rise from the desert. Torah rises from the desert. The Tabernacle rose from the desert. Sanhedrin rose from the desert. Prophecy rose from the desert." Later rabbinic sources add that Moses, too, rose from the desert where he tended to Yitro's flocks.

Consistent with the approaching holiday of Shavuot commemorating Matan Torah, the Almighty's greatest gift to His people, is the startling fact that it was the arid environment of the desert that He chose as the site for His great gift.

Rabbi Lipowitz draws upon a fascinating Midrashic parable to drive home his point. It reads, "Where was the Lord finally welcomed with praise? In the desert! Thus, we read, 'If only I were granted a wayfarer's lodging in the desert…' (Jeremiah 9:1). Imagine a nobleman entering a province that is thriving and attempt to become its king. The inhabitants would reject him. Imagine that he enters another thriving province attempting the same. Its inhabitants would also reject him. Then, suppose he enters a third province, one that is destitute and in ruins. They would accept him with open hands in the hope that he could benefit them. The nobleman would then proclaim this as the best of all provinces. Here I can build myself a palace in which to dwell." (Bamidbar Rabba, 1:2)

Rabbi Lipowitz finds in this, and other sources, a lesson about human nature. People who are complacent, self-satisfied, and comfortable with themselves are rarely open to input from others. They have what they need. Why should they bother to open themselves to the Divine? On the other hand, those who are weary and anxious are open to input from the Lord. Indeed, they search for Him.

Teachings such as these abound in all the available writings of Rabbi Lipowitz. They help us understand so much about our tradition. They are especially helpful to those of us who feel spiritually exhausted.

His teachings were especially helpful to two young students who, many decades ago, were introduced to them. Back then, they encouraged us to see our anxieties as prods to draw upon inner resources, inner "waters" to quench our thirst. They helped us not to merely cope with the challenges we faced, but to relish them as motivators. Moreover, they

allowed us to enjoy the festival of that Shavuot in the yeshiva so long ago. And above all, these teachings, and those of similarly gifted and inspired mentors, persist in guiding us to this very day.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Constantly on the Road

Rabbi Yedidya and Ahuva Toyber

Our portion opens up a new book which deals entirely with the journey of the People of Israel. Instead of reaching the Land of Israel soon after leaving Egypt and settling down, each tribe in its respective inheritance and each man and family in his personal plot of land – the Israelites find themselves wandering around in circles in the great wilderness in what seems to be an endless journey.

Instead of the destination, the actual journey suddenly becomes the focal point and takes on new meaning. So much so, that it is explicated upon over an entire book, as the need arises to address various issues that come up along this great journey and would probably not have transpired had the Israelites not been on the road. Indeed, the Book of Bamidbar depicts a myriad of downfalls and problems which spring up along the way – the complaints about lack of meat, the Korach affair, the spies and so forth. All of these events take place en route to the Land.

The dangers on the road - Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook of blessed memory, wrote: "In this world one finds oneself in two types of situations: at home or on the road. When a person is in his own home, he is safe; on other hand, when one is on the road, danger lurks in every corner… He comes upon unexpected complications and undergoes troubles and tribulations…. And yet, it is crucial to set out and hit the road. Reality, by definition, requires us to get up and journey, and there is no evading it… When a person is in his own home, he is safe, protected, quiet and calm; he is surrounded by walls; he has a set routine. But both these dimensions – the "home" and the "road" – make up the life of the individual, as well as that of a nation." (The essays of Rabbi Zvi Yehudah HaKohen Kook on Bamidbar, 13-14, 53).

Embarking on any type of journey involves dangers and presents challenges. When one is on the road, one cannot but feel constant fear and tension. The heart rate is accelerated, the eyes dart in all directions and one is constantly concerned with the following: Where will the next unexpected occurrence come from? What might go wrong? These feelings stem from a sense of insecurity. One who is not within his own walls, and does not have a roof over his head cannot but feel unprotected. For this reason, we say Tefillat HaDerech (literally – "The Prayer of the Road") upon leaving our homes and setting out on a journey.

There is no special prayer for one who decides to stay at home, but only for those who set out and hit the road. Here are a few words from the prayer: "May You save us from the hands of all enemies and all those who lurk for us… and save us from all types of calamities that come to the world."

Nonetheless, embarking on the journey is essential. One who only sits in his own home and never leaves his comfort zone and his protective space cannot ever advance and progress. One must always take steps forward; strive to improve; aspire to be a better person. For this, one needs bravery of heart, without which one cannot set forth and hit the road.

It follows then that the perils on the road stem from the fact that the journey takes place outdoors, where there is no protection. However, if we delve deeper, we will find another reason still for the challenges which arise for the fact that one is on the move.

"Every change is negative" -
This is what Shmuel says in the Talmud: "Any change leads to illness"[1]. Similarly, the Maharal writes in numerous places that "any change is a bad thing"[2]. In his book Gevurot Hashem[3], the Maharal explains as follows:

"The explanation seems to be that every change stands in relation to that which had existed beforehand, and comes to uproot a previous process or break down that which had formerly been standing. It follows then that every change incorporates some kind of loss or void in reference to the previously existing form. Hence, every change is negative, for it has lost something which had previously existed."

In other words, every change involves a departure from a previous position or place; an eradication, of sorts, of an earlier reality or existence. Hence, even if one advances towards a better place or a higher level, the loss of the previous existence is bound to cause some form of sorrow. The pain of this sorrow is not easy and that is why we require a special prayer when setting out on a journey, a prayer asking that the sorrow be not too great, and that the road to change be as pleasant as could be. For example, one who treads the path of marriage with the woman he loves, knows that he is on a road leading to a better place and that the destination is one of greater wholeness and joy. And yet, he also knows full well that some concessions must be made and that from now on, his spouse will have to be taken into account. He will probably enjoy less freedom than he did as a bachelor, and will have to engage in household chores and so forth. In other words, although the destination is wonderful, the journey is oftentimes filled with hardship stemming from the fact that the person now finds himself in a new reality.

The historical journey of the Jewish Nation - There is no other nation in the world that has had to undergo such a long and trying journey as the People of Israel. The 40 years in the desert were only a taste of what was yet to come – a 2000-year-old journey strewn with obstacles and bumps. The Book of Bamidbar gives us a tiny glimpse into the true essence of our nation, a people well-weathered by a long journey. It was not our choice to take to the road for so long, but we have had no choice. Reality demands constant growth. It requires of us to grow incessantly and to aspire to be better people. As such, we have no choice but to seize our walking sticks and set out on our journey. It is for good reason that the phrase "the wandering Jew" was initially coined. After all, wandering is a part of our calling.

This does not mean to say that our ultimate goal is to wander till the end of times. After all, we pray daily "Thou bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of Thine inheritance" in addition to praying for the Holy Temple to be built on the Mountain of God and that "old men and old women sit in the streets of Jerusalem." And yet we are not afraid of a long journey. This long winding road may have led to the downfall of great empires, but it does not deter the Jewish People. For we are skilled in walking long roads; we are versed in great voyages.

The journey of Shlichut - The very fact that one understands that the journey is not an easy one, but is filled with great challenges, is what gives one the strength to cope with the trials of the road, alleviates some of the concerns experienced by every traveler and gives courage to set out and hit the road.

Embarking on the journey is inevitable. Some may even feel that the road is calling out to them, and so they cannot remain indifferent. These people constantly feel the urge to push forward and transcend to new levels. They always strive to be better people who add light to the world; they give whatever they can of themselves, even in the most remote of places. These people aspire to connect every single Jewish community in the Diaspora to the roots and the core of the Jewish People; to embrace every Jew as members of the Jewish nation.

These devoted people know well that the road is filled with bumps and that the staff in their hand is often painful, but they push forward nonetheless, with the thought that the Jewish People has never ceased to wander, and that our nation is always on the road, upon an incessant journey even when the destination is in sight.

And at this point they turn their heads upwards to heaven and ask God to assist them on their journey. Solemnly uttering the words of Tefillat HaDerech, "The Prayer of the Road", they wave goodbye to their beloved ones, wipe away a tear and set out on their mission.

[1] Ketubot 110: 2
[2] Netzach Yisrael, chapter 36; Chidushei Agadot on the tractate of Shabbat 140 etc.
[3] Chapter 7.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah
by Rabbi Label Lam

There's No Place Like Home

A great scientist saw the need to send a spaceship to the nearest star and back. Knowing the trip would take approximately six thousand years, he designed a craft large enough and aesthetically pleasing to make the journey a more pleasant one. He solved with his genius and sensitivity all of the technical problems that could possibly arise. There were plants to replenish air and other creatures to create a constantly replenishing food chain.

The only problem that he struggled with was the radical of the human factor. People born on the craft after the generation of the first couple would think that this was their native home. They would forget about the original mission and may even tamper with and sabotage it.

Even the brilliant and creative scientist was desperate for a solution. The flight needed some human input and was ultimately for the sake of preserving humanity. The mission was for man, but how to keep man actively involved in the project was the question of the day.

It was decided a document would be introduced into the lives of the people on the spacecraft that achieved a few vital purposes.
1) It would include the blueprint of the entire craft to be used as a tool for understanding and repairing the craft along the way. It would advise about daily, weekly, and yearly maintenance of the ship and the proper use of all its buttons and levers, and of course sharp warnings and cautions about the abuse of certain buttons and levers.

2) Included in the document would be the original goal and philosophy of the mission.

3) It would describe the history of its initiation till its ultimate conclusion.

4) The document would help attune the participants as to the cycles of life on the craft for example; a) Every seventh day the window of the ship faces home. For those who are aware it is an awesome treat and it orients the inhabitants to their point of origin and destination. b) Every year, at different times, smells and sounds from fruits unique to planet earth are introduced to create a sense of longing and belonging to another time and place. These days correspond to days of historical significance such as launching and unsealing the document etc.

5) Laws of human conduct to maintain order and decency are vital for the continuity and safety of the flight.

6) Technical instructions whose purpose and origin only the brilliant scientist knows are promulgated in the document, partially to demonstrate the superior genius of the designer and partially to test the loyalty of the crew, but nobody really knows what the real reason is. Yet everyone with clear intellect understands that fools rush in where angels fear to tread and proceeds cautiously.

7) Procedures about keeping the integrity of the document and its myriad details are also a critical component of the document. As long as the message is clear there is still hope for a successful mission. Once the message is blurred then the entire project is at great risk.

8) Essential parts of the document itself are hung about the giant spacecraft at conspicuous junctures such as doorways.

9) The document is spread throughout the ship in all languages so that the information within is never lost.

10) A special group of scholars who are designated and heralded with the special task of representing and maintaining the integrity of the document and its grand plan so the project shall not fail. They are handpicked, as special commandos and are trained to give their life rather than change or consciously misrepresent the mission.

With these features intact the scientist felt more confident to launch the project that would save humanity while man himself would play the crucial role in bringing the ship back home.

When contemplating celebrating the holiday of Shavuos, which commemorates the giving and the receiving of the Torah by the Jewish Nation 3335 years ago, keep in mind this little science fiction tale and remember the following phrases while clicking your heals

together three times. A hint is enough for a wise man. This ain't Kansas Dorothy. No analogy is perfect. Time wounds all heals. Things left to chance go to chaos. Truth is stranger and more organized than fiction. There's no place like home.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

On the Look-Out*

Two mountains loom large in the history of our people and the traditions of our faith. One is Mount Sinai, from which Moses came down with the Ten Commandments. The other is Mount Moriah which Abraham ascended in order to bind his son Isaac and offer him up as a sacrifice until God bade him stop at the last moment. Both these mountains are prominent in the history of the civilized world. And yet one wonders at the difference between them. One wonders, why, when it came to building the Beit HaMikdash, the Temple, it was Mount Moriah which was so honored and which became sacred in Jewish law and life, whereas Mount Sinai retains only historic significance but is of no importance religiously. Why is it that Mount Moriah has become the geographic center of Judaism, the place to which we turn in our prayers, and Mount Sinai is just another little hill in the great barrenness called Sinai Desert?

In the answer to that question lies a whole philosophy, the essence of the Jewish approach to God and the kernel of the Torah world-view. The answer, in fact, can be expressed in a parallel study of two historic personalities whose names are associated with these mountains. They are Moses and Abraham. The name of Moses is inextricably bound up with Sinai, and Abraham with Moriah.

Moses, of course, is the prophet par excellence of Judaism. He is the lawgiver and the man whom God chose to redeem Israel from Egypt. He reached the highest rung any man can ever hope to reach. But the early history of Moses is one of ease and facility. There are struggles, but not great struggles. There are difficulties, but no tormenting ones. He was a man who was chosen to lead and to prophecy, and his very birth was accompanied by signs of greatness. He was tending his flock in the land of Midian one fine day when he heard a voice call out of a bush, which burnt but was not consumed. It was the voice of God summoning him to his great role in history. It happened so suddenly, so quickly. It seemed that he just "had it in him." And when, years later, he assembled his people about the mountain called Sinai, they too seemed just "naturals" for the word of God. There is even a tradition that they slept late that historic day and had to be awakened to hear the Ten Commandments issued by the divine voice. With folded arms they stayed at the foot of the mountain, while the Torah was given to them. That is the character of Sinai – a passive awaiting of God's word. Man waits while God seeks him out.

Abraham represents the exact reverse. He was a precocious tot of three – or, according to Maimonides, a man of 43 – when he first conceived of the idea of one God. God did not reveal Himself to Abraham. But Abraham, having come to the conclusion that there must be such a personal transcendent God, began to look for God. He spent the better part of his life trying to reach him. He braved the ridicule and the mockery of his idolatrous society because of his belief in and search for an invisible God. Not once in many years did God make himself available to the searching patriarch. Only after many heart-breaking decades did the word of God come to Abraham: lekh lekha. . . . and then he was 75 years old! It was a successful and vindicating venture, this search for God, but only because it was a search – difficult, hard, often frustrating.

But if this long search was a hard one, how much more so Abraham's trek up Mt. Moriah. Here he was, in his old age, a father of one son born to him in his late years. And now God had called upon him to sacrifice this son atop the mountain. His religious nature responded affirmatively at once. His humanitarian side rebelled. His only real son, the one and only to his old mother. And yet, torn by this inner conflict, Abraham climbed the mountain, every step filled with pain and foreboding with a fire raging in his soul. He climbed up to God, and he finally reached the summit – he was going to follow the Godly voice! And he did, until the angel ordered him to desist, and told him that he had passed the test. That is the character of Moriah – a powerful looking for God, a dynamic active search by man for God.

That is what accounts for the holiness of Moriah and the religious insignificance of Sinai. Holiness is not a generous gift bestowed by God on prima-donna souls. It is wrested from God by the sweat of the brow and the mighty wrangling of the heart. A Temple is not built by religious wall-flowers. It is sanctified by searchers, by men always on the look-out for God. That is why Mount Moriah is crowned by the Holy Temple, whereas Sinai has nothing Jewish associated with it; on the contrary, on its summit today there is a Christian monastery.

Those who pray carefully might sometimes wonder: we often refer to God as Elokei Avraham, never as Elokei Moshe. Why? Because it was Abraham, not Moses, who searched the harder. And Elokei Avraham means the God of Abraham in the possessive sense, that Abraham actually "owns" a part of God. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik offers an interesting halakhic explanation. The halakha discusses the case of one who finds an object in the street, an object of value but which has no identifying marks. In such case, the law is "finders keepers." But what is the legal reason for the transfer of the property from the previous owner to the finder? The reason, according to the Talmud, is ye'ush baalim, the fact that the previous owners (knowing that it bears no identifying marks) renounce ownership because they despair of its return. In the same way, so to speak, did Abraham become possessive of God. There was no one who had any prior claim on God. Men had despaired of reaching Him. There was ye'ush baalim. But Abraham went on the lookout. He searched for this Divine metzia, and he found Him; hence, Elokei Avraham, the God of Abraham. Abraham looked for God, and so God was Abraham's. But God was the one who looked for Moses and found him, and so he is known as Moshe eved Hashem, Moses the servant of God (Deuteronomy 34:5). Moses was found by God and hence belongs to God.

It was only long after Sinai, after the Tablets there delivered were broken, that Moses changed his approach to God, that he announced "har'eni na et kevodekha" (Exodus 33:18), God, I am out to discover Your glory. It was only then that Moses rose to his eminent position in the history of humanity.

It is the same in religion as in all life, except more so. You never get something for nothing. In Torah it is even deeper: you must work much harder, but the returns are much greater. Those who have not experienced true simḥa shel mitzva, the ecstatic joy of spiritual achievement, have not lived.

I sometimes wonder at some of our Jews. I wish they would take their business shrewdness into the synagogue proper, not only to board meetings. Which businessman would trust an agent who tries to sell him stock that supposedly requires very little investment, involves no risk and gives tremendous windfall profits, without a thorough examination? And yet, these same people, so circumspect in finances, come into the synagogue and expect to invest three or visits a year, no risks of spiritual creativity and hardship, and expect God to jump every time they snap their fingers, expect to be "inspired." There is only one difference. In business, such speculative fly-by-night investment can cost you your shirt. In religion, you can lose your soul. Torah does indeed offer terrific spiritual profits, but not without heavy capital investment – investment of your time and energy and faith and money and prestige. It requires being constantly on the look-out for God, being a Mount Moriah Jew, not a Sinai Jew.

I wish people would not come into this synagogue to "be inspired" as one goes to a show to be entertained or to a steam-room to be massaged. This is neither a theatre nor a service agency. The rabbi is not an actor, nor does he aspire to be a masseur. This is a workshop, a workshop of the human soul where you are both the artisan and the vessel, where God is both the boss who demands and the customer who must be satisfied, and where the rabbi is just another poor, hard laborer who

merely seeks to give some friendly advice. No one can find God without looking for Him, and it is just that the synagogue is the best place to look.

It is told of the great Hasidic teacher, Reb Baruch of Meziboz that his grandchild once came crying to him, and complained that he had been playing hide-and-seek with friends, and that he was hiding but his friend did not come to look for him. "Ahh," exclaimed the Rabbi, "but God has the same complaint. No one comes to look for Him."

If we religious Jews had taken that to heart fifty and sixty years ago in greater numbers and with more enthusiasm, the State of Israel today might have more genuine Jewishness in it, in place of the offensive secularism which sometimes tears at the heart. If only we had known then that Messiah would not come looking for us if we remained with folded arms. Messiah comes only when he is sought out, when he is looked for. Only then does one find aṯhalta degeula. The Hebrew song, Yerushalayim, has one beautiful refrain: me'al pisgat har hatzofim shalom lakh Yerushlayim, from the summit of Mount Tzofim, peace unto you, O Jerusalem. Those who know Hebrew know that "tzofim" comes from the word which means to look, to search out. Only when Jews will begin to look for Jerusalem with love and devotion, when they will put their lives into the striving for the City of Beauty will peace come unto Jerusalem.

If parents would understand this difference between Moriah and Sinai, between Abraham and the early career of Moses, they would not be satisfied with the pitifully little they give their children. Parents who are happy with a three-day-a-week education for their children are not providing them with the equipment with which to undertake the long and tough search for meaningfulness and holiness in life. Those who give their children a two-hour-a-week fling in things Jewish are not only not providing them, but I dare say are blindfolding their own children; if one of these ever finds meaningfulness it is sheer luck. Those parents who give their children full, maximum education, those who give them – let us not be afraid to say it openly – a good day-school education if it is available, they are the ones who help their children. That kind of teaching means providing children with spiritual binoculars in the search for God.

"And from there shall you seek the Lord your God, and you will find Him, if you will search after Him with all your heart and with all your soul. In your distress, when all these things come upon you" (Deuteronomy 4:29–30), when man is troubled by the sheer emptiness of his life, when he is worried and pained, when he feels caught in a vise and tossed about recklessly in the tempests of life, when in distress, then God calls out, seek God, look for Him, and you will most certainly find Him. "For the Lord your God is a merciful God; He will not fail you, not destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers which He swore unto them" (Deuteronomy 4:31).

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Covenant and Conversation
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

The Ever-Repeated Story

Bamidbar takes up the story as we left it toward the end of Shemot. The people had journeyed from Egypt to Mount Sinai. There they received the Torah. There they made the Golden Calf. There they were forgiven after Moses' passionate plea, and there they made the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, inaugurated on the first of Nisan, almost a year after the exodus. Now, one month later, on the first day of the second month, they are ready to move on to the second part of the journey, from Sinai to the Promised Land.

Yet there is a curious delay in the narrative. Ten chapters pass until the Israelites actually begin to travel (Num. 10: 33). First there is a census. Then there is an account of the arrangement of the tribes around the Ohel Moed, the Tent of Meeting. There is a long account of the Levites, their families and respective roles. Then there are laws about the purity of the camp, restitution, the sotah, the woman suspected of adultery, and the nazirite. A lengthy series of passages describe the final preparations for the journey. Only then do they set out. Why this long series of seeming digressions?

It is easy to think of the Torah as simply telling events as they occurred, interspersed with various commandments. On this view the Torah is history plus law. This is what happened, these are the rules we must obey, and there is a connection between them, sometimes clear (as in the case of laws accompanied by reminder that "you were slaves in Egypt"), sometimes less so.

But the Torah is not mere history as a sequence of events. The Torah is about the truths that emerge through time. That is one of the great differences between ancient Israel and ancient Greece. Ancient Greece sought truth by contemplating nature and reason. The first gave rise to science, the second to philosophy. Ancient Israel found truth in history, in events and what God told us to learn from them. Science is about nature, Judaism is about human nature, and there is a great difference between them. Nature knows nothing about free will. Scientists often deny that it exists at all. But humanity is constituted by its freedom. We are what we choose to be. No planet chooses to be hospitable to life. No fish chooses to be a hero. No peacock chooses to be vain. Humans do choose. And in that fact is born the drama to which the whole Torah is a commentary: how can freedom coexist with order? The drama is set on the stage of history, and it plays itself out through five acts, each with multiple scenes.

The basic shape of the narrative is roughly the same in all five cases. First God creates order. Then humanity creates chaos. Terrible consequences follow. Then God begins again, deeply grieved but never losing His faith in the one life-form on which He set His image and to which He gave the singular gift that made humanity godlike, namely freedom itself.

Act 1 is told in Genesis 1-11. God creates an ordered universe and fashions humanity from the dust of the earth into which He breathes His own breath. But humans sin: first Adam and Eve, then Cain, then the generation of the Flood. The earth is filled with violence. God brings a flood and begins again, making a covenant with Noah. Humanity sin again by making the Tower of Babel (the first act of imperialism, as I argued in an earlier study). So God begins again, seeking a role model who will show the world what it is to live in faithful response to the word of God. He finds it in Abraham and Sarah.

Act 2 is told in Genesis 12-50. The new order is based on family and fidelity, love and trust. But this too begins to unravel. There is tension between Esau and Jacob, between Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel, and between their children. Ten of Jacob's children sell the eleventh, Joseph, into slavery. This is an offence against freedom, and catastrophe follows – not a Flood but a famine, as a result of which Jacob's family goes into exile in Egypt where the whole people become enslaved. God is about to begin again, not with a family this time but with a nation, which is what Abraham's children have now become.

Act 3 is the subject of the book of Shemot. God rescues the Israelites from Egypt as He once rescued Noah from the Flood. As with Noah (and Abraham), God makes a covenant, this time at Sinai, and it is far more extensive than its precursors. It is a blueprint for social order, for an entire society based on law and justice. Yet again, however, humans create chaos, by making a Golden Calf a mere forty days after the great revelation. God threatens catastrophe, destroying the whole nation and beginning again with Moses, as He had done with Noah and Abraham (Ex. 32: 10). Only Moses' passionate plea prevents this from happening. God then institutes a new order.

Act 4 begins with an account of this order, which is unprecedentedly long, extending from Exodus 35, through the whole of the book of Vayikra and the first ten chapters of Bemidbar. The nature of this new order is that God becomes not merely the director of history and the giver of laws. He becomes a permanent Presence in the midst of the camp. Hence the building of the Mishkan, which takes up the last third of Shemot, and the laws of purity and holiness, as well as those of love and justice, that constitute virtually the whole of Vayikra. Purity and holiness are demanded by the fact that God has become suddenly close. In the Tabernacle, the Divine Presence has a home on earth, and whoever comes close to God must be holy and pure. Now the Israelites are ready to begin the next stage of the journey, but only after a long introduction.

That long introduction, at the beginning of Bamidbar, is all about creating a sense of order within the camp. Hence the census, and the detailed disposition of the tribes, and the lengthy account of the Levites, the tribe that mediated between the people and the Divine Presence. Hence also, in next week's parsha, the three laws – restitution, the sotah and the nazir – directed at the three forces that always endanger social order: theft, adultery and alcohol. It is as if God were saying to the Israelites, this is what order looks like. Each person has his or her place within the family, the tribe and the nation. Everyone has been counted and each person counts. Preserve and protect this order, for without it you cannot enter the land, fight its battles and create a just society.

Tragically, as Bemidbar unfolds, we see that the Israelites turn out to be their own worst enemy. They complain about the food. Miriam and Aaron complain about Moses. Then comes the catastrophe, the episode of the spies, in which the people, demoralized, show that they are not yet ready for freedom. Again, as in the case of the Golden Calf, there is chaos in the camp. Again God threatens to destroy the nation and begin again with Moses (Num. 14: 12). Again only Moses' powerful plea saves the day. God decides once more to begin again,

this time with the next generation and a new leader. The book of Devarim is Moses' prelude to Act 5, which takes place in the days of his successor Joshua.

The Jewish story is a strange one. Time and again the Jewish people has split apart, in the days of the First Temple when the kingdom divided into two, in the late Second Temple period when it was riven into rival groups and sects, and in the modern age, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when it fragmented into religious and secular in Eastern Europe, orthodox and others in the West. Those divisions have still not healed.

And so the Jewish people keeps repeating the story told five times in the Torah. God creates order. Humans create chaos. Bad things happen, then God and Israel begin again. Will the story never end? One way or another it is no coincidence that Bemidbar usually precedes Shavuot, anniversary of the giving of the Torah at Sinai. God never tires of reminding us that the central human challenge in every age is whether freedom can coexist with order. It can, when humans freely choose to follow God's laws, given in one way to humanity after the Flood and in another to Israel after the exodus.

The alternative, ancient and modern, is the rule of power, in which, as Thucydides said, the strong do as they will and the weak suffer as they must. That is not freedom as the Torah understands it, nor is it a recipe for love and justice. Each year as we prepare for Shavuot by reading parshat Bemidbar, we hear God's call: here in the Torah and its mitzvot is the way to create a freedom that honours order, and a social order that honours human freedom. There is no other way. [2015]

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Shavuot: A Message for the Entire Team

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The recent pandemic, when we all found ourselves surrounded by uncertainty and confronted with difficult decisions at every turn, helped us to realize that a wise man, living more than a century ago, forewarned us that we will encounter drastically unpredictable dilemmas for which we must strive to ascertain the Almighty's will by living

our lives as His "kingdom of priests, a holy people."

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

The Nature and Value of Torah Study
By Harav Aharon Lichtenstein

In Jewish thought and experience, few values are as cherished as talmud Torah, the study of Torah; and few cultures, if any, have assigned to learning of any kind - let alone the mastery of scriptural and legal texts - the status it enjoys within Judaism. That priority is not the result of much-vaunted Jewish intellectualism. Quite the contrary: it is, if anything, the latter's cause rather than its effect. Its true source is the specifically religious role that Jewish law and tradition have accorded talmud Torah.

This religious role is multifaceted. The study of Torah constitutes, at one level, a halakhic act, entailing the realization of a divine commandment - and one of the preeminent commandments at that. As such, it has a dual basis. On the one hand, it is a distinct normative category, positing specific goals and prescribing, like other mitzvot, clearly defined conduct enjoined by a particular mandate. The mitzva of talmud Torah charges the Jew to acquire knowledge of Torah, insofar as he is able; but it addresses itself primarily to the process rather than the result. Its minimal demand, some daily study of Torah, is formulated in verses included in the first portion of the Shema: "Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up" (Devarim 6:6-7). On the other hand, it is included in the far more general charge enjoining the Jew "to love the Lord, your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and soul" (Devarim 11:13) - that service requiring, as the midrash postulates, the study of Torah, apart from ritual and prayer (Sifri Devarim 5).

At a second level, talmud Torah is viewed axiologically - both as an independent value and as a means of ensuring and enriching spiritual existence, both personal and collective. Engagement with Torah for its own sake, lishmah, is a prime goal. Its raison d'etre need not be sought by reference to other categories, moral or religious. Can study that "only" entails live contact with the revealed and expounded divine Word be less than invaluable? Obviously, that contact can ordinarily have instrumental value as well - in two respects. First, study provides knowledge requisite to halakhic living, even as it deepens halakhic commitment. Second, since talmud Torah enables a person, within limits, to cleave unto God, it has moral, passional, and pietistic repercussions.

These elements exist on the collective plane as well. Beyond them, however, one may note a more strictly public aspect. As Torah itself is the basis of Israel's covenant with God, so is its study a means both of cementing that bond and of providing communal uplift. In one sense, this applies to the oral Law in particular, as the intimacy of the covenantal relationship is experienced within it uniquely. "Rabbi Yohanan stated: 'The Holy One, blessed be He, entered into a covenant with Israel only because of oral matters, as it is written [Shemot 34:27]: "For after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee, and with Israel"'" (Gittin 60b). The principle, however, applies to Torah in its entirety, with its full conceptual and experiential import.

At a third level, the role of talmud Torah is conceived in cosmological and mystical terms, bordering, in some formulations, on the magical. From this perspective, it attains continuous cosmic significance as a metaphysical factor affecting the fabric of reality - indeed, as that which supports and sustains the very existence of the universe. The Talmud cites this concept in the name of Rabbi Eleazar, who, interpreting a biblical verse in this vein, saw it as attesting to the significance of Torah: "Rabbi Eleazar said: 'Great is Torah for, were it not for it, heaven and earth would not exist, as it is stated [Yirmiyahu 33:25], "If my covenant be not day and night, I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth"'" (Nedarim 32a); and elsewhere the Talmud explains the gravity of bittul Torah - literally, "the negation of Torah," that is, the failure to study it adequately - on a similar basis (Shabbat 33a). Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner, founder in 1802 of the archetypal Lithuanian yeshiva and the most vigorous modern proponent of this view, went so far as to arrange for some measure of Torah study at his yeshiva at all times in order to ensure cosmic existence. To many, this may surely seem naively bizarre anthropocentrism. Be that as it may, the underlying attitude, shorn of its literalist application, is deeply rooted in rabbinic tradition.

The object of study can of course be any and every part of Torah. The Midrash, commenting upon the verse "Give ear, my people, to my teaching" (Tehillim 78:1), notes: "Let not one tell you that the psalms are not Torah, for they are indeed Torah, and the prophets are also Torah ... as are the riddles and the parables" (Midrash Tehillim ad loc.). And from a purely normative standpoint, the mitzva is fulfilled, regardless of which area of Torah is being studied. Historically, however, the major emphasis - particularly, but not exclusively, at more advanced levels of scholarship - has been upon the Torah she-be-al peh, the corpus of law and tradition, homily and exegesis, primarily formulated and preserved in the Talmud.

Jews often recited psalms as a pietistic exercise, but learning was more likely to deal with the Mishna, the Gemara, or the collection of talmudic aggadot, Ein Ya'akov. The Talmud itself postulates that periods of study should be apportioned, "one third to Scripture, one third to midrash, and one third to Talmud [that is, Gemara]" (Kiddushin 30a). However, one classical medieval authority, Rabbenu Tam, held that the study of the Babylonian Talmud sufficed, since all three elements were blended within it, while another, R. Moses Maimonides, stated that this counsel applied only in the early stages of intellectual development, during which the raw material of Torah was being absorbed and digested, but that once the infrastructure existed a person should devote himself to the subtle analysis of the Gemara. Whatever the rationale, the primacy of Torah is fairly clear.

The primacy derives, in part, from concern about potentially heterodox tendencies springing from direct and independent study of Scripture. Primarily, however, it is grounded in the centrality of law and rabbinic tradition within Jewish consciousness and experience. The encounter with God as commander lies at the heart of Jewish existence; to the extent that it is realized through talmud Torah, the legal corpus, as developed within the oral tradition, is a prime vehicle for this encounter. To an outsider, much of traditional talmud Torah no doubt borders on the absurd. From a purely rational or pragmatic perspective, the prospect of a group of laymen studying the minutiae of complex and often "irrelevant" halakhot may indeed be bizarre. In light of Jewish commitment and experience, however, it is thoroughly intelligible.

That commitment is the key to the traditional conception of the nature of talmud Torah. Study is, of course, an intellectual and largely critical activity, but in this case it is significantly molded by its religious character. The effect is both enriching and constricting. On the one hand, Torah study, regarded as an encounter with the Shekhina (the divine Presence), is enhanced by an experiential dimension. Hence the importance that the rabbis assigned to the confluence of prayer and study: They urged that one should preferably engage in both at the same place, even if in most views this entails praying in private rather than in public. In this vein, talmud Torah can assume an almost visceral quality, and aggadic texts abound with similes comparing Torah study to sensuous and even sensual activity, elemental and exotic alike. Commenting upon the verse "A lovely hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy thee at all times" (Mishlei 5:19), Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman expounds: "Why were the words of the Torah compared to a hind? To tell you that the hind has a narrow womb and is relished by its cohabitants at each and every moment as at the first hour... Why were Torah words compared to a nipple? As with a nipple, however often an infant fondles it he finds milk in it, so it is with Torah words. As often as a man ponders them, he finds relish in them" (Eruvin 54b).

Conceived in such terms, talmud Torah is invested with a dual nature. In part, it is

oriented to accomplishment, with the acquisition of knowledge and skills being obvious goals. Teleological considerations aside, however, the process, as has been noted, is no less important than its resolution; and even if one has retained nothing, the experience itself - live contact with the epiphanous divine will manifest through Torah, and encounter with the divine Presence, which hovers over its students - is immeasurably important. Talmud Torah is not just informative or illuminating; it is ennobling and purgative. He who studies Torah, says the Mishnah, "is called friend, beloved, lover of God, and lover of men. He rejoices God and men. The Torah invests him with modesty and reverence and enables him to be virtuous, pious, upright, and faithful. It distances him from sin and draws him near to virtue" (Avot 6:1). It is this emphasis upon process and its purgative character that renders abstruse study both possible and meaningful. From a pragmatic standpoint, much talmud Torah is futile or irrelevant, or both. Religiously regarded, however, it is eminently sensible. The bather is refreshed, regardless of where he dips into the ocean. Does he refrain from going to the water merely because he cannot reach the other shore?

But if the religious conception of talmud Torah extends its horizons in one sense, it constricts them severely in another. The religious view implies, in effect, that study that is not grounded in commitment is, at best, of limited value, and that has indeed been the traditional position. With reference to more extreme cases - presumably those involving patently negative attitudes - the rabbis stated that while Torah is life-giving to those who approach it rightly, "to the sinister, in relation to it, it is a poisonous herb" (Shabbat 88b). However, even purely dispassionate study, the very ideal of much of the academic world, has been regarded with great reservation. This attitude has not been grounded in a mystical view of Torah as a gnosis to be reserved for the initiate; it has sprung, rather, from the perception that talmud Torah cannot be realized by approaching sacral material from a secular perspective.

While the sacral character of talmud Torah has generally been universally assumed by Jewish tradition, its scope has been very much in dispute. Of course, relatively few have doubted that much learning is a desirable thing; but opinions have differed over how much could be normatively demanded or ordinarily expected. Some have held that while the mitzva of talmud Torah clearly required a modicum of daily study, anything beyond the barest minimum was more a matter of lofty aspiration than of halakhic duty. Others, however, have insisted that while minimal daily study could be singled out as an inescapable and irreducible charge, maximal commitment - flexibly perceived - constituted an obligation rather than a meritorious desideratum. As Rabbenu Nissim, one of the last of the great medieval authorities, put it in the fourteenth century: "Every person is obligated to study constantly, day and night, in accordance with his ability" (Comm. on Nedarim 8a).

The key phrase is, of course, "in accordance with his ability" (kefi kocho), but its practical substantive import remains wholly amorphous so long as one has not come to grips with the critical question of the relation of talmud Torah to other areas of human endeavor, secular or religious. In one sense, this is simply a variant of the broader problem of the definitions of priorities and the apportionment of energies, resources and commitment between the mundane and the spiritual realms, respectively. This specific point was debated in the twelfth century by Rabbenu Tam and his grand-nephew, R. Elhanan ben Isaac of Dampierre, who, in interpreting the aphorism "Excellent is talmud Torah together with a worldly occupation" (Avot 2:2), disagreed as to which component was primary. Presumably, they dealt with practical rather than axiological primacy; nevertheless, their controversy is clearly significant. At a second level, however, the problem concerns the relation between different elements of the spiritual life proper - between the outreach of charity and gemilut hasadim as opposed to self-centered spirituality; or between talmud Torah and prayer as aspects of the contemplative life.

Surveying much of the current yeshiva scene and its recent east European, and particularly Lithuanian, background, one often gets the impression that, as a spiritual value, talmud Torah is not only central but exclusive. From a broader perspective, however, the picture is more balanced - especially with reference to the talmudic sages. Statements to the effect that "talmud Torah is equal to them [that is, a list of key mitzvot] all" (Pe'ah 1:1), or the famous counsel "Turn it over and turn it over [that is, the Torah] for all is in it" (Avot 5:25), are complemented by sharp asseverations that single-minded talmud Torah is not only incomplete but distorted. "Whoever says that he has nothing but Torah," expounds the Talmud in the tractate Yevamot, "does not even have Torah. Why? Rav Papa said, 'Scripture states, "Study them and observe them faithfully" [Devarim 5:1]. Whosoever relates to observance relates to study, whosoever does not relate to observance does not relate to study'" (Yevamot 109b). Elsewhere, we encounter an even more radical statement. "He who engages solely in Torah [study]," declares Rav Huna, "is as one who has no God. For it is written [II Divrei Ha-yamim 15:3], 'Now for long seasons Israel was without the true God.' What is meant by 'without the true God'? It means that he who engages solely in Torah [study] is as one who has no God" (Avoda Zara 17b).

Unquestionably, emphases differ among both the talmudic sages and subsequent generations. The Talmud relates that when Rav Huna saw Rabbi Hamnuna prolonging his prayer at the expense of talmud Torah, he commented: "They forsake eternal life and engage in temporal life"; and it goes on to explain that Rabbi Hamnuna evidently held that there should be "a time for prayer apart, and a time for Torah apart" (Shabbat 10a). Analogously, the practice of the Palestinian amora Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who "would not go to a house of mourning save to that of one who had been childless, for it is written, 'Weep sore for him that goeth away, for he shall return no more nor see his native country' [Yirmiyahu 22:10]" (Moed Katan 27b), presumably so as not to divert time and energy from talmud Torah, reflects this singular emphasis. But one principle is beyond question, namely, that Torah exists within a larger axiological complex. It both complements other values and is complemented by them, and even if it reigns supreme, it surely does not rule alone.

Clearly, then, the assertion of Rabbenu Nissim that one is obligated to engage in talmud Torah "day and night, to the extent of one's ability [kefi kocho]," remains, in practical terms, ill defined. Only after one has determined the scope of other legitimate concerns and has allocated to them their respective time and effort does kefi kocho become clear. Nevertheless, the formulation - with its implicit assumption that there is a basic total commitment to talmud Torah from which one then subtracts - is highly significant in its own right. It clearly reflects the singular importance that, whatever the continuing dialectic between intellection and implementation, Judaism has uniquely assigned to the study of Torah, even at the popular level. One might note that the concern with talmud Torah attains further significance as a source of the heightened time-consciousness that is so integral a part of Jewish sensibility and experience.

Finally, as to the scope of talmud Torah, it is very broad in one sense and extremely limited in another. As a value, its range is well nigh universal. It relates to Gentiles and Jews alike, to both men and women, to children as well as adults. "Rabbi Meir stated, 'Whence that even a Gentile who engages in [the study of] Torah is as a high priest? For it is stated [Vayikra 18:5], "Which if a person do [i.e., the mitzvot], he shall live by them." It does not say, "Kohanim, Levites, and Israelites," but "a person"'" (Sanhedrin 59a). As a normative mitzva, however, it devolves only upon Jewish men. For others, it is regarded in part as an admirable aspiration and in part as a means for acquiring the knowledge requisite for the fulfillment of other mitzvot, but not as a duty to pursue knowledge for its own sake. Moreover, concern lest half-baked knowledge be abused has, at times, actually led to discouraging such voluntary study. This fear of dilettantism has, historically, been a prime reason for the relatively limited level of Torah study by women. Given the changes in women's overall social and educational status

and the nature of their total cultural experience within the modern world, many have felt that this benign neglect is no longer warranted; and, indeed, since the turn of the century, much has been done to redress the imbalance in the talmud Torah of men and women. How far this process will develop and whether it has built-in halakhic limits remains to be seen. Be that as it may, the axiological and historical centrality of talmud Torah remains a cardinal fact of Jewish spiritual existence.

Dvar Torah
Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

In our tradition, Torah is compared to four different types of liquids. Let us focus on this in anticipation of the festival of Shavuot through which we will dedicate ourselves to the study of Torah and celebrate Zman Matan Torateinu, the season of the giving of Torah.

The prophet Isaiah (55:1) compares Torah to water and he declares, "Hoi kol tzamei lechu lamayim." – "Let all those who are thirsty come for water."

Here the prophet wants us to know that our souls have a natural thirst for Torah which is just like water.

In this spirit, Rabbi Akiva in the Gemara Masechet Brachot taught that just as fish cannot live on dry land, so too the Jewish nation cannot survive without Torah in our lives.

The Sifri tells us that Torah is compared to wine. Its message is that just as wine gladdens the heart, so too Torah always brings great simcha, much rejoicing in our lives. In addition, wine matures and gets better as time goes on and so too we are discovering today that the Torah is more relevant in our fast moving sophisticated and creative 21st Century than it has ever been before, and that is certainly something to rejoice about.

The Midrash Tanchuma tells us that Torah can be compared to oil, and its message is that just like the more than one crushes the olives, the better the quality of the oil will be, so too, the more we are engaged within our Torah study, the deeper our knowledge will become and the greater will be our appreciation of it.

And finally the Gemara in Masechet Taanit compares Torah to milk. In the same way as milk cannot be preserved very well in expensive vessels such as gold and silver vessels, and is best preserved in cheap cartons, so too Torah stays within the hearts and minds of those who are humble. Where there is arrogance, there is less Torah study and appreciation. So therefore, in anticipation of the festival of Shavuot, let us learn the lessons of these four liquids and let us make the most of the greatest gift on earth that has ever been given, which is the Torah for us to study and to enjoy.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Torah vs. Cheesecake
Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

Unlike the other two major Biblical festivals of Pesach and Sukkot, the upcoming holiday of Shavuot has no specific mitzvot designated for its celebration. No symbolic foods must be eaten, no huts built and no formal seder. Shavuot, from a straightforward reading of the Biblical verses, is a Yom Tov, a simple holiday devoid of any particular rituals.

Even though Shavuot does not come with listed laws or rituals in the Torah,, the Talmud in Masechet Pesachim (68b) points to one halakha which is unique to Shavuot. In delineating the rules of the holidays, the Torah at times refers to them as "holidays for you," and at times as "holidays for God." Picking up on this seeming inconsistency, the Talmud suggests that these two terms are in fact complementary, inasmuch as they indicate to us how we are meant to spend our holidays. R' Eliezer claims that one should choose either to devote one's time and energy over the holidays to the study of Torah ("holidays for God") OR to focus on the eating, drinking, and festivities of the day ("holidays for you"). R' Yehoshua, on the other hand, argues that time must be made for both activities, studying and feasting, over the course of every holiday. Following this argument, the Talmud states that regardless of the view one adopts in the previous debate, it is universally accepted that on Shavuot one must make time for feasting, for Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah.

This last halakhic ruling seems odd. Specifically on the day the Torah was given we are meant to make time for eating and drinking? Does that make eating cheesecake, marketed in bakeries all over Israel this time of year, a real mitzvah?! We would expect just the opposite: Of all the holidays on the calendar, Shavuot should have been designated to focus purely on Torah study. In fact, in Jewish communities around the world, there is a well-established custom to study Torah all night long!

Rav Tzadok Hakohen (Pri Tzadik, Shavuot #12), offers an amazing interpretation of this ruling. Shavuot is, indeed, the time that we celebrate the giving of the Torah. But the Torah is not merely a text to be studied in the beit midrash, as meaningful as that is. The Torah is a way of life, the core and essence of how we live and breathe within the world. All of life, says Rav Tzadok, emanates from Torah and takes inspiration from it. As such, there is no better day than Shavuot to eat and drink – with the express intent to sanctify our lives and our world through engaging with the physical. Not through relegating celebration through a special mitzvah, like matza or lulav, do we mark the commemoration of the giving of the Torah, but through the act of engaging with the physical, like eating. This is how we recognize the place that the Torah holds in everything that we do.

Likutei Divrei Torah

The Talmud's approach to how we celebrate Shavuot, as interpreted by Rav Tzadok, reflects a fundamental idea in our Jewish observance. The Torah is not restricted to the spiritual or the cerebral, or boxed off into the space in which we perform ritual commands. Rather, the Torah calls on us to find holiness in our every action – our meals, our work, our everyday interactions with others, and beyond. Every part of life offers us the chance to fill the world with the splendor of Torah, by acting in accordance with its letter and with its spirit. The everyday, the mundane – these are not the opposite of holiness, but simply the open space that invites holiness in at every moment. It is about bringing holiness into the mundane and the recognition that without the mundane, holiness is unimportant.

As we once again accept the Torah, let us take it upon ourselves to find new ways to infuse holiness into the routines that make up our daily lives, to feel the presence and the relevance of Torah wherever we may travel, in whatever we may do.

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perez
The Revolutionary Idea of Covenant

Last year, Mizrachi Press and Gefen Publishing House released "The Jewish State – From Opposition to Opportunity" by Rabbi Doron Perez, Executive Chairman of World Mizrachi. The following essay is adapted from the book.

Human life is first and foremost about relationships, particularly those that matter to us most. We have different types of relationships – with our families, our communities, and with G-d. According to Jewish tradition, there is one central organizing principle to all these critical relationships. The Tanach introduces us to one of the most transformative ideas in all of religious history – the concept of a brit.

Mentioned 283 times in Tanach, this revolutionary idea creates a unique framework to define the nature of the relationships between G-d and humanity, G-d and the Jewish people as a whole, G-d and each of the founding fathers of the Jewish people, the founders and their descendants, and indeed, the relationships among all members of the Jewish people for all generations. The brit is the paradigmatic framework through which Jews are charged to relate to each other, to their historic community, and to Hashem.

Covenant versus contract - The brit forges a covenantal bond beyond what the rational human mind can conjure on its own. To understand this transcendental, divinely inspired concept, we must juxtapose it with the human constructs of agreements and contracts.

One of the most influential political philosophers, Englishman Thomas Hobbes,

was the first to define the organizing principle of human society and the state as "the social contract." In his 1651 book Leviathan, he described the way human beings create societies through a type of social contract in which members of society commit to collectively protecting their own individual rights. The main motivations of a functional society are self-interest and self-preservation. People agree to a central governing mechanism to try to ensure that no one harms another, in an attempt to live and let live.

A biblical covenant could not be more different. While the social contract focuses predominantly on self-interest and personal benefit, the covenant focuses on the collective. The focus is less on the protection of individual rights and more on people's responsibility to society as a whole. While preserving individuality and personal dignity in the process, a covenantal system encourages the individual to be driven by a commitment to the greater good. The goal of the individual in a covenantal system is to dedicate oneself for the sake of society as opposed to utilizing society to serve oneself.

This can only be done when individuals transcend personal gain and protection of their own individual space and focus on fulfilling the needs of others. Values and moral commitment are at the heart of the covenant, whereas parochial individual needs and interests are at the heart of normative agreements and contracts. Contracts protect rights; covenants delineate mutual responsibilities. Contracts are built on what each party can get; covenants specify what each party ought to give. Contracts are self-serving; covenants transcend the self.

Rav Kook highlights this very distinction between general human societies and a distinctly Jewish one. A general society may be compared to a large insurance company; in essence, every citizen is ensuring his or her personal needs by being part of this society. Not so a Jewish society, which should be based first and foremost on mutual values and lofty moral and spiritual ideals (Orot Yisrael 6:7).

An everlasting bond - The biblical covenant is an everlasting binding agreement. Those who commit to it enter a new entity of unparalleled dedication and commitment in which the other is the focus. G-d binds Himself in an eternal bond, a divine contract, as a party in an agreement that He is bound by. A brit is not only something that binds G-d to a people and the Jewish people to G-d, but it is something that binds all Jews across generations. Even those yet to be born are committed to this bond.

Multiple covenants appear at every critical juncture of Jewish history, always reinforcing and expanding mutual commitment. Particularly at times of challenge and suffering, G-d would remember His commitment to and covenant with His people. Immediately prior to the Exodus, G-d responds to Moshe's plea regarding Bnei Yisrael's suffering and says that He will surely redeem them, as He remembers the covenant that He made with their forefathers. So too, later on at the end of the horrific curses in Sefer Vayikra, G-d says that He will remember the covenant made with all three of the forefathers and will not forsake His people despite anything they have done. At the foot of Har Sinai, an additional covenant is made for the Jewish people to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Shemot 19).

With the giving of the Ten Commandments and the Torah at Sinai, the Jewish people say the eternal words of "na'aseh v'nishmah," "We will do and we will listen," committing themselves as a people to the values of the Torah (Shemot 24:7). Before entry into the Land, as the entire new generation stands together, Moshe enacts another covenant, this time explicitly binding all Jews for all generations as part of the eternal spiritual entity of Knesset Yisrael (Devarim 29).

Rights versus responsibilities - At the very core of all covenantal relationships is the primary value of responsibilities.

Commitment and responsibility to others is the very heart of a Torah-based civil society, as opposed to the Western ideal of protecting personal security and mutual self-interest. Similar to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Constitution of the United States speaks of the "unalienable rights" to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Human law enshrines rights, while Jewish law focuses on responsibilities.

Fascinatingly, nowhere in the Torah is there a specific focus on individual rights. Throughout the Torah, though, there is a focus on duties and responsibilities, epitomized in the 613 mitzvot. In the Torah's perspective, all individual rights stem directly from the personal responsibility that the Torah places on the individual. If I am personally responsible for my moral behavior and called upon to act with loving-kindness to others, then ipso facto, I and all others have inalienable individual rights. It is the duty to be kind and considerate to others that begets the rights of one and all.

Why does the Torah focus on responsibilities as opposed to rights?

First, it seems that a major shortcoming of focusing primarily on rights is that it is not clear exactly who is responsible to provide them. For example, if I have the right to food and sustenance, should I be solely responsible for providing it? Perhaps others should also be responsible – my family, community, government, or society at large? This can lead to dependency and a sense of privilege and entitlement; after all, if I have a right to something without being responsible to provide it for myself, then I am entitled to receive it from someone else.

Second, there is another essential difference between human law and divinely mandated law. Rabbeinu Nissim explains that the primary focus of civil law is to create a functional and organized society, whereas the main focus of civil law from a Torah point of view is of a spiritual nature – to create a more G-dly society (Derashot HaRan, 11).

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Pines, a student of Rav Kook, explains this further. He argues that societies rooted in human civil law can ultimately create an orderly society, by preventing people from hurting one another and damaging each other's property. The aim of mishpat (Jewish law), though, is to transform human beings spiritually and morally – to help people be more selfless and less selfish and to encourage them not to act on animalistic instincts, but rather on moral conscience, to aim to do what is right rather than what is convenient, and to be driven by values and not by expedience (Mussar HaMikra v'HaTalmud, 36).

In short, a legal system rooted in human consensus alone is a collective effort to ensure the protection of individual rights – to guard against mutual harm. This is very noble, and the Western world has done much to advance the dignity of all human beings. But the Torah requires more. The aim is no less than a heavenly society collectively committed to the ethic of personal responsibility – a life of personal and communal spiritual transformation in which individuals proactively partner with G-d in creating a better and more just society, by seeing all human beings as created in His image.

The covenantal relationship at the heart of Jewish society is thus based on mutual responsibility to one another and the good of society as a whole. The idea of the covenantal relationship in Judaism is so positively transformative that it is seen as the very ideal that the nations of the world will wish to emulate in aiming to build a better society. In the famous words of Yishayahu the prophet, a Jewish society will be a source of light to the nations: "I, the L-rd, have called you to display My righteousness, and I will take you by the hand and guard you, and I will make you [the Jewish people] an exemplar of a covenantal nation, a light to the nations" (Yishayahu 42:6).

It is this eternal bond of the Jewish people among each other, with all generations both before and after, and with their G-d that ought to animate the ongoing project of Jewish statehood.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

The Arrogance of Modernism

On this pleasant festival, I beg your indulgence for sharing with you a sense of irritation. I am allergic to the word "modern." I am incensed at the smug and complacent *am ha-aretz* who says to me, "How can you be Orthodox when you are so modern? How can you refrain from smoking or driving on Shabbat, or eating non-kosher food, or fasting on Yom Kippur, in this twentieth century?"

I am similarly upset when I hear people saying, "He is religious – but modern," in almost exactly the same tone as one would say, "He is slightly insane – but sincere" – as if modernity can save the benighted religious soul from the damnation to which the unsophisticated are foredoomed.

I even confess that I am uncomfortable with the title "Modern Orthodox." There is an arrogance about this assertion of modernity which should give offense to any intelligent and sensitive man. There is no better term that I have found, but I flinch when I articulate the words.

Modernity – what conceit! How vain, how meaningless! As if the accident of being born into the Space Age makes one superior to the past, because "we" know so much more than those of previous generations did. But who is this "we" who know so much? If any of us has advanced knowledge in any one specialized field, does that give us warrant for feeling better and greater than ancients whose wisdom often ranged far and wide, whose interests were universal? Because we have the ability, through no fault of our own, to turn a knob on the television set and watch a space ship near the moon, does that make us better than Newton or Kepler or any of the other geniuses of the past who discovered and described the laws of the universe which have made our age possible?

I am moved to speak of this theme because Shavuot is the anniversary of the giving of Torah, and an old Torah it is! It is *not* a modern Torah. It is a holy Torah, a powerful and wise and meaningful and vital and just Torah – but no, not a modern one. It is not materialistic or hedonistic or youth-oriented or secularistic or "with it."

Judaism maintains that truth does not depend on time. The Maharal of Prague observed that the festival of Shavuot, unlike all the others, is not appointed by the Torah to a special date on the calendar. It is only indirectly fixed as seven weeks after Passover. Why is this so? Because, answers the Maharal, Torah is למעלה מן הזמן, beyond time. Its truth is not a function of the age in which it was given. Jews, therefore, should not assent to what Jacques Maritain has called "chronolatry," the worship of what is latest in time.

Every age is, of course, modern in its own eyes. But the tendency to consider this modernity as a virtue is fairly recent. I believe that it is largely the result of a misinterpretation of evolutionary theory: since life is supposed to evolve to higher forms, therefore I am greater than my father, and he was greater than his... Thus, one might conclude – and many often do – that the religious tradition that comes to us from the remote past is inadequate for us, because the ancients were not modern and we are.

This feeling afflicts even profoundly religious people. About 150 years ago, the Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote a book entitled *ON RELIGION: To its Cultured Despisers*. How revealing! Those who despise religion are modern, they are cultured. We are benighted, we are behind the times. So it is with most religious folk – we labor under the heavy burden of an inferiority feeling because we are not modern.

I do not mean to say all that is modern is bad, and that as an observant Jew I am against modernity. That would be as absurd a notion as the supposition that all that is modern is good and true. Over 200 years ago, Lord Chesterfield wrote: "Speak of the moderns without contempt, and of the ancients without idolatry; judge them all by their merits, and not by their age."

I admit that it sometimes seems as though the Rabbis of the Talmud were inclined to ascribe greater virtue to ages past:

אם ראשונים בני מלאכים, אנו בני אנשים, ואם ראשונים בני אנשים, אנו כחמורים (שבת קי"ב:).

"If those of the earlier generations were the children of angels, we are merely the children of men; and if they were but the children of men, then we are like mules." But I do not think that this implies a *general* condemnation of later generations. It is not really anti-modernist. Rather, it

represents a specific judgment that they made when comparing their own generation with that of the Prophets – and I agree, that spiritually we have been in decline for a long time.

But that does not mean that in their view human history *always* deteriorates. On Shavuot, ארמי :the farmer who would bring his *bikurim*, or first fruit, would recite the passage that begins My father was a wandering Syrian." Abraham had very humble origins. And on" אבד אבי Passover we proclaim: מתחלה עובדי עבודה זרה היו אבותינו, once upon a time our ancestors were miserable idol-worshippers. The past is not always better than the present. And, by the same token, the present is seen as leading to a much greater future: the coming of the Messiah.

Nevertheless, Judaism does not subscribe to "chronolatry." We must not submit to the arrogance of modernity.

This modern worship of modernity results in a number of patent absurdities. Consider this: if we are bright and intelligent and wise because we are modern, and therefore superior to past generations, how will we be judged by the coming generations? And how will they be judged by the ones following them? And if by their standards we are primitive, how sure are we now that we are right in anything we believe, including our arrogant assumption about modernity?

Even our vocabulary suffers and reveals the foolishness of making a fetish of modernity. The very word "modern" has become shopworn. Many people have begun to use "contemporary" instead. More recently, learned journals have featured a spate of articles on the "post-modern." What is to come next? – post-contemporary? Post-post modern?

It is true, generally, that technological knowledge and ability is cumulative, and that every generation in this sense is greater than the one preceding it. But it is not necessarily true in ethics and morality, in religion and in the life of the spirit. And even technologically, the idea of constant and uninterrupted progress is true *only* provided that there is no devastating war that results from technology itself, so that man is reduced – as Albert Einstein put it – to fighting the next one with bow and arrow; and provided that the flow of technical knowledge does not become so vast, so enormous, so stifling, that mankind strangles on it, unable to digest and use it.

But to repeat, whatever may be true of technology and science is not necessarily true for religion. Love and hate, fear and reverence, the sense of mystery and worship – all these are independent of artifacts and gadgets and mathematics. Science and technology make us more effective – but to what end? Modern scholarship is more critical – but are we wiser? We have

great communications – but do we say more that is worth saying? We can have more fun – but are we happier?

Torah is not anchored to the "modernity" of any age. For Shavuot is not given a date in the Torah. The Torah given on Shavuot – is beyond time. It applies to then and now and to tomorrow. It is always "modern" and yet never merely "modern."

I recently read with amused contempt a report of the JTA on May 8th which is pertinent to the idea we are discussing. It tells of a statement by a Reconstructionist leader who urged that Jewish Community Centers remain open on the Sabbath to serve "the needs of those who do not hold to Orthodoxy." He also declared that the Sabbath "must be re-established not as a restrictive day of fourth-century worship and rest, but rather as a twentieth-century turn-on to relevance."

What colossal *am haaratzut* for a "Rabbi" to speak so disparagingly and *unknowingly* of fourth-century Judaism – the very high point of the creation of the Talmud: It is difficult to find a more apt illustration of the "arrogance of modernity" – arrogance and *hutzpah* and immaturity! Not even a supposedly religious teacher, but any cultured individual, would refrain from such obvious vulgarity in preaching "relevance." So the Shabbat should not be a day of worship and rest, but a "turn-on

to relevance!" What does that mean? Are we to abandon the synagogue and repair to the gymnasium? To quit our services and head for the swimming pool? To spend all Shabbat on election campaigns? On breaking windows on the campus? In demonstrations?

"Turn-on!" I would recommend instead a simple "turn," or as it is known in Hebrew, *teshuvah*, or repentance. That may be less "exciting" and less "modern," but it would lead to more humility and respect and responsibility.

No, Torah is not geared to the calendar, it does not tell us that we have to be modern and always accords with the *zeitgeist*, with the spirit of the time. The late Dr. Raphael Gold once made this comment: Adam and Eve, after they sinned and corrupted their lives, heard the voice of the Lord: "And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden לרוח היום" (Gen. 3:8), which is usually translated as "toward the cool of the day," but which may just as well be translated, "according to the spirit of the day." Once they had sinned, they approached God only according to the *zeitgeist*, according to the canons of modernity. It is the way and the wages of sin: man attempts to reduce the infinity of God to his own pitifully puny dimensions. He turns away from God, and "turns-on to relevance." He breathes deeply of the רוח היום and, intoxicated, becomes arrogantly and vulgarly "modern."

So let us not be frightened by the word "modern." Let us not be awed by the self-satisfied ignoramuses who feel superior because of the accident of their birth in this generation. *The Jewish Chronicle* may criticize us, and *Commentary* may not like us. The rich and the powerful may consider us antiquated. But that is no tragedy, it is not fatal. We shall survive – long enough to have to put up with yet another generation which will consider the present moderns as outdated as we are supposed to be!

Modern science and technology and culture have contributed much that is of abiding value for mankind, just as they have failed miserably in so many other areas.

What we hold to be true, we hold to be timeless, unaffected by the years, and uncorroded by the ages. We hold our Torah to be true; it is a *Torat emet*. And Torah and truth are both timeless, even as God, the *noten ha-Torah*, is beyond the ravages of time.

What is true is valuable, even if ancient; and what is false remains contemptible, even if modern and up-to-date.

In closing word of the *Akdamut* prayer, which we read this morning, we recited the following words:

מרומא הוא אלקין בקדמתא ובתרייתא צבי ואתרעי בן
ומסר לן אורייתא
Exalted is the Lord from the beginning of time to the end, Who loved us and was pleased with us, and gave us His Torah.

Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah via the Internet

Volume 30, Issue 35 **Shabbat Parashat Naso** **5784 B"H**

Covenant and Conversation
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

The Blessing of Love

At 176 verses, Naso is the longest of the parshiyot. Yet one of its most moving passages, and the one that has had the greatest impact over the course of history, is very short indeed and is known by almost every Jew, namely the priestly blessings:

The Lord said to Moses: "Tell Aaron and his sons, 'Thus shall you bless the Israelites. Say to them "May the Lord bless you and protect you; May the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you; May the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace."' Let them set My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." Num. 6:23–27

This is among the oldest of all prayer texts. It was used by the priests in the Temple. It is said today by the kohanim in the reader's repetition of the Amidah, in Israel every day, in most of the Diaspora only on festivals. It is used by parents as they bless their children on Friday night. It is often said to the bride and groom under the chupah. It is the simplest and most beautiful of all blessings.

It also appears in the oldest of all biblical texts that have physically survived till today. In 1979 the archaeologist Gabriel Barkay was examining ancient burial caves at Ketef Hinnom, outside the walls of Jerusalem in the area now occupied by the Menachem Begin Heritage Center. A thirteen-year-old boy who was assisting Barkay discovered that beneath the floor of one of the caves was a hidden chamber. There the group discovered almost one thousand ancient artefacts including two tiny silver scrolls no more than an inch long.

They were so fragile that it took three years to work out a way of unrolling them without causing them to disintegrate. Eventually the scrolls turned out to be kemayot, amulets, containing, among other texts, the priestly blessings. Scientifically dated to the sixth century BCE, the age of Jeremiah and the last days of the First Temple, they are four centuries older than the most ancient of biblical texts known hitherto, the Dead Sea Scrolls. Today the amulets can be seen in the Israel Museum, testimony to the ancient connection of Jews to the land and the continuity of Jewish faith itself.

What gives the priestly blessings their power is their simplicity and beauty. They have a strong rhythmic structure. The lines contain three, five, and seven words respectively. In each, the second word is "the Lord". In all three verses the first part refers to an activity on the part of God – "bless", "make His face shine", and "turn His face toward". The second part describes the effect of the blessing on us, giving us protection, grace, and peace.

They also travel inward, as it were. The first verse, "May the Lord bless you and protect you" refers, as the commentators note, to material blessings: sustenance, physical health, and so on. The second, "May the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you" refers to moral blessing. Chen, grace, is what we show to other people and they to us. It is interpersonal. Here we are asking God to give some of His grace to us and others so that we can live together without the strife and envy that can so easily poison relationships.

The third is the most inward of all. There is a lovely story about a crowd of people who have gathered on a hill by the sea to watch a great ship pass by. A young child is waving vigorously. One of the men in the crowd asks him why. He says, "I am waving so the captain of the ship can see me and wave back." "But," said the man, "the ship is far away, and there is a crowd of us here. What makes you think that the captain can see you?" "Because," said the boy, "the captain of the ship is my father. He will be looking for me among the crowd."

That is roughly what we mean when we say, "May the Lord turn His face toward you". There are over seven billion people now living on this earth. What makes any of us more than a face in the crowd, a wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the seashore? The fact that we are God's children. He is our parent. He turns His face toward us. He cares.

The God of Abraham is not a mere force of nature, or even all the forces of nature combined. A tsunami does not pause to ask who its victims will be. There is nothing personal about an earthquake or a tornado. The word Elokim means something like "the force of forces, cause of causes, the totality of all scientifically-discoverable laws." It refers to those aspects of God that are impersonal. It also refers to God in His attribute of justice, since justice is essentially impersonal.

But the name we call Hashem – the name used in the priestly blessings, and in almost all the priestly texts – is God as He relates to us as individuals, each with our unique configuration of hopes and fears, gifts and possibilities. Hashem is the aspect of God that allows us to use the word "You". He is the God who speaks to us and who listens when we speak to Him. How this happens, we do not know, but that it happens is central to Jewish faith.

That we call God 'Hashem' is the transcendental confirmation of our significance in the scheme of things. We matter as individuals because God cares for us as a parent for a child. That, incidentally, is one reason why the priestly blessings are all in the singular, to emphasise that God blesses us not only collectively but also individually. One life, said the Sages, is like a universe.[1]

Hence the meaning of the last of the priestly blessings. The knowledge that God turns His face toward us – that we are not just an indiscernible face in a crowd, but that God relates to us in our uniqueness and singularity – is the most profound and ultimate source of peace. Competition, strife, lawlessness, and violence come from the psychological need to prove that we matter. We do things to prove that I am more powerful, or richer, or more successful than you. I can make you fear. I can bend you to my will. I can turn you into my victim, my subject, my slave. All of these things testify not to faith, but to a profound failure of faith.

Faith means that I believe that God cares about me. I am here because He wanted me to be. The soul He gave me is pure. Even though I am like the child on the hill watching the ship pass by, I know that God is looking for me, waving to me as I wave to Him. That is the most profound inner source of peace. We do not need to prove ourselves in order to receive a blessing from God. All we need to know is that His face is turned toward us. When we are at peace with ourselves, we can begin to make peace with the world.

So the blessings become longer and deeper: from the external blessing of material goods to the interpersonal blessing of grace between ourselves and others, to the most inward of them all, the peace of mind that comes when

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we feel that God sees us, hears us, holds us in His everlasting arms.

One further detail of the priestly blessings is unique, namely the blessing that the Sages instituted to be said by the kohanim over the mitzva: "Blessed are You… who has made us holy with the holiness of Aaron and has commanded us to bless His people Israel with love."

It is the last word, be'ahavah, that is unusual. It appears in no other blessing over the performance of a command. It seems to make no sense. Ideally, we should fulfil all the commands with love. But an absence of love does not invalidate any other command. In any case, the blessing over the performance of a command is a way of showing that we are acting intentionally. There was an argument between the Sages as to whether mitzvot in general require intention (kavanah) or not.[2] But whether they do or not, making a blessing beforehand shows that we do have the intention to fulfil the command. But intention is one thing, emotion is another. Surely what matters is that the kohanim recite the blessing and God will do the rest. What difference does it make whether they do so in love or not?

The commentators wrestle with this question. Some say that the fact that the kohanim are facing the people when they bless means that they are like the cherubim in the Tabernacle, whose faces "were turned to one another" as a sign of love. Others change the word order. They say that the blessing really means, "who has made us holy with the holiness of Aaron and with love has commanded us to bless His people Israel." "Love" here refers to God's love for Israel, not that of the kohanim.

However, it seems to me that the explanation is this: The Torah explicitly says that though the kohanim say the words, it is God who sends the blessing. "Let them put My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." Normally when we fulfil a mitzva, we are doing something. But when the kohanim bless the people, they are not doing anything in and of themselves. Instead they are acting as channels through which God's blessing flows into the world and into our lives. Only love does this. Love means that we are focused not on ourselves but on another. Love is selflessness. And only selflessness allows us to be a channel through which flows a force greater than ourselves, the love that as Dante said, "moves the sun and the other stars,"[3] the love that brings new life into the world.

To bless, we must love, and to be blessed is to know that we are loved by the One vaster than the universe who nonetheless turns His face toward us as a parent to a beloved child. To know that is to find true spiritual peace.

[1] See Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5.
[2] See Rosh Hashanah 28b.
[3] Dante Alighieri, Divina Commedia, Paradiso p. 33.

OU Dvar Torah

The Return to Zion: Recognition of the Present and Vision for the Future*

The Jews sanctified the Land of Israel twice, the first time in the days of Joshua and the second in the days of Ezra. When one compares the two eras from a secular-historical standpoint, from a political-economic perspective, the second entry into the land, Ezra's sanctification, is no more than a pale reflection, a weak echo, of a great and glorious epoch, such that the comparison itself arouses gloom. In the days of Joshua, the nation was young, filled with an aggressive, militant spirit, and pounced on the Land of Israel like a youthful desert lion, defeating thirty-one kings, claiming one victory after another. Nature itself helped the young Jewish people forge its destiny: "Stand still, O sun, at Gibeon, O moon, in the Valley of Aijalon!" (Josh. 10:12). "They conquered the land in seven years and divided it among the tribes in seven years" (Zevaḥim 118b). They were proud and youthful, pugnacious and courageous, filled with all the romanticism of a nation stepping out onto the historical stage and enjoying the respect, awe, and admiration of its neighbors. "Dread of you has fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before you" (Josh. 2:9).

In the days of Ezra, the ten tribes were entirely absent, having been exiled to Halah and Habor (see I Chron. 5:26) or, in the words of the Jewish aggadah, "beyond the Sambation River" (Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 10:5). A segment of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin wanted no part in the return to Zion, the Second Temple, or the redemption. They were happy sitting by their fleshpots in Babylon, Persia, and Media. Cyrus, Darius, Ahasuerus, and the other kings altered their edicts seven times a day, each new declaration repealing the previous one: one moment immigration was allowed, the next, they issued a White Paper halting entry. Even with someone positioned as close to the monarchy as Esther, the Land of Israel could not be mentioned: "At the wine feast, the king asked Esther, 'What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be fulfilled'" (Esther 5:6). "'Half the kingdom,' but not the whole kingdom, and not something that would serve as a barrier to the kingdom. And what is that? The building of the Temple" (Megillah 15b). "Sanballat and Tobiah, and the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites" (Neh. 4:1), Samaritans, enemies, informers, hateful broadsides, defamation and behind-the-scenes plots, fear of violent excesses and pogroms. "The basket-carriers were burdened, doing work with one hand while the other held a weapon. . . . that we may use the night to stand guard and the day to work" (Neh. 4:11, 16): with one hand, we have to extract water from the Negeb of the Land of Israel; with the other, we have to protect ourselves from Arab hooligans. And the internal situation? Economic hardship and spiritual impoverishment, intermarriage and ignorance, lack of language and tradition. And above all, "we have become a mockery" (Neh. 3:36): we have become objects of shame and derision.

Nevertheless, Maimonides, the great Jewish teacher, the pillar of the halakhah, comes along and rules that "the first sanctification . . . was in effect in its own time but not for all time," whereas the "second sanctification is in effect forever, both in its own time and for all time" (Hilkhot Terumot 1:5). You hear? Joshua's sanctification via capture and military victory, undertaken in an unbridled, gushing, enterprising spirit of conquest, when proud prophets, warriors, elders, students of our teacher Moses, and heroic legions seized the Land of Israel, was no more than a temporary phenomenon: Nebuchadnezzar abrogated it. But Ezra's sanctification, which came about through daily, small-scale, unheroic, painstaking work, through disappointments and despair, intercession with and requests from the authorities, insults and humiliation – that remains forever: neither Titus nor Hadrian, neither Islam nor the Crusades, neither Turkey nor even the [British] Colonial Office can undo it.

Maimonides explains this halakhic paradox using the same philosophical idea: "Why do I maintain . . . that [the first sanctification] was not in effect for all time with respect to the rest of the Land of Israel vis-a-vis the sabbatical year, tithes, and so on? The reason is that . . . the requirement to observe the sabbatical year and the tithes depended on the land being conquered by the people, so that once it was taken away from them, their conquest was negated" (Hilkhot Beit ha-Beḥirah 6:16). Joshua's sanctification was not the result of hardship but of historical success during glorious moments of Jewish history – none of which is forever. Ezra's sanctification, by contrast, came about through occupation, settling the land, through the word of God, through adversity, martyrdom, spiritual pain and despair, mockery and derision. Ezra's sanctification emerged from crisis, tribulation, and subjugation. Redemption born of suffering, the messiah born following birth pangs, are eternal – sanctification for all time!

How beautiful are the words we read in today's haftarah: "The angel who talked with me came back and woke me as a man is wakened from sleep" (Zech. 4:1). The angel of redemption rouses Zechariah, the prophet of the return to Zion:

Prophet! Despair not, deliver your prophecy, spread the Torah of redemption, of the messiah, of the building of the Temple! Do not give up hope because of the pitfalls and obstacles on the road; because of the external Sanballats, Samaritans, and Arabs and the internal Satans dwelling in the houses of the Kohanim Gedolim; or because of the "filthy garments" (Zech. 3:3) worn by Joshua the Kohen Gadol, who was supposed to lead the people toward God! Deliver your prophecy,

proclaim redemption, and awaken the people's hearts so that they hear the steps of the messiah.

Look, Zechariah! "A lampstand all of gold, with a bowl above it. The lamps on it are seven in number, and the lamps above it have seven pipes; and by it are two olive trees, one on the right of the bowl and one on its left" (Zech. 4:2–3). You see such a great vision of light, anointing oil, priesthood, and kingship; you see the great drama of the End of Days that can result from this movement! Inform the people, tell them about the golden Menorah with its fount of oil, about the clear light radiating from its seven branches, about Jewish anointing oil, sanctity, purity, ethical ideals, and historical hopes. Talk to them, inspire them!

However, the prophet does not understand how the great light of the golden Menorah can be born of such modest circumstances, such political bankruptcy, such a disgraceful national condition, such a state of disintegration and disharmony. At most a small community will emerge, not any sort of epoch-making event. The angel asks him, "Do you not know what those things mean?" and he responds, "No, my lord" (Zech. 4:5): I do not understand! At that point, the angel reveals to him the great secret of suffering, adversity, and sacrifice. "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power" (Zech. 4:6). For the Second Temple will be built not with happiness and joy, not with the support of neighbors and great kingdoms, but in spite of the enemies, insults, and disruptions, in spite of the enmity and disdain exhibited by the rest of the world. Through adversity and hardship will the holy light of the golden Menorah shine forth, and eternity will prevail.

**This excerpt is taken from an address delivered by Rabbi Soloveitchik to the Emergency Conference of the Mizrachi National Council on June 2, 1945.*

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Uniformity and Uniqueness

One of the interesting paradoxes of human life is our tendency to copy one another and to try to "fit in" with friends and acquaintances, while simultaneously trying to be distinct from others, and to be our "own person."

The pressures of conformity are very strong in all human societies. People who are different are often treated as outcasts. And each of us determines our behavior with an eye toward others' opinions. We want to be part of the group, part of the crowd.

The pressures that human groups—large and small—exert upon each of us result not only in conformity, but in uniformity. Groups demand that all members act in accordance with their norms and its standards. Behavior which breaks the mold of uniformity is seen as threatening, even bizarre.

And yet, we all feel the need to assert our uniqueness, our own precious individuality.

One of my personal favorite cartoons shows a crowd of penguins, looking identical, all black and white. In the center of the horde is one penguin with a barely noticeable red bow tie. The cartoon's caption has that penguin saying, "I got to be me."

Obviously, conformity is necessary for a society to function efficiently, and to maintain its equilibrium. Individual self-expression is also necessary, to introduce new coping methods into the social process.

There are dangers to both tendencies, that which demands uniformity, and that which allows for the individual's urge for autonomy and self-assertion.

Countless times in history, we have witnessed terrible dangers intrinsic to crowd behavior. We have seen the negative effects of cults, which encourage blind conformity to group norms. We have seen entire nations unquestioningly following cruel calls for the genocide of targeted populations.

We have seen the urge to be different result in equally harmful and dangerous behavior. Individuals who just want to be noticed will resort to serial murders of innocents, or to venting their rage by spraying a school campus with bullets. Self-expression carried to the extreme.

Apparently, there are good sides and bad sides to both social conformity and individualistic behavior. The secret lies in the balance between the two.

In the Torah portion, Parshat Naso, even the casual reader will be troubled by the repetitive description of the offerings of the twelve tribal princes. Each of them contributes an absolutely identical set of celebratory gifts to the tabernacle. The uniformity of the twelve sets of gifts is absolute. It seems as if each of the twelve princes strove to totally conform to the others, and none dared defy the standards of the rest of the group. An example of conformity, if there ever was one.

The congregants in the synagogue who hear the Torah reader repetitively chant the monotonous lists of contributions often feel bored and ask, "Why the repetition, and why the uniformity?"

Here, the rabbis of the Midrash help us out. They take a different, deeper, and more perceptive view. Motivated by the same discomfort as today's Torah listener, they exclaim, "Their gifts are all identical, but each has his own unique intention."

Although the gifts all shared common explicit language, the thoughts and emotions behind each gift differed from prince to prince. Each lent a different kavanah, a distinct unspoken meaning, to his gifts. And that meaning was based upon the unique nature of each prince and the tribe he represented. The gifts were all the same; the underlying intentions were as different as one can imagine. The lyrics were identical; the melody, different.

The rabbis speculate at some length as to the nature of these implicit intentions. They wonder as to how the prince of the tribe of Reuben might have expressed his tribe's uniqueness in contradistinction to the prince of the tribe of Simeon, and Levi, and Judah, and so forth.

All human societies contain the tension between the pressure to conform and the inner urge to be distinctive. Religious societies contain that tension all the more. Judaism, for example, requires conformity to an elaborate set of behavioral guidelines. The casual observer of a group of Jews at prayer, or at the Passover Seder table, or circling the bimah with their palm fronds during the holiday of Succoth, will see a group of people who seem to be obsessively imitating each other.

But the observer who is familiar with the inner lives of those who comprise that group of Jews will realize that each person's prayer is different and reflective of his or her unique experience. Everyone around the Seder table is responding to different religious memories, and each of those who are circling the bimah is doing so with a very distinctive and unique set of religious emotions.

If there is a lesson to be gained from this perspective of our parsha, it is this: Religious behavior calls for a great deal of uniformity, but also insists that each individual draw from his or her own wellspring of inspiration.

We all must be the same, yet we all must be different. This paradox is true of all human societies. It is especially true of the society of Jews.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

People Need Protection From Their Own Wealth

The Sifrei on the pasuk in Birkas Kohanim – "May Hashem Bless you and Guard you" (Bamidbar 6:24) – analyzes the blessing (Yevarechecha) and the guarding (V'Yishmerecha) that Hashem provides. The Medrash provides an entire listing of opinions as to what each of these terms represent.

One opinion in the Sifrei is that Yevarechecha refers to acquiring property (i.e., wealth) and V'Yishmerecha refers to Hashem saving you from all the potential hazards that might take away your property. However, the first opinion in the Sifrei is that both Yevarechecha and V'Yismerecha simply refer to a person's property. We readily understand the opinion that Yevarechecha refers to acquisition of wealth and V'Yishmerecha refers to

preservation of that wealth. However, what exactly is meant by saying that both Yevarechecha and V'Yishmerecha just refer to wealth?

Perhaps the thought is that a person should be blessed with wealth, but that this wealth should not ruin him—something which is an all-too-common situation. We see repeatedly that money does something to a person. Someone can be the most wonderful and generous of individuals, and yet when he makes a few bucks, he turns into a different type of person.

This opinion in the Sifrei is teaching that Hashem should protect us from our own money – that it shouldn't ruin us. In one of his books, Dr. Abraham Twerski, ob"m, wrote that when he was growing up in Milwaukee, there was a Jew who was a very poor man, but anytime he had any money whatsoever, he would give it to charity. Even when he could not afford it, he would give his money to tzedaka – to such an extent that Dr. Twerski's father, Rav Yaakov Twerski – the patriarch of the family – had to tell this person NOT to give away his money!

One day, the man became wealthy. He made a lot of money. At that point, he became a cheapskate. It was crazy. When he had no money, he gave it away and when he had money, he couldn't give it away! That is what the bracha means to protect against when it teaches "Yevarechecha HaShem, v'Yishmerecha." May your wealth not come and corrupt you, which unfortunately is not an uncommon occurrence.

The Husband Who Withholds Priestly Gifts May One Day Need the Kohen's Services

In Parshas Nasso, the Torah teaches, "And all that is raised up of all the holy things that the Children of Israel bring to the Kohen, it shall be his. A man's holy things shall be his, and what a man gives to the Kohen, it shall be his." (Bamidbar 5:9-10). In effect, a person must give all his "Priestly Gifts" to the Kohen.

This is immediately followed by the laws of Sotah, a man who suspects his wife of being unfaithful. Rashi comments on the juxtaposition of these two parshios: If someone holds back that which he is obligated to give to the Kohen – "By your life, you will need to come to him to bring your wife for the Sotah ritual."

This fellow is stingy. He does not want to give to the Kohen what he is supposed to give. The Torah says, as it were, "Guess what fella: One day you will need to depend on this Kohen because you will suspect your wife of infidelity and you will need to bring her to him in order for her to once again be permitted to live with you."

The problem with this drasha is, how does it happen that just because I am stingy, my wife is going to turn into the type of woman that will potentially engage in adulterous relations? Where is the cause and effect? What is the connection between my stinginess and my wife's infidelity?

I would like to suggest the following answer: There are two types of women who can wind up being a Sotah. There is a woman who is in fact guilty as charged, and was indeed unfaithful to her husband. She suffers the consequence of the Sotah. The "Bitter Waters" that she drinks do their work and she explodes from this potion. However, there is also another type of woman who is falsely accused of being unfaithful.

If we think about the type of male personality who does not give his Priestly Gifts to the Kohen, we are talking about a person who is a cheapskate. We are talking about the type of person who holds onto his money. We are talking about the type of person who is not generous, who is not giving. This is the type of person who often has a jealous personality. There is a personality profile here which combines the traits of cheapness, jealousy, and an uncompromising nature.

This is the type of person who, when he sees his wife having an innocent and innocuous conversation with another man, because of his perspective on life—always viewing people in a negative light—jumps to conclusions and asks: "What is my wife doing with this guy?" Therefore, he right away makes a kinui on her (warning her not to be seen in private with this fellow) and if there happens to be steerah (where the woman is subsequently seen in private with him), he will drag her to the Kohen. The truth of the matter may very well be that this woman has done nothing evil. But because of her husband's negativity and his outlook on life, he sees sinister events where no such events have transpired.

So it does not automatically follow that a stingy person has a wife who is a run-around. She in fact may be perfectly innocent, but such a person views his wife with his negative perception which may lead to kinui and steerah, and eventually may necessitate him needing to bring his wife to the Kohen.

The Singular Individual Who Accepted Nezirus Was Usually Single

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky shares a very interesting idea in his sefer, which is most appropriate for the person who wrote it!

A Nazir can raise his personal sanctity up to the level of a Kohen Gadol. Just like a Kohen Gadol is forbidden to become tameh by contact even with dead relatives, so too a person who is a Nazir has the law of a Kohen Gadol and cannot defile himself, even to become involved in the burial of his father or mother!

Rav Yaakov notes something unique in the pasuk that states that a Nazir cannot become tameh "to his father, his mother, his brother, or his sister." Rav Yaakov points out that there is a difference between what the Torah says by a Kohen Gadol and what the Torah says by a Nazir. By the list of relatives for which a Nazir is forbidden to defile himself, the Torah omits "his son or his daughter," which are both included in the list of relatives for which a Kohen Gadol may not contaminate himself. The halacha, of course, is that a Nazir CANNOT become tameh for his son or daughter, just like a Kohen Gadol cannot do so. Why then does the Torah not mention them by the Nazir?

Rav Yaakov suggests a novel idea. Generally speaking, the only people who became Nezirim were bochurim, unmarried young men. Unmarried young men did not have sons or daughters, so there was no need to mention them. Rav Yaakov asks, why is it that, generally speaking, it was only bochurim who became Nezirim? He offers the following theory:

The Gemara—in explaining the juxtaposition of the laws of Sotah with that of Nazir—says that someone who sees the disgrace of a Sotah should take a vow to abstain from wine. The type of people, Rav Yaakov says, who when they see something dramatic are likely to become inspired and change the directions of their lives are typically bochurim.

The unfortunate reality is that the older we get, the more set in our ways we become, and the harder it is for us to change. This does not mean it is impossible. We see that people do change all the time, and we see people who are in their thirties, forties, and fifties – and even in their sixties – who become Baalei Teshuva. But the reality is that the older we are, the harder it is for us to change.

It is the bochur who is not yet set in his ways who can more easily be inspired and take dramatic action to alter his life behavior and take himself to a higher spiritual level. That is why the majority of Nezirim were in fact bochurim, and so when the Torah enumerates the dead relatives whose contact the Nazir must avoid, it omits "his son and his daughter."

Dvar Torah
Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Peace is a suitcase. Now why do I say that? In Parshat Nasso we're given the Birkat Kohanim – the 'duchaning' – the blessing that the Kohanim bring from Hashem to the people, and the entire blessing leads to a crescendo with the words (Bamidbar 6:26), "Veyaseim lecha shalom," – "May Hashem give you peace." The impression given here is that peace means everything.

The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 21:1) on this verse and the Talmud Yerushalmi both tell us, that from here we learn, "Ein kli machzik

bracha eila shalom." – "Peace is a vessel that contains blessings within it like none other."

Why is peace described in this particular way? Let's say you're going on a train journey. You're going somewhere for the weekend, and you take an old suitcase with you and in the suitcase you've got your clothes and many valuable possessions. When you arrive at the station, lo and behold your old suitcase falls apart! You have to pick up all of your valuable possessions and hold them in your arms, and you have to schlepp them like this until you get to your hotel.

I can guarantee you that by the time you reach your destination there'll be hardly anything left because they'll all slip from your arms. That's the reason why our sages tell us, "Ein kli machzik bracha eilah shalom." – "Peace is a vessel that contains your blessings within it, like none other."

It's like that suitcase. Because without being able to hold onto your blessings they'll all slip away. It is for this reason that when, in Parshat Bechukotai, the Torah gives us the promise (Vayikra 26:6), "Venatati shalom ba'aretz," – "I will give peace in the land,"

Rashi comments as follows: What happens if people say, "But we've got everything already! You've promised us the lot! Why is peace necessary?" Rashi answers, "Magid shehashalom shakul keneged hakol." – "From here we learn that peace equals everything."

How true it is. One can be blessed with enormous material wealth. One can have relationships. One can have all types of blessings. But if one's life is full of tension, if there is divisiveness, if there is a poisonous atmosphere without peace, you actually end up having hardly anything at all.

That is why in our daily prayers we say, "Oseh shalom uvoreih et hakol," – "Hashem makes peace and He creates everything."

Let's never forget that peace is like a suitcase and without it, we end up having nothing at all.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

The Nazirite According to Rabbi Elia Benamozegh's Em laMikra
Rabbanit Malka and Rabbi Eliezer Shai Di Martino

The analysis that we are going to make will be based on the teachings of Rabbi Elia Benamozegh of Leghorn (1822-1900). Rabbi Elia Benamozegh was a famous Italian rabbi and philosopher who lived in the 19th century, known for his work in reconciling Jewish and modern thought.

It is worth studying Rav Benamozegh's Biblical Commentary Em laMikra, in order to know and understand the Jewish vision that one of the greatest Jewish minds of our era, Professor José Faur z"l, called Sephardic religious humanism and of which Rav Benamozegh is perhaps the highest representative.

As Sephardic scholar David Shasha perfectly expressed, the great thinkers of the Sephardic tradition have sought to articulate the critically important values of religion and humanism as one unified category. Religion is not only a matter of our relationship to God and the spirit. Religion in its scheme should give a place of honor to Humanity, and so should do the vast enterprise of Humanistic studies with the voice of religion.

My personal definition of Religious Humanism, based on Prof. Faur's words, is the ability of some religious Jewish thinkers to extensively quote from a wide range of scholars and, by applying their field of specialization to Biblical texts and Rabbinic exegesis, be able to show the intimate relationship between the interpretation of the text and the conventions and values making up the historical context of the rabbis.

We are going to study Benamozegh's teachings, based on Numbers 6, and try to understand his insights on the concept of a Nazirite vow.

"Speak to the Israelites and say to them: If any men or women explicitly utter a Nazirite's vow, to set themselves apart for the Lord". (Numbers 6, 2)

One of Rav Benamozegh's main intellectual battles was to reinforce the idea, not only of the legitimacy, but of the indispensability of the Torah SheBeAl Pé, the Oral Torah. He never misses the opportunity to emphasize this concept and he does so by quoting Salomon Munk (1803-1867) the famous German-born Jewish-French Orientalist. The Written Torah does not mention an eternal Nazirite vow like that of Samson, so where did the Israelites got the idea to make such a vow? The Oral Torah must have instructed them on this matter, and without it, they would not have known how to behave in keeping the eternal Nazirite vow.

"If any men or women explicitly utter a Nazirite's vow…": We do not find in the Torah any mention of an eternal Nazirite like Samson's Nazirite's vow, as the sage (Salomon) Munk testified in his "Palestine," p.168. And for me, this is a great proof of the truth of the Oral Torah, that if (the Oral Torah) did not enjoin to (the people of) Israel what the Written Torah was silent about, including the matter of eternal Nazirite vow, where would they take the idea to make an eternal Nazirite vow? And where would be found the Torah and the mitzva according to which they will behave in keeping it (the eternal Nazirite vow)? (Em laMikra, Numbers 6:2)

In Numbers 6:3, the Torah instructs Nazirites to abstain from wine and other intoxicants: "they shall abstain from wine and any other intoxicant; they shall not drink vinegar of wine or of any other intoxicant, neither shall they drink anything in which grapes have been steeped, nor eat grapes fresh or dried". (Numbers 6:3)

Rabbi Benamozegh argues with a certain Dodwell – who could be the Irish writer on archaeology, Edward Dodwell, or the Anglo-Irish Christian theologian and controversial writer Henry Dodwell – who argued that prophets used to drink alcohol to prepare themselves for prophecy. Benamozegh cites several biblical passages that show that wine is not an aid to prophecy, but instead induces mistake and error. For example, in Amos 2:12 and Isaiah 28:7, implying that making someone drink wine prevents prophecy.

"They shall abstain from wine and any other intoxicant…": I didn't know where Dodwell learned from that the prophets would drink wine to prepare themselves for prophecy, and we haven't heard that they would use only music, and by way of hypothesis it is logic to say that they did not drink at all as priests, as monks, and as charioteers. And we find in the scripture: "But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and ordered the prophets not to prophesy" (Amos 2:12); and so you learn that the making someone drink wine prevents prophecy. And in the book of Isaiah: "But these are also muddled by wine and dazed by liquor: priest and prophet are muddled by liquor; they are confused by wine, they are dazed by liquor; they are muddled in their visions, they stumble in judgment" (Isaiah 28:7). And so you found that wine is not an aid to prophecy, instead it induces to mistake and error. See (Nicolas Antoine) Boulanger (L')Antiquité dévoilée (par ses usages), Vol. IV 48 (Em laMikra, Numbers 6, 3).

Benamozegh concludes that wine is not conducive to prophecy, and it is best to avoid it suggesting to the reader to check this principle in the writings of French philosopher Nicolas Antoine Boulanger.

In Numbers 6:4, the Torah instructs Nazirites to refrain from eating anything that comes from the grapevine, including seeds and skin.

"Throughout their term as Nazirite, they may not eat anything that is obtained from the grapevine, even seeds (chartzanim) or skin (zag)" (Numbers 6:4).

Rabbi Benamozegh analyzes the word "zag" and doesn't miss the opportunity to argue with his main "rival", his contemporary Shemuel David Luzzatto, known as the Shadal. Shadal was an extreme rationalist and a free thinker who often expressed little respect for Talmudic sages. Aside from this he was a harsh opponent of Jewish Kabalistic mysticism.

Shadal in his commentary contradicts the classical Talmudic understanding of the two terms, "chartzanim" meaning seeds and "zag"

meaning skin. Shadal says that actually "zag" means the seeds. Benamozegh in this case, probably on purpose, doesn't need to bring examples from non-rabbinical texts, and counters Shadal using only Talmudic proofs.

Skin (zag): According to Rabbi Yossé (Talmud Bavli Nazir 34b and Mishnah) "zag" refers to the skins (of the raisins), and the Sage Shemuel David Luzzatto (on his commentary on Numbers 6:4 doesn't agree, and) thought that (Rabbi Yossé) being from the Galilee, didn't speak proper Hebrew and relied on the (similar) word "zog," meaning a bell. And if we analyze Rabbi Yossé's words (Mishnah Nazir 6,2) we can find that he says: "a mnemonic so that you should not err: It is like a bell [zog] worn by an animal, in which the outer part is called zog, and the inner portion of the bell, the clapper, is called inbal".

After all, you have no choice but to understand (Rabbi Yossé's words) as a mnemonic sign as is the custom of the Sages in the Mishnah and the Talmud, and he did not rely on it at all in his interpretation. And other places where this expression comes in the words of our Sages: "so that you should not err", will prove that it is just formulating a mnemonic sign, as in (Mishnah Menahot 11,4): "Rabbi Yehuda says: The following letters are a mnemonic so that you will not err and forget the dimensions of the two loaves: zayin, dalet, dalet. The numerical value of the letter zayin is seven and the numerical value of the letter dalet is four. The mnemonic therefore represents the length of seven handbreadths, the width of four handbreadths, and the height of four fingerbreadths, respectively. The following letters are a mnemonic for the dimensions of the shewbread: yod, heh, zayin, which stand for the length of ten handbreadths, the width of five handbreadths, and the height of seven fingerbreadths, respectively." (Em laMikra, Numbers 6, 4)

Finally, in Numbers 6:20, the Torah explains that the priest has to perform the Nazirite offering in a special manner called "tenufá", a sort of jolt:

"The priest shall elevate them as an elevation (Tenufa) offering before the Lord; and this shall be a sacred donation for the priest, in addition to the breast of the elevation offering and the thigh of gift offering. After that the Nazirite may drink wine" (Numbers 6:20).

Rabbi Benamozegh notes that it is not possible for Moses to warn about the "elevation" (tenufa) and not explain how to do it, and again he emphasizes the necessity and legitimacy of the Oral Torah paraphrasing a famous passage from tractate Taanit:

"The priest shall elevate them as an elevation offering…": It is not possible for Moshe to warn about the "elevation" (tenufa), and not to explain how it is to be done. And the way of doing it is explained in the Oral Torah, "extends the offering to each of the four directions and brings it back, then raises and lowers it" (see T.B. Menahot 61a). And for all intents and purposes we have already found the custom of the movement (ni'nua') explained in the Torah and our Sages extended it to the Lulav, and they truly said (T.B. Taanit 9a) that "there is nothing (in the Oral Torah) that isn't alluded in the Written Torah". (Em laMikra, Numbers 6:20)

Overall, Rabbi Benamozegh's teachings on the Nazirite vow highlight the importance of the Oral Torah in Jewish tradition. The Torah's commandments are not just limited to the Written Torah but are also found in the Oral Torah and the mystical traditions, which provide a deeper understanding of how to fulfill them. While expressing this central idea he shows a positive attitude towards the Nazirite vow, seeing it as a legitimate choice for those who wish to rise spiritually.

But most of all, through his vast knowledge and use of Jewish and modern thought, Benamozegh shows us that religious humanism has roots that draw from ancient sources and that extend into the future and represent an authentic and legitimate Judaism which should have a place of honor in the intellectual panorama of our faith.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger

The Privilege of Access

It certainly was not frontal teaching, but it was not participatory or collaborative either. Indeed, the manner in which Hashem instructed Moshe the majority of Torah has not been categorized or described, to my knowledge, in the annals of modern education. Rashi, noting an unusual construct in the last pasuk of our parsha, comments that Moshe listened in to Hashem talking to Himself.

This "fly on the wall" approach to study is recorded in the last pasuk of our parsha. Moshe, when called into the Ohel Moed (7:89), would hear Hashem "me'daber", which Rashi explains is a form of "misdaber", and thus translates as, "He heard the Voice uttering itself". Rashi further explains that it is out of reverence for the Most-High God that the Torah describes it as "The Voice speaking to itself", and Moses listening in.

As strange as it seems, it is quite easily appreciated by students of the Talmud and the Yeshiva Torah Tapestry of all times. After all, we, too, "listen in" to the debates of Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai, Rav and Shmuel, Rava and Abayei, Rambam and Raavad, the Ketzos and the Nesivos, Rav Moshe and Rav Henkin. And whereas this style of learning is charming and engaging, it so often strikes us as terribly inefficient. That is why it is so incredibly important to understand that Ravina and Rav Ashi, when writing the text of the Talmud, were following the style that Hashem initiated as He taught Moshe in the desert. It is Chazal once again following the style and format of the Almighty.

Human experience gives us an insight into the "eavesdropping" style of our daily Torah regimen. The "eavesdropper" or the "fly on the wall" knows, with every silenced and bated breath, that he is in a place that is beyond where he ought to be. The students of Hashem's Torah come to realize that we are far from deserving, or capable, of fully engaging with the word of Hashem, nor the repartee of Rav and Shmuel, nor even the crosstalk of the Torah giants and sages of any time.

It is this cumbersome style that reifies for us the precious privilege we have been gifted to behold and to delve into every Rashi and every Tosfos. May we all be blessed the yishuv hada'as to appreciate this gift to the best of our abilities.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah
by Rabbi Label Lam

How Much They Count

HASHEM spoke to Moshe and Aaron saying: Make a count (Nasso es Rosh) of the sons of Kohas from among the children of Levi by their families, according to their fathers' houses. (Bamidbar 4:1-2)

It's truly amazing how much is lost in translation. That is far from what is being asked of Moshe and Aaron here. There is nothing more dehumanizing than assigning a number to a person.

The word NASSO is comprised of a two-letter root that is rife throughout the Parsha: SIN and ALEF. Where else do we find it and what does it mean in those places? The Leviim who were to be counted were charged with certain tasks, "MASA", with that SIN-ALEF root. They were to NOSEH- carry the Aron HaKodesh. The Talmud tells us, "NOSEH ARON NOSAV" – "The Aron carried those who carried it". SIN-ALEF means to carry a burden, to lift up.

The Cohanim bless the Jewish people with the words, "Yisa (SIN_ALEF) HASHEM PANAV ELECHA" – HASHEM should lift His face upon you…and give you peace." The word for the princes of the Jewish People who each brought their inaugural gifts to HASHEM is spelled NUN-SIN-ALEF-YUD. These are the leaders with a SIN-ALEF again. A NASI is also a cloud. So, what's the common denominator and what does it tell us about the real task of NASSO ES ROSH – counting.

Years ago, I got a call from a prominent Rav in Lakewood. My wife and I had been guests in the community many times where we had some friends and relatives, who we visited every summer. I would take the opportunity to give an afternoon lady's Shiur. This time the Rabbi had a tall order for me. He said that on Shabbos afternoon there would be a big Kiddush to honor a group of congregants who

were finishing SHAS – the entire Talmud, on a schedule different from the Daf HaYomi calendar. He wanted me to address the congregation before Musaf on Shabbos morning. I can't believe I agreed to do it, but I did. Now my mind was racing one thousand miles an hour. What could I possibly say? This was Lakewood. These men had completed SHAS. I felt I was way over my head. An idea woke up inside and this is basically what I shared.

One of the most unusual first encounters ever was between Reb Yochanan and Reish Lakish. Reb Yochanan was an unusually beautiful man and he was bathing in a river. Reish Lakish was a notorious bandit and seeing the Rabbi was a vulnerable target, he leapt across the river to attack his prey. Upon seeing this this athletic feat in process Reb Yochanan declared, "CHEILCHA L'ORAISA" – Your power, your prowess, your talent is for Torah". I can still recall my Rebbe marveling at what he didn't say. "Thief! Police! Help!" He saw the raw potential of a future Torah star. Reish Lakish retorted to Reb Yochanan that his beauty is wasted on a man. Reb Yochanan replied "If you think I am beautiful, you should see my sister. If you dedicate your might to Torah, I will give her to you as a wife." Reish Lakish committed himself on the spot. He married Reb Yochanan's sister, became a great Talmud scholar, and a life-long study partner with Reish Lakish.

Then I fast forwarded to a barber shop in Spring Valley where I was waiting my turn for a haircut. Into the barbershop strode an elderly man, Rabbi Aronson. He was then in his mid-90's. I had heard that he had learned in Slobodka where giants like Reb Aaron Kotler, Reb Yaakov Kaminetsky, Reb Yitzchok Hutner, Reb Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman, Reb Dovid Leibowitz and more were raised by the Alter from Slobodka, Reb Nosson Tzvi Finkel.

I engaged him briefly in conversation. I asked him, "Was Rabbi Aronson in Slobodka?". He affirmed, "Yes!" I asked him, "Did Rabbi Aronson see the Alter?" He Nodded and confirmed, "Of course!" I asked him if he was there when Reb Aaron Kotler and Reb Yaakov Kaminetzky were there and he said, "I was there the day they arrived". I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I said to him, "There must have been a big celebration! Two great people like that arriving!" He looked at me like I fell from outer space." "Celebration? They were Bochurim! Nobody saw anything!" He said emphatically. Then he corrected himself, "The Alter, he saw something!"

NASSO means to lift up, carry, demonstrate to a person what their loftiest mission in this world is, and not just to count them but to empower them and show how much they count.

Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet
BAMIDBAR 5784

Sefira: Friday night will be 46 Days - Hayom Shisha V'Arba-im Yom Sh'Hem Shisha Shavuos ViArba Yamim LaOmer - Tiferes Sheb'Malchus

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Home Weekly Parsha BAMIDBAR
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

I have always been fascinated why this book of the Bible and this week's Torah reading is called Bamidbar – in the desert. The rabbis of Midrash have stated that the lesson involved here is that the Torah only remains in a person who empties all other causes from one's midst, and is as open and unoccupied as is the desert.

Nevertheless, there may be other insights that may be gleaned from the use of the desert as the backdrop for the events and laws contained in this fourth book of the Torah. One of these different insights has to do with the ability of water to transform a barren desert into a productive place of lush fields and orchards.

Here in Israel, the Negev desert that began fifty years ago just south of Chevron has now expanded many kilometers far south of Beersheba. This is due to the national water carrier system and other means of bringing water to that area of our country. Literally, the desert has bloomed in fulfillment of the ancient prophecies of Isaiah.

Water can overcome the arid dryness and barrenness of the desert of the Negev. In California, desert valleys have been transformed into America's vegetable basket by systems of water diverted from the Colorado River. Again, in that case water was the key to transforming a desert into a garden and orchard. There are plans afloat all over the world to transform deserts into arable land. However, fresh water is a valuable and oftentimes scarce commodity and the struggle to discover and harness more of it for agricultural and human use is a continuous effort.

Throughout the books of the prophets of Israel and as well as within the Talmud, the Torah itself is metaphorically compared to and even called water. Just as water has the ability to convert desolate and nonproductive desert land into a veritable Garden of Eden, so too can Torah fill the void in our hearts and souls and make us productive holy people. Torah, like the water that represents it, has this enormous regenerative power. The book of Bamidbar will, in its narrative of the many sad and tragic events that befall Israel in its sojourn in the desert, constantly reminds us of the powers of water/Torah to restore the Jewish people to a purposeful existence with greatly productive achievements in spite of all of its failures and backsliding.

No matter how bleak and barren the desert landscape in which we currently find ourselves, we should always be cognizant of the ability of Torah to refresh and renew us. The Jewish people are an old nation and yet our powers of rejuvenation have never waned. We were and are constantly nourished by the waters of Torah irrespective of whatever desert we found or find ourselves in. The choice of Jewish tradition to call this book of the Torah by the name of Bamidbar - in the desert – is meant to convey to us this message of hope, constant redemption, and rebirth.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

Liminal Space
BAMIDBAR
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

In English, the book we begin this week is called Numbers, and for an obvious reason. It begins with a census, and there is even a second count toward the end of the book. On this view, the central theme of the book is demography. The Israelites, still at Sinai at the beginning of the book, but on the brink of the Promised Land by its end, are now a sizeable nation, numbering 600,000 men of an age to embark on military service.

Within Jewish tradition however, this book has become known as Bamidbar, "in the wilderness," suggesting a very different theme. The superficial reason for the name is that this is the first distinctive word in the book's opening verse. But the work of two anthropologists, Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, suggest a deeper possibility. The fact that Israel's formative experience was in the wilderness turns out to be highly significant. For it is there that the people experience one of the Torah's most revolutionary ideas, namely that an ideal society is one in which everyone has equal dignity under the sovereignty of God.

Arnold Van Gennep, in his The Rites of Passage, argued that 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 third is incorporation, re-entering society with a new identity. Between the two is the crucial stage of transition when, having said goodbye to who you were but not yet hello to who you are about to become, you are recast, reborn, refashioned.[1]

Van Gennep used the term liminal, from the Latin word for threshold, to describe this second state when you are in a kind of no-man's-land between the old and the new. That is clearly what the wilderness signifies for Israel: liminal space between Egypt and the Promised Land. There Israel is reborn, no longer a group of escaping slaves but "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The desert – a no-man's-land with no settled populations, no cities, no civilisational order – is the place where Jacob's descendants, alone with God, cast off one identity and assume another.

This analysis helps us understand some of the details of the book of Exodus. The daubing of the doorposts with blood (Ex. 12:7) is part of the first stage, the separation, during which time the door through which you walk as you leave your old life behind has special symbolic significance.

Likewise the division of the Red Sea. The division of one thing into two, through which something or someone passes, is a symbolic enactment of transition, as it was for Abraham in the passage in which God tells him about his children's future exile and enslavement (Gen 15:10-21). Abraham divides animals, God divides the sea, but the movement between the two halves is what signals the phase-change. Note also that Jacob has his two defining encounters with God in liminal space, during his journey from his home towards the dwelling of Laban (Gen. 28:10-22, and Gen. 32:22-32).

Victor Turner added one additional element to this analysis. He drew a distinction between society and what he called communitas. Society is always marked by structure and hierarchy. Some have power, some don't. There are classes, castes, ranks, orders, gradations of status and honour.[2] For Turner what makes the experience of liminal space vivid and transformative is that in the desert there are no hierarchies. Instead, there is "an intense comradeship and egalitarianism. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenised." People cast together in the no-man's-land of the desert experience the "essential and generic human bond." That is what he means by communitas, a rare and special state in which, for a brief but memorable period, everyone is equal.[3]

We now begin to understand the significance of midbar, "wilderness," in the spiritual life of Israel. It was the place where they experienced with an intensity they had never felt before nor would they easily again, the unmediated closeness of God which bound them to Him and to one another.

That is what Hosea means when he speaks in God's name of a day when Israel will experience, as it were, a second honeymoon:

"Therefore I am now going to allure her; 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 up out of Egypt. "In that day," declares the Lord, "you will call Me 'my husband'; you will no longer call Me 'my Master.'"

Hos. 2:14-16

We also now understand the significance of the account at the beginning of Bamidbar, in which the twelve tribes were encamped, in rows of three

on the four sides of the Tabernacle, each equidistant from the holy. Each tribe was different, but (with the exception of the Levites) all were equal. They ate the same food, manna from heaven. They drank the same drink, water from a rock or well. None yet had lands of their own, for the desert has no owners. There was no economic or territorial conflict between them.

The entire description of the camp at the beginning of Bamidbar, with its emphasis on equality, fits perfectly Turner's description of communitas, the ideal state people only experience in liminal space where they have left the past (Egypt) behind but have not yet reached their future destination, the land of Israel. They have not yet begun building a society with all the inequalities to which society gives rise. For the moment they are together, their tents forming a perfect square with the Sanctuary at its centre.

The poignancy of the book of Bamidbar lies in the fact that this communitas lasted so briefly. The serene mood of its beginning will soon be shattered by quarrel after quarrel, rebellion after rebellion, a series of disruptions that would cost an entire generation their chance of entering the land.

Yet Bamidbar opens, as does the book of Bereishit, with a scene of blessed order, there natural, here social, there divided into six days, here into twelve (2×6) tribes, each person in Bamidbar like each species in Bereishit, in his or her rightful place, "each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house" (Num. 2:1).

So the wilderness was not just a place; it was a state of being, a moment of solidarity, midway between enslavement in Egypt and the social inequalities that would later emerge in Israel, an ideal never to be forgotten even if never fully captured again in real space and time.

Judaism never forgot its vision of natural and social harmony, set out respectively in the beginnings of the books of Genesis and Numbers, as if to say that what once was could be again, if only we heed the word of God.

[1] Arnold Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, University of Chicago Press, 1960.

[2] Victor Turner, The Ritual Process, Transaction Publishers, 1969.

[3] Victor Turner, Dramas, Fields and Metaphors, Cornell University Press, 1974.

Astrology and Jewish Law

Revivim

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

For thousands of years, the wisdom of astronomy and the wisdom of astrology were intertwined, and the sages of the nations of the world believed in them * When there was a general consensus among the sages of the nations that astrology was a true wisdom, the Sages of Israel did not disagree with them * As systematic science progressed, the demand for precision grew, and since astrologers could not be precise, their wisdom was called into question * The halakha follows the overwhelming majority of poskim that it is forbidden to inquire about the future through astrology

Astrology

Q: According to the Sages of Israel, is there truth in astrological prediction? And is it permissible to use astrology to inquire about future predictions, and personality analysis?

A: Astrology is a method based on the belief that the stars and constellations moving in their paths in the heavens influence everything that happens in the world, because life, with its good and bad, flows from the heavens through the stars and constellations. Stars refer to the seven nearby planets: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon. Constellations refer to the twelve sets of distant stars that create shapes in the sky, after which they are named: Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius, and Pisces. Since the heavenly bodies move in their orbits, their influence changes at all times according to the positions of the stars and constellations, with each month having its own constellation, and each day, and hour, having its own star patterns. According to the combination between them, they construct the birth chart of a person, and predict their destiny. Regarding the fate of nations and countries, according to the positions of the stars at the time of their establishment, or during significant events that occurred to them, they determine what events, opportunities, or difficulties await them in the future.

Astronomy and Astrology

For thousands of years, the wisdom of astronomy and the wisdom of astrology were intertwined, and the sages of the nations of the world, including the sages of Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, and Greece, believed in astrology. Over time, sages arose who questioned the credibility of astrology, until through a gradual process, a clear distinction was made between them. Astronomy developed as a precise science, advancing due to sophisticated telescopes that enabled observing distant stars and galaxies, and by observing them, it became possible to calculate their orbital motion, and the gravitational forces affecting them. Astrology, on the other hand, is a method whose adherents have not been able to prove scientifically, and therefore many today believe there is no truth in it.

The Position of the Sages of Israel

In general, in Talmudic times, when there was a general consensus among the sages of the nations that astrology was a true wisdom, the Sages of Israel did not disagree with them. Stories based on this view were even brought in the Talmud (Shabbat 119a, 156a-b). However, in the era of the Rishonim, when the sages of the nations disagreed as to whether the system of astrology was mistaken, among the Sages of Israel – some believed there was truth in it, and others believed it was false. One should not be surprised that the Sages of Israel took into account the sages of the nations, for the Torah Sages do not purport to decide scientific questions according to the Torah, because the Torah's purpose is to teach us the most important matters: what is good and what is bad, what is forbidden and what is permitted – and not to rule on scientific matters.

The Explanation and Debate on the Status of Astrology

It can be explained that in principle there is truth in astrology, since all creatures in the world are interconnected, and it is possible to learn about one system from another, especially from the all-encompassing system of the heavenly bodies. However, since the state of the stars is very complex, it is difficult to determine a clear position based on them, for a person's birth chart consists of three factors: hour, day, and month, each of which is complex in itself. Additionally, the fate of every person depends on the fate of their family, friends, fellow citizens, and nation, and it is impossible to construct astrological charts for all people, families, societies, and nations. And even if it were possible to construct such charts, the human mind cannot compute them all together.

Apparently, the successful astrologers were scholars in multiple fields who delved into the individual psyche and understood social processes, and were also endowed with a mystical talent, which enabled them to identify the main components from the totality of data in the astrological chart, and receive inspiration to predict the future. And although they often erred, since there were no better tools to help people and rulers plan their future moves, many relied on their predictions.

The Development of Science and the Decline of Intuitive Wisdom

As systematic science progressed, the demand for accuracy increased, and since astrologers could not be precise, their wisdom was called into question. As a result, a two-stage change occurred: 1) Talented individuals tended to develop their talents in the scientific direction at the expense of the mystical ability, and thus, the number of those capable of predicting the future through astrology diminished, for as mentioned, only a combination of multi-disciplinary talent with the development of mystical ability enables the use of astrology for future prediction. 2) Consequently, the transmission of this wisdom from generation to generation was impaired, to the extent that over time, very few wise people were able to understand a person's character and inclinations through astrology, let alone predict the future.

It turns out that those who believed in the truth of astrology relied on cases where astrologers succeeded in predicting the future. In contrast, those who denied its truth subjected it to a more severe test, demanding higher levels of accuracy that it could not meet, especially in generations

where the best talent was directed toward precise science, at the expense of developing the mystical sense.

Three Opinions

According to Rambam (Maimonides), astrology is a lie like all witchcraft and sorcery, and therefore it is forbidden by the Torah to ask astrologers about the future, just as it is forbidden to ask sorcerers and diviners. And if one acts based on what an astrologer says, they are liable for lashes (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avodah Zarah 11:8-9; Tur Yoreh De'ah 179; Tiferet Yisrael on Kiddushin 4:1, Boaz 1; and others).

In contrast, some poskim (halachic authorities) permitted asking an astrologer what will happen in the future, because the prohibition on predicting the future is through the means of witchcraft, while astrology is a scientific wisdom. This is the opinion of Ibn Ezra and Ralbag (Vayikra 19:26); and Rashba (1:413) wrote that perhaps there is no prohibition in this.

According to the middle opinion, which is the view of Ramban (Nachmanides) and most Rishonim and poskim, since astrologers predict the future through wisdom and not witchcraft or sorcery, there is no violation of "Lo tenachashu ve'lo te'onenu" ('Do not practice divination or soothsaying') (Leviticus 19:26). However, due to the positive commandment, "Tamim tihyeh im Hashem Elokecha" ('You shall be wholehearted with the Lord your God') (Deuteronomy 18:13), it is forbidden to ask them about the future. If God reveals the future to us through a prophet or the Urim and Tummim, we will know it; if not, we will rely on God that even if a distressing event occurs, it is meant to benefit us, so that through it, we will grow, and advance. And if we find a ploy to know the future and avoid that distress, in the end, we will suffer from many more distresses (Ramban in Meyuchasot 283; Haiyraiym 239, 431; Ritva on Shabbat 156b; Ran and Nimukei Yosef on Sanhedrin 65b; Shulchan Aruch and Rema 179:1-2, and many others).

The Practical Halakhic Ruling

The halakha follows the overwhelming majority of poskim that it is forbidden to attempt to inquire about the future through astrology. According to most poskim (Ramban and others), this is because the person asking violates the positive commandment "You shall be wholehearted with the Lord your God." And there are those who say (Rambam and others) that he also transgresses the negative commandment "Do not practice divination."

Is it Permissible to Use Astrology for Personality Assessment?

After learning that it is forbidden to ask astrologers about the future, we are left to clarify: Is it permissible to conduct a personality assessment with the help of an astrologer?

As we have learned, according to Rambam, there is no truth in astrology, both because it relies on incorrect assumptions, and because a person's fate can change through good or bad deeds (Iggeret Le'Chachmei Marseille). Therefore, it is forbidden to seek astrological advice, since the Torah has warned us to distance ourselves from falsehood. One who follows false advice misleads himself into thinking he has character traits that he does not actually possess, and lacks qualities he truly has. Instead of striving to develop his character traits according to his understanding, and the guidance of his rabbis and friends, he will pursue vanities, and neglect developing his character traits and talents properly. Over the years this view has strengthened, and its proponents cite evidence from cases of people who, following such advice, invested effort in a direction that turned out to be extremely harmful – such as being told they were gifted in business, only to ultimately lose their entire fortune, or hearing that they lacked talent in a certain field, only to succeed greatly in that very field many years later.

However, on the other hand, according to those who hold that astrology sometimes contains truth, it would be permissible for a person to use astrology to deepen his understanding of his character and traits. For if one knows he is prone to a certain sin, he can be more careful to avoid it, and if he knows he has talent in a certain area, he can develop it further. As our Sages said (Shabbat 156a) about one born under the constellation of Mars, that by nature, he will tend toward bloodshed, but it is within his ability to choose whether to be a murderer, a ritual slaughterer, a doctor who performs therapeutic bloodletting, or a mohel (circumciser).

Likewise, our Sages related (Shabbat 156b) about the mother of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak, that astrologers told her that her son would be a thief, therefore she was insistent that he always wear a head covering, so that he would have fear of Heaven. When he grew older, she implored him to always be careful to wear a head covering and pray to God for mercy that the evil inclination not control him. At first, he did not understand why his mother was so concerned. But one day, while sitting and studying under a date palm tree, his head covering fell off. He raised his eyes to the palm tree and saw the dates there. His desire overcame him, and due to the intense craving to steal them, he climbed the palm tree, and pulled off a cluster with his teeth. At that moment, he understood his mother's concern, for the astrologers were correct, that by nature, his desire drew him to theft. However, ultimately, they erred – for by virtue of his faith and Torah study, Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak became one of the great Torah Sages of Israel.

Still, one could argue that in the past, astrologers were of a higher caliber, so there was reason to consider their words, but over time, their wisdom was forgotten, and their statements became increasingly filled with errors.

In Practice

Since this matter is disputed, one who wishes to consult an astrologer has basis to rely upon. However, it is preferable to refrain from doing so, since it is difficult to know who is truly an expert. The more renowned the astrologer is for being God-fearing, humble, and cautious about taking definitive stances, and is also endowed with educational understanding – according to the view that there is truth in astrology, there is more room to consult with him. Nevertheless, according to those who hold that there is no truth in astrology, one should refrain from it.

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

Parshat Bemidbar: Desert, Divine Word, and Divine Habitation

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

"And God 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 were come out of the Land of Egypt." (Numbers 1:1)

Bemidbar, or "In the Desert," is the name by which this fourth of the Five Books of Moses (Pentateuch) is most popularly known – an apt description of the forty years of the Israelite desert wanderings which the book records.

Indeed this desert period serves as the precursor of – as well as a most apt metaphor for – the almost two thousand years of homeless wandering from place to place which characterized much of Jewish history before the emergence of our Jewish State in 1948.

The Hebrew word for desert, midbar, is also pregnant with meanings and allusions which in many ways have served as a beacon for our Jewish exile. The root noun from which midbar is built is d-b-r, which means leader or shepherd. After all, the most ancient occupation known to humanity is shepherding, and the desert is the most natural place for the 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 d-b-r means leader-shepherd because it also means word: the shepherd directs the flock using meaningful sounds and words, and the leader of people must also have the ability to inspire and lead with the verbal message he communicates; indeed, the "Ten Words" (or Ten Commandments, Aseret HaDibrot) were revealed in the Sinai desert, and they govern Israel – as well as a good part of the world – to this very day.

Moreover, it must be noted that wherever the Israelites wandered in the desert, they were always accompanied by the portable desert Mishkan, or Sanctuary, which is derived from Shekhina, Divine Presence. However, God was not in the Sanctuary; even the greatest expanse of the heavens cannot contain the Divine Presence, declared King Solomon 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 Words" on the Tablets of Stone preserved in the Holy Ark, as well as the ongoing and continuing word of God which He would speak (vedibarti, Exodus 25:22) from between the cherubs on the ends of the Kapporet above the Holy Ark. It was by means of these divine words that even the desert, the midbar – a metaphor for an inhospitable and even alien exile environment which is boiling hot by day, freezing cold by night, and deficient in water which is the very elixir of life – can become transformed into sacred space, the place of the divine word (dibur). And indeed those words from the Desert of Mount Sinai (diburim) succeeded in sanctifying the many Marrakeshes and Vilnas and New Yorks of our wanderings! God's word can transform a desert – any place and every place – into a veritable sanctuary; indeed the world is a midbar waiting to become a dvir (sanctuary) by means of God's dibur, communicated by inspired leaders, dabarim.

Postscript: A Story

Allow me to share with you a story from my previous life (in the exile of the West Side of New York City) which taught me how the word can bring sanctity to the most unlikely of places. In the early 1970s, a disco opened up in a window storefront building on 72nd Street and Broadway. Despite the fact that it was called the Tel Aviv Disco and was owned by

Israelis living in New York, it remained open every night of the year, even Kol Nidrei night. I must have placed at least two dozen calls to the owners to try to persuade them to close at least on the night of Yom Kippur, only to have finally received a message from their secretary informing me that the owners would not speak to rabbis!

During this period, Rabbi Yitzchak Dovid Grossman – a beloved and respected friend who is the rabbi of Migdal HaEmek – spent Shabbat with us at Lincoln Square Synagogue. A recipient of the Israel Prize, he is a charismatic religious leader who is well-known for the many prisoners and other alienated Jews whom he has brought back to religious observance. After a delightful Friday evening meal at my home, replete with inspiring Hasidic melodies and words of Torah, he suggested that we go for a "shpatzir" (Yiddish for leisurely walk).

I tried to explain that the general atmosphere of the West Side streets of Manhattan were hardly conducive to Sabbath sanctity – but to no avail. His steps led us in the direction of 72nd Street and Broadway, right in front of the window revealing the frenzied disco dancers. "Did you ever see a mosquito captured in a glass jar?" he asked me in Yiddish (our language of discourse). "The mosquito moves with all sorts of contortions, and appears to be dancing. In reality, however, the mosquito is gasping for air. That is the situation of those 'dancers' in the disco. They are really gasping for air, struggling in their search for a real Shabbos. Let's go in and show them Shabbos."

Before I could say "Jackie Robinson," he was inside the disco – and as a good host, I felt obliged to follow him. He sported a long beard and side-locks, and was wearing a shtreimel (fur hat) and kapote (silk gabardine), and I was dressed in my Sabbath Prince Albert, kippa and ritual fringes out. As we entered the disco, the band of Israelis immediately stopped playing. I recognized three young men from the synagogue, who seemed totally discombobulated; two ran out covering their faces, and the third tried to explain to me that he wasn't really there, that his mother had had some kind of attack and he thought that her doctor might be at the disco…. Rabbi Grossman began to sing Sabbath melodies. Almost miraculously, the men danced on one side, the women on the other. After about twenty minutes he urged me to speak to them in English. I told them of the magical beauty, the joy, and the love of the Sabbath, and they listened with rapt attention. Rabbi Grossman led them in one more song – and we left.

I cannot tell you that the miracle continued; it didn't take five minutes, and we could hear the resumption of the disco band music. However, before the next Yom Kippur, the Tel Aviv Disco closed down. I don't know why; perhaps because the owners wouldn't speak to rabbis. And for the next two years, at least a dozen young singles joined Lincoln Square Synagogue because they had been inspired by our disco visit, because God's words had the power to transform even a disco into a sanctuary, if only for twenty minutes of eternity…

Shabbat Shalom

Rav Yehudah Hachassid and His Shidduchin

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: A Shidduch Crisis

"My husband's name is Chayim Shelomoh, and an excellent shidduch possibility was just suggested for my daughter. However, the bachur's name, which was originally Shelomoh, was changed to Chayim Shelomoh when he was ill as a child. May we proceed with this shidduch?"

Question #2: Must we turn down this shidduch?

"My wife's name is Rivkah, and we were just suggested an excellent shidduch for my son. However, the girl's name is Esther Rivkah. Must we turn down the shidduch?"

Answer:

Both of these questions relate to rules that are not based on Talmudic sources, but on the writings of Rav Yehudah Hachassid, who prohibited or advised against many potential marriages that are otherwise perfectly acceptable, according to halachah. But before we discuss the writings of Rav Yehudah Hachassid, let us discover who he was, and why his opinion carries so much weight.

Who was Rav Yehudah Hachassid?

Well, to complicate matters a bit, there were two people in Jewish history who were called Rav Yehudah Hachassid. These two individuals lived hundreds of years apart, and, to the best of my knowledge, had no known connection to one another, other than that they were both esteemed Ashkenazic leaders in their respective generations. The Rav Yehudah Hachassid of the seventeenth century, famed as the builder of a shul in the Old City of Jerusalem, now called the Churva shul, spearheaded the first "modern" effort to establish an Ashkenazi community in the holy city. Although this failed attempt had political and practical ramifications that lasted until the middle of the twentieth century, I have never heard him blamed for the blocking of a potential shidduch.

On the other hand, the much earlier Rav Yehudah Hachassid, whose writings and rulings will be discussed in this article, was a great posek and mekubal, whose halachic decisions and advice have been followed extensively by both Ashkenazim and Sefardim.

Rav Yehudah Hachassid, who was born in approximately 4910 (1150), is quoted several times in the Tosafos printed in our Gemara (for example, Tosafos, Bava Metzia 5b, s.v. Dechashid and Kesuvos 18b, s.v. Uvekulei). Rav Yehudah's students included a number of famous rishonim who are themselves Baalei Tosafos, such as the Or Zarua, the Rokeach, the Semag, and the Sefer Haterumah.

Rav Yehudah Hachassid was the head of a select group of mekubalim called the Chassidei Ashkenaz. He authored numerous works on kabbalah and was the author of the poem Anim Zemiros, sung in many shullen at the end of Shabbos davening. Two works of his are intended for use by the common laymen, the Sefer Chassidim and the Tzava'as [the ethical will of] Rav Yehudah Hachassid, and these mention the subject of today's article.

The tzava'ah of Rav Yehudah Hachassid

In his ethical will, Rav Yehudah Hachassid lists 56 practices that he prohibits and/or advises against. Most of these have no source in the Gemara. Why did Rav Yehudah Hachassid prohibit these actions? Although he did not explain his reasons, later authorities assume that these are practices that Rav Yehudah Hachassid considered to be dangerous, based on kabbalah. It is quoted, in the name of Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi (the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, author of Shulchan Aruch Harav and Tanya), that to elucidate one of Rav Yehudah Hachassid's statements in his tzava'ah would require a work the size of the Shelah, a classic of halachah, kabbalah and musar, that is hundreds of pages long.

I am not going to list everything in Rav Yehudah Hachassid's tzava'ah, but, instead, will simply cite some of the practices that he prohibits.

- A man should not marry a woman who has the same name as his mother, nor should he marry a woman whose father has the same name that he has.

Rav Yehudah Hachassid closes by saying that if people violated these instructions, one of the parties with the name in common should change his/her name -- perhaps this will provide some hope. He does not specify what the harm is or what the hope is for.

- Two mechutanim should not have the same name.
- Two mechutanim should not make two shidduchim, a son with a daughter and a daughter with a son.
- One should not marry one's niece, either his brother's daughter or his sister's daughter.
- A father and son should not marry two sisters.
- Two brothers should not marry two sisters, nor should they marry a mother and her daughter.
- A stepbrother and a stepsister should not marry.
- Two married brothers should not live in the same city.

Before we get everyone disturbed, I will share with you that many of these relationships prohibited (or advised against) by Rav Yehudah Hachassid are not recognized as binding by later authorities. For example, the Chofetz Chayim's first rebbitzen was hisstepsister: he married the daughter of his stepfather, who was married to the Chofetz Chayim's widowed mother. Similarly, I know of numerous instances in which two brothers married two sisters, without anyone being concerned about it. And the Tzemach Tzedek of Lubavitch mentions that one need not be concerned about pursuing a shidduch in which the fathers of the chosson and the kallah have the same given name (Shu't Tzemach Tzedek, Even Ha'ezer #143).

Selective service

In most places, the only shidduchin-related rule of Rav Yehudah Hachassid that has been accepted is that a man not marry a woman who has the same given name as his mother, nor should a woman marry a man who has the same name as her father. Why is this rule more accepted than any of the others?

Early poskim note that the custom of being concerned about this was far more widespread than concern about the other prohibitions of Rav Yehudah Hachassid. They propose several reasons to explain why this is true.

One answer is because the Arizal was also concerned about a man marrying a woman whose name is the same as his mother. Yet, there is no evidence of the Ari or other authorities being concerned regarding the other rules of Rav Yehudah Hachassid (see Shu't Mizmor Ledavid of Rav David Pardo, #116, quoted by Sedei Chemed, Volume 7, page 17; Shu't Divrei Chayim, Even Ha'ezer #8).

Another possible reason is that the Chida writes that he, indeed, saw problems result in the marriages of people who ignored this specific prohibition of Rav Yehudah Hachassid.

Rav Chayim Sanzer adds that one should be concerned about this particular practice only because klal Yisroel has accepted as custom to pass up these marriages. To quote him: If the children of Israel are not prophets, they are descended from prophets, and there is an innate understanding that these shidduchin should not be made.

The responsum of the Noda Biyehudah

No discussion of the instructions of Rav Yehudah Hachassid is complete without mentioning a responsum of the Noda Biyehudah, the rav of Prague and posek hador of the eighteenth century. The Noda Biyehudah (Shu't Even Ha'ezer II #79) discusses the following case: A shidduch was suggested for the sister-in-law of a certain Reb Dovid, a close talmid of the Noda Biyehudah, in which the proposed chosson had once had his name changed, because of illness, to the name of the girl's father. The Noda Biyehudah replied to Reb Dovid that generally he does not discuss questions that are not based on sources in Talmud and authorities. Nevertheless, he writes that he will break his usual rules and answer the inquiry.

First, the Noda Biyehudah points out a very important halachic principle: No talmid chacham may dispute any halachic conclusion of the Gemara, whether he chooses to be lenient or stringent, and anyone who does so is not to be considered a talmid chacham. Upon this basis, the Noda Biyehudah notes that we should question the entire tzava'ah of Rav Yehudah Hachassid, since the work forbids numerous practices that run counter to rulings of the Gemara. To quote the Noda Biyehudah, "We find things in Rav Yehudah Hachassid's tzava'ah that are almost forbidden for us to hear." The examples the Noda Biyehudah chooses include:

One should not marry one's sister's daughter. However, the Gemara (Yevamos 62b) rules that it is a mitzvah to do so.

Rav Yehudah Hachassid prohibited a father and son from marrying two sisters, yet we see that the great amora Rav Papa arranged the marriage of his son to his wife's younger sister (Kesubos 52b).

Another example is that Rav Yehudah Hachassid writes that two brothers should not marry two sisters, yet the Gemara (Berachos 44a) writes approvingly of these marriages. Furthermore, the amora, Rav Chisda, arranged for his two daughters to marry two brothers, Rami bar Chamma and Ukva bar Chamma (ibid.).

Explaining Rav Yehudah Hachassid's concern

The Noda Biyehudah continues: "However, out of esteem for Rav Yehudah Hachassid, we must explain that in his great holiness, he realized that the shidduchin he was discouraging would all be bad for his descendants. Therefore, Rav Yehudah Hachassid's comments do not conflict with the Gemara, since he was writing a special ruling for individuals that should not be applied to anyone else." Therefore, Reb Dovid does not need to be concerned about his sister-in-law proceeding with this shidduch.

The Noda Biyehudah presents an additional reason why Reb Dovid does not need to be concerned: Rav Yehudah Hachassid's concerns apply only to birth names or names given to sons at their bris, but do not apply to any name changes that take place afterwards. The Noda Biyehudah rallies proofs that adding or changing a name because of illness can only help a person and cannot hurt. In addition, the Noda Biyehudah reasons that if someone was an appropriate shidduch because of his birth name, changing or adding to his name cannot now make this shidduch prohibited.

Marry a talmid chacham

Aside from the other reasons why the Noda Biyehudah feels that this shidduch can proceed, he adds another rule: It is more important for someone to marry off his daughter to a talmid chacham, which the Gemara says is the most important thing to look for in a shidduch, than to worry oneself about names, a concern that has no source in the Gemara.

At this point, let us examine one of our opening questions:

"My husband's name is Chayim Shelomoh, and an excellent shidduch possibility was just suggested for my daughter. However, the bachur's name, which was originally Shelomoh, was changed to Chayim Shelomoh when he was ill as a child. May we proceed with this shidduch?"

According to the Noda Biyehudah, one may proceed with the shidduch, even if the younger Chayim Shelomoh does not qualify as a talmid chacham and even if they are descended from Rav Yehudah Hachassid, since the name Chayim was not part of his birth name.

Stricter approaches

On the other hand, there are other authorities who are, in fact, concerned about violating the instructions of Rav Yehudah Hachassid and do not mention any of the above heterim (quoted in Sdei Chemed Volume 7, pages 17- 20; Kaf Hachayim, Yoreh Deah 116:125). These authorities supply a variety of reasons why the arguments of the Noda Biyehudah do not apply. As far as the Noda Biyehudah's statement that Rav Yehudah Hachassid could not have banned that which is expressly permitted, or even recommended in the Gemara as a mitzvah, some respond that, although at the time of the Gemara there was no need to be concerned about the kabbalistic problems that these concerns may involve, our physical world has changed (nishtaneh hateva), and there is therefore, currently, a concern of ayin hora (quoted by Sdei Chemed pg. 19).

In conclusion

I leave it to the individual to discuss with his or her posek whether or not to pursue a particular shidduch because of an identical name or any other concern raised by Rav Yehudah Hachassid. Of course, we all realize that the most important factor in finding a shidduch is to daven that Hashem will provide the appropriatematch in the right time.

We will return to a discussion about Rav Yehudah Hachassid and his special rulings in two weeks.

Perceptions

By Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Parshas Bamidbar

What's For Desert?

THE DESERT IS an unforgiving place, unless God is leading you through it with great miracles. To most of the world, a desert is a symbol of death because little grows there and even less may survive. And this is exactly why the Jewish people were made to endure it for 40 years altogether, as an integral part of becoming a Torah nation.

The reason is simple. A desert is ownerless, a place that can be trampled by all. For this reason the desert is a symbol of humility, the key trait for accepting and living by Torah. So much so that we are told that the mountain on which Torah was given, Har Sinai, was chosen over other mountains because it was small and "humble."

This is interesting, since we place such an emphasis on Kavod HaTorah, honoring the Torah. We go to great lengths and have many halachos to protect the honor of Torah. And yet, at the very time we were to receive Torah, God chose the lesser of the possible mountains on which to give it. It's a powerful statement about humility.

The Gemora explains why. Torah flows down to the world from above, and like water, it can only flow from a higher level to a lower one. At least metaphorically. The physical world does not usually defy gravity. The spiritual world is unaffected by it, but the point is the point: you have to be humble to learn Torah.

Do you? The world is filled with people who lack humility but who learn Torah on a regular basis. Or do they? They seem to. Or do they? How can you know? By the effect it has on a person. To the extent that Torah learning makes the person spiritually better, that is the extent to which they have "learned" Torah.

Torah is not just another textbook that you open, read, and put down again. It is not only "just" the word of God. It is a stream of Divine light that flows to a person whether they are reading from an actual Sefer Torah, a Chumash, a Gemora, or a sefer based upon it. The Source is God Himself, the medium is whatever a person learns, and the recipient is the person who can be a vessel for it.

But if you pour water into a full cup, the water will run off. If you pour anything into a container that is closed, nothing will enter it. You can just keep pouring but it will not change the end result, just make a bigger mess. The same thing is true about Torah as well. A person who lacks humility will deflect the kedushah of the Torah they learn to the outside world, feeding the Klipos and making evil stronger.

But there may be more to humility than meets the eye, which may be the lesson of the following unusual statement:

When Rebi Yehudah HaNasi died, humility and fear of sin ceased. Rav Yosef said to the tanna: Do not teach humility, for there is still one: me. (Sotah 49b)

What a seemingly very unhumble thing to say. Usually humble people are the last to say anything good about themselves, let alone that they are humble. If you heard someone say this about themself, what would you conclude about them? It is the Torah that tells us about Moshe Rabbeinu's great humility, not Moshe himself.

But if you had asked Moshe who the humblest person in the world is, he would have told you that he was. But it would not have been self-praise at all, just a statement of fact. Humility does not mean you have to lie about your greatness, just that you realize its source, God Himself. Therefore, when you talk about it, it is as if you are referring to someone else, even though you know you are talking about yourself.

Which is very hard to do. It is very hard to talk positively about yourself and not feel some sense of pride inside, even if only a little. But to the extent that one feels pride is the extent to which they, as a vessel, are filled with something else other than Torah. That sense of pride is not lifeless like a desert, but alive like an inhabited city, which is crowded with other people and personalities.

That is fine, if being your own physical self rather than a conduit for the light of God is more important to you as your soul yearns to be. We think that giving up our pride to serve God takes away from our sense of self and therefore, our ability to enjoy life. After all, how exciting is a humble desert compared to a proud city?

Not very exciting at all. Until that is, God transforms the desert and makes it bloom beyond any level of life a man-made city could ever hope to achieve, in this world and the next one. Then all of a sudden, life and death seem to change places.

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Bamidbar

Counted Out

The Book of Numbers begins just that way – with many numbers. It counts the Jews who were in the desert and assigns unique divisions for each of the tribes. Every tribe has its own flag and position among the great camp of Israel. They are strategically placed around the Mishkan, and grouped accordingly. This division is somewhat troubling. Why isn't there a concept of a great melting pot under one flag? Moreover, the singling out of the tribe of Levi raises more questions. "Bring the tribe of Levi close and have them stand before Ahron and they shall serve him (Leviticus 3:6). The Torah relates the specific tasks of the descendents of Levi and also warns the stranger, the ordinary Israelite, against attempting to join in those tasks. Why is there further division in the ranks of Jews? Why can't the Israelite do the task of the Kohen, and the Kohen the task of the Levi, and the Levi the task of the Israelite?

The great Arturo Toscanini was conducting Beethoven's Symphony #3 back in the late 1930s with the NBC Symphony orchestra. The outdoor concert was held at City University's Lewisson Stadium and was well attended. The famed trumpeter, Harry Glanz, was going to play the offstage trumpet, an integral part of the production of this piece.

People had flocked to hear the great trumpeter under the baton of the even more accomplished Toscanini. Glanz positioned himself in a corner about 50 feet behind the stage ready to blast his notes upon cue. As the recital led up to that moment Toscanini held his baton high, waiting to hear the sharp blasts of Glanz's horn. They never came. All he saw was a burly security guard wrestling with the hapless musician on the grass behind the stage.

The guard was pointing to the stage. "You fool!" he was shouting, "what do you think you're doing blowing that horn back here? Don't you see there's a concert going on up there?"

Not everybody who wants to can be up on the stage. In the concert of the Almighty, every player has his designated position that makes the symphony much more beautiful. I have a friend who travels the United States and stops for minyanim all across the country. "Often," he exclaims, "when they ask, 'Is there a Kohen in the house?' I have the urge to go up there and pretend that I am a Kohen. I always wanted to know what it's like being called up first!"

Fortunately, he, like most of us, understands that every person in the nation of Israel, whether man or woman has a unique role to play. Sometimes roles are played from the inside, sometimes from the outside, nevertheless, the offstage trumpeters are just as vital as the onstage ones. And if we rush the stage to perform out of sync, we can ruin the beautiful harmony of a carefully orchestrated concert.

The Israelite has the mitzvos that the Kohen cannot perform. He may visit the dying and assist in the burial of any deceased. It is the Israelite who gives the tithes and supports the poor. The Kohen and Levi inherit no land from which they could perform myriad commandments. True ,

the Israelite cannot serve in the Temple, but his trumpeting may resound as loud as his brother's. As long as he plays it in the right position.
Dedicated by Bernard and Tova Fuchs in memory of Chana Mindel Fuchs
Good Shabbos
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Bamidbar: She's family
In Jewish law, a maidservant isn't a lowly slave.
Dr. Elliot Resnick
Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch
"Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families…" (Numbers 1:2).
The Hebrew word for "family" is mishpacha, which comes from the root shefach. Interestingly, the word for "maidservant" – shifchah – also comes from this root. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch writes that this linguistic connection teaches us that the "person who, in the non-Jewish point of view, stands at the very lowest social grade is raised, in the Jewish point of view, to a member of the family."
There's more. Every kesubah (Jewish marriage contract) declares that a husband must provide his wife three items (food, clothing, and intimate attention). Where does this obligation appear in the Torah? In the context of a maidservant whose father sold her into slavery (Exodus 21:10)! In other words, when the Torah "wants to lay down…the elementary rights of the daughters of its people, it picks out for its example a woman of the very lowest social grade, the child of a beggar, of a man who…to save his child and himself from starvation, has to sell her as a slave."
The "Torah takes this wife, and sets her beside an ordinary bride – a girl married out of a free rich family – and proclaims the great maxim: 'Not by one hairbreadth may the treatment of the one differ from that given to the other.'" Amazing!
This command is hardly self-evident. Exodus 21:10 concerns a man who marries his father's maidservant (whom his father rejected for himself). He, unlike his father, never knew this woman as a free individual. He always knew her as a slave. Moreover, the verse informs us that he subsequently married a second woman – a regular, free Jewess – in addition to his "maidservant wife."
It would only be natural, then, for him to treat his first wife with a measure of disrespect or neglect. But the Torah has such a high regard for the inherent worth of each individual that it warns him to treat his "maidservant wife" exactly as he does his "regular wife"!
A shifchah – a maidservant – isn't a lowly individual in the eyes of the Torah. She's mishpachah. And when she marries, she's an honored wife.
Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) – head of the Jewish community in Frankfurt, Germany for over 35 years – was a prolific writer whose ideas, passion, and brilliance helped save German Jewry from the onslaught of modernity.
Elliot Resnick, PhD, is the host of "The Elliot Resnick Show" and the editor of an upcoming work on etymological explanations in Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's commentary on Chumash.

Office of the Chief Rabbi Mirvir
Why the wilderness? D'var Torah for Parshat Bamidbar.
Surely the Torah didn't need to use that term 'Bemidbar' and yet at the commencement of this week's portion which is at the beginning of a new book of the Torah, we are told 'Bemidbar Sinai'.
It was not just 'in Sinai', but 'in the wilderness of Sinai' that the tent of meeting was constructed and where the Torah was given.
Indeed, nearly every single year Bemidbar is read on the Shabbat prior to the festival of Shavuot, which recalls the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.
So why is the wilderness of such great significance for us?
So many of our commentators give beautiful reasons and I want to share with you just two.
The first is that a wilderness is a symbol of humility, it doesn't contain much to boast about, and similarly for us to acquire Torah, to appreciate it, to be able and responsible representatives of a Torah way of life, we need to have humility.
We need to walk in the footsteps of Moses, our greatest teacher, who was 'anav mikol adam' – he was more humble than anyone else.
Then there is a second message conveyed by Bemidbar.
A desert is 'hefker', it belongs to the entire nation. There is no private property within it, it is there for everybody, and so too the Torah was given in a wilderness to let us know Torah belongs to everyone. It's not the exclusive property of any one segment or group of Jewish people.
And that is such a strong message at this time of the year as we approach the festival of Shavuot.
Just as at the Seder of Pesach, we recognise that the Torah is given to four different types of Jewish people, those who are wise, those who let us down, those who are simple, those who do not even know how to ask – we include everybody.
So too, at this time, we recognise that Torah is there for absolutely every one of us.
So therefore, as we approach Shavuot this year, let us always remember to maintain that deep sense of humility and never to forget that Torah is there for absolutely every one of us.
'Vetein chelkeinu b'toratecha' – let every single person say 'I want my portion in the Torah which belongs to us all'.
Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand
Parshas Bamidbar
Pagiel and Achira Took on Aliases to Remind Themselves They Were in a Bad Neighborhood
These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1338 — Can You Make The Second Day of Shavuos Early? Can American Mohel in Israel Perform A Bris on the Second Day of Shavuos. Good Shabbos
In Parshas Bamidbar, the Torah not only specifies the census of Bnei Yisrael when they came into Eretz Yisrael, it also specifies the "seder hadegalim" – the configuration in which they would travel. The twelve shevatim (tribes) were divided up into four "machanos" (camps), which were all positioned around the Mishkan.
Each machaneh (camp) included three shevatim. Machaneh Don (the camp of Don) included the shevet (tribe) of Don and also the shevet of Asher, led by Pagiel ben Achran and the shevet of Naftali, led by Achira ben Einan. These two princes, from the shevatim of Asher and Naftali, had rather strange names. We have never come across anyone named either Pagiel, Achira, Achran, or Einan! None less a personage than Rabbeinu Ephraim (one of the Ba'alei Tosefos) comments that these four rather strange names were not the names given to either of these princes or their fathers at their respective brissim. He says that they were all adopted names.
Why did they adopt these names? Rabbeinu Ephraim explains that Machaneh Don was situated at the north side of the travel configuration. It is known that Shevet Don brought along an idol, known as Pesel Michah, from the time they left Mitzrayim, until they entered Eretz Yisrael (and even after they entered Eretz Yisrael). Thus, there was an Avodah Zarah in Machaneh Don! The unfortunate neighbors of Shevet Don were Shevet Asher and Shevet Naftali. These two shevatim were none too pleased that they had a neighbor who was travelling with an idol!
Consider a situation where you know that your next-door neighbor is a drug dealer. How will that make you feel? It is not like they had the option to pick up and move because Hashem put them there! The princes of Shevet Naftali and Shevet Asher were very afraid that this proclivity for idols would rub off on them and their shevatim. Therefore, they changed their names to remind themselves of the fact that they were living in a very hostile spiritual environment.
The prince of Asher called himself Pagi-el, which is a short form of the statement "Pagah bi El" (G-d put me in a bad situation). Son of Achran – Achran means a person who corrupts Bnai Yisroel. He wished to

announce “I am Pagi-el ben Achran: Hashem put me in this situation where I am in proximity to the people of Shevet Don, who are ocher es Yisrael – they corrupt the rest of Klal Yisrael. He gave himself this name to constantly remind himself and others “I have very bad neighbors and if I don’t watch myself, I am going to wind up like that.” The prince of Naftali called himself Achi-Rah, literally “My Bad Brother,” as if to say “I am next to my bad brother.” Son of Einan – etymologically related to the anan (cloud), which expelled sinners.

In other words, in order to make sure that their defenses would not slip, they changed their names. This is how they called themselves and had other people call them – to remind them all that they had to be on their toes and be constantly aware of their spiritually corrosive environment, so as not to be influenced by their neighbors.

There are three lessons to be learned from this teaching of Rabbeinu Ephraim:

The first lesson is that a person is affected by his neighbors and his neighborhood. A person can live in the best of cities but if his particular neighbors or neighborhood is not up to snuff, it eventually affects him.

The second lesson is that a person should take action when he realizes that he finds himself in a challenging spiritual position. A person should not have the attitude “Okay. Too bad. I am in a bad neighborhood.” These two princes changed their names as a constant reminder. Time will tell whether such action will be effective or not. But at least they were not passive about it. They made an attempt to build up their spiritual defenses.

The third very important and powerful lesson is brought out by a famous schmooze from Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, zt”l:

The Gemara [Sanhedrin 19b] notes that a certain person in Tanach is called both Palti and Paltiel. Rabbi Yochanan says that his real name was Palti but he was also called Paltiel because G-d removed him from doing an aveira (Palto Kel min ha’aveira). What did Palti do? He implanted a sword between himself and his wife (who was really previously given as a wife to Dovid) in their bedroom and said ‘Whoever will engage in this matter shall be pierced with this sword.”

Without going into the halachic lomdus here, King Shaul had previously promised his daughter Michal to Dovid, but Shaul held that she was not really Dovid’s halachic wife. He felt free to give her in marriage to Palti. Palti was in no position to reject the king’s offer to marry his daughter, but he felt that he was now living with a married woman! He recognized that this was a nisayon (temptation) that would be hard to withstand over the course of time. Thus, on the night of his marriage he dramatically stuck a sword between their two beds as if to say “If I touch this woman, I deserve to be killed”. Therefore, the entire time he remained with her, he never touched her.

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz asks: What did sticking the sword in the ground accomplish for him? Just as he stuck it in the ground, he could pull it out of the ground next week or next month! Rav Chaim Shmulevitz explains that Palti was a very smart man. He knew that on this first night, he was fully conscious that he was in a bedroom with an eishes ish (a married woman) and someone who commits adultery with a married woman is deserving of death by the sword. But he also knew that with the passage of time, a person can easily start rationalizing: Maybe Shaul is in fact correct! Maybe halachically she is not married to Dovid. Therefore, maybe I am just torturing myself for nothing.

That is human nature. After a while, we begin to rationalize. So Palti ben Layish placed a permanent symbolic reminder in his bedroom of how he felt the first night when he knew what was right and what was wrong. The sword represented how he felt when he was not overcome with temptation by any ulterior motives to rationalize and reason. Palti knew that without such a symbol, his Yetzer HaRah, after many days and weeks and years, could very well wear him down. The sword was his reminder: “This is how I felt THEN and that is the TRUTH.”

We can say the same thing regarding Pagiel ben Achran or Achira ben Einan. They called themselves these names as a reminder: We are next to Shevet Don. Shevet Don has this Pesel Micha. I don’t really want to be in their neighborhood. They were afraid that after a while, they would succumb to the bad influence of Pesel Michah. So as soon as they moved into the neighborhood, they changed their names: We knew the emes when we entered the situation, and we want to have a perpetual reminder for the rest of our time in that situation!

The Lesson of a Census Anomaly

Rav Chatzkel Levenstein, zt”l, once noted a strange fact in the census of Klal Yisrael, which demographically does not make any sense. Shevet Don had an adult male population of 62,700. They were the largest tribe. Shevet Binyomin, on the other hand, had a population of 35,000. When we look back to Parshas Vayigash and see the number of grandchildren Yaakov had from each of his sons, Binyamin had ten sons and Don had a single son. Not only did Don have only one son, but he was disabled. Chushim ben Don, Chazal say, was deaf. If we were to have taken bets regarding who would be the bigger tribe upon the Exodus from Egypt 210 years later, any sound statistical prediction would of course predict that Binyomin would be the larger of the two shevatim.

And yet, at the end of the day, Don had 62,700 adult male descendants in this census and Binyomin had 35,000. Rav Chatzkel derived the following lesson from this: A person like Don, who knows he has only one child, and a handicapped one at that, turns to the Ribono shel Olam and asks: “How am I going to survive? How am I going to see future generations?” In such a situation, a person goes to the Being who controls everything and pours his heart out. A person with ten sons will be confident and say “Let’s do the math!” My grandchildren and great grandchildren will increase exponentially! Such a person does not daven as much. When someone feels confident, he feels that he can rely “on the data”. There are times, however, that the “data” does not yield the projected result.

That is the lesson of this census anomaly. The lesson is that we never know!

There is a similar story mentioned by the Chofetz Chaim:

In Galicia, the custom was that on Motzai Shabbos (right before Ma’ariv), they would recite Tehillim. A fellow from outside of the city came into shul then and saw that the people were saying Tehillim. He noticed one fellow in particular, in the corner of the shul, pouring his heart out. As he recited his Tehillim, he was crying and banging on the wall. He was literally in a different world! The visitor was so inspired by this scene that he also started saying Tehillim with great inspiration and intensity. After Ma’ariv, he went over to this fellow in the corner and said to him, “I saw you saying Tehillim. It was very inspiring to me. You were crying your eyes out. Do you have a problem?”

The fellow in the corner responded, “Yes. I have a problem. I have a daughter who is not married. The whole week, I am on the road doing business and I am not at home (as was common in many parts of Europe). When I am on the road, my daughter’s situation is “out of sight, out of mind.” But when I come home for Shabbos and I see how broken my daughter is, it really hurts me. That is why I pour my heart out, because I don’t know how I can make a shidduch for her. I have no money!” I don’t have any idea how I can make it happen, so automatically I turn to the Ribono shel Olam!”

The visitor said, “Do you know what? I also have no money. But I have a son. Listen – you have no money and I have no money. Let’s make a shidduch between our children.” And so it was. The daughter of the fellow in the corner married the visitor’s son. That shidduch produced four sons. One of them was Rav Aryeh Leib HaKohen Heller (author of the Ketzos HaChoshen, the Avnei Miluim, and the Shev Shmaytza). The second son was Rav Yehuda Heller Kahana (author of the Kuntres HaSefeikos). The third son was Rav Mordechai Heller, who was a Rav in Chodorov. The fourth son was Rav Chaim HaKohen Heller. So, from this poor shidduch came, among others, the Ketzos HaChoshen. People do not study the Talmudic masechtos in Seder Nezikin without the Ketzos, and people do not learn Seder Nashim without the Avnei Miluim and people do not learn Yoreh Deah without the Shev Shmaytza. Likewise, people do not learn Seder Nezikin without the Kuntres HaSefeikos.

This goes to prove the old maxim: We never know!

Parshas Bamidbar
Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Yosef ben Yaakov.

Making it Count

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Patrilineal Descent?

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

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

This principle needs clarification. What does it mean that if you teach someone Torah it is as if you gave birth to him? Chazal don't exaggerate or take poetic license; perhaps you taught them some information or gave them some life skills, but how is this akin to giving birth to someone? Additionally, Moshe taught Torah to all of Bnei Yisroel; why are the children of Aharon singled out? This principle should apply to anyone who was at Mount Sinai.

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

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

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

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

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

לע"נ
שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
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PARSHAT NASO - Intro to Sefer Bamidbar

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

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

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

So why does the Torah record them together?

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So what's going on in Sefer Bamidbar?

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

DIVIDE & CONQUER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How about Sefer Bamidbar?

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

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

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

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

To clarify this distinction, here are a few examples:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ALMOST LIKE SEFER SHMOT

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

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

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

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

INTENTIONAL 'INTERRUPTIONS'

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

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

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

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

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

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

RAMBAN'S INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How about the MITZVOT L'DOROT of Sefer Bamidbar?

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

WHERE DO THEY ALL BELONG?

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

Take for example:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE 'PSHAT' OF 'DRASH'!

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

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

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

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

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

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

SHCHINA IN THE CAMP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

C) Parshat Sotah (5:11-31)

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

D) Parshat Nazir (6:1-21)

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

E) Birkat Kohanim (6:22-27)

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

TRAVELLING WITH THE "SHCHINA"

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

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

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

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

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Parshot Bamidbar and Naso: Introduction to Sefer Bamidbar

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

PART I

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

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

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

MEANINGS OF P-K-D IN THIS SEFER:

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

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

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

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

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

P-K-D AS COUNTING OR LISTING:

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

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

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

2) Counting of all males of fighting age:

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

3) Listing of the degalim:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

P-K-D AS APPOINTING:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

P-K-D AS PUNISHMENT:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PART II:

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

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

P-K-D: SOME EXAMPLES:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE THEMES OF THE HUMASH HA-PEKKUDIM:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shabbat Shalom