

[From Efraim Goldstein efraimg@aol.com]
Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet
Bamidbar 5769

Tonight, Friday evening, May 22, we will count day 42, which is 6 weeks and 2 days of the omer.

יום ירושלים

THE HOLIDAY: YOM YERUSHALAYIM 5768

Yeshivat Har Etzion

The Western Wall and "Western" Civilization

Based on a sicha by Harav Yehuda Amital

Adapted by Dov Karoll

Those of us who experienced the reunification of Yerushalayim on 28 Iyyar, 5727 (7 June, 1967) find it difficult to describe. It was one of the greatest experiences of my life. I was at home; I had been exempted from fighting because I was above forty. I tried to help the elderly, to make myself useful during those difficult days, days of trembling and fear.

Suddenly, on 28 Iyyar, we heard the Kol Yisrael radio station: they were playing "Yerushalayim shel Zahav," "Jerusalem of Gold," in the middle of the war. A little while later, not at the regular time, there was a newsflash: "Jerusalem has been liberated!" The announcer, Moshe Choval, who was not religious, began to read Tehillim 122, "I rejoiced when they said to me: 'Let us go to God's house.'" It stunned me that they were reading this psalm on the radio!

I do not have the words to describe that experience. I do remember that Mincha that day was one of my greatest prayers ever. A neighbor of mine, a Torah scholar, told me: "This is a revealed miracle!" I do not know if it was a revealed miracle or a hidden miracle, but I know how strongly I felt it.

The ideas and emotions of that day must inform my thoughts about the Israeli government's economic plan. This plan, espousing austerity for the sake of economic growth, stems from an ideology of globalization. Market forces, privatization, individualism — these are its buzzwords. What lies at the foundation of this ideology?

I am sure you have seen at recent weddings that there are some people who do not dance in the circle, but dance on their own. I saw a wedding where there were 100 boys, each one dancing on his own. It is aesthetically pleasing, but what is going on here? How can a celebration such as this devolve into individuals executing fancy dance steps? The catchphrase is "Al titarev," "Don't get involved." Why dance in an unnatural circle, hands clasped, arms linked? Let nature run its course, let each individual express himself, and you will see how well it comes out.

This is the ideology of globalization: "Al titarev, let market forces run their course, don't talk about social justice. The rich will get richer and the poor will disappear; let them die of starvation, and whoever is left will be wealthy."

This is the philosophy of privatization: why should the state get involved in the personal lives of its citizens? In the Knesset, we have 120 of the cr me de la cr me, the best of our nation, and what they say is the law! Why should the Supreme Court get involved when we have these elected sages to who make decisions? Why would you interfere? We need economic growth.

Even the "spirituality" of our time gives its imprimatur to this attitude. These are the philosophies that backpackers bring back from India: they do not speak of tzedek (justice) at all! "People should die quietly and not make noise." They do not speak about tzedek and uprightness, because everything is about finding yourself, individualism. This is enlightenment? This lies behind the idolatry that goes around today: "Go with nature; don't get involved."

How nice is it for everyone to do whatever he wants! On the Internet and cable television, everyone watches whatever he wants, whenever he wants. Freedom, privatization — behind all this is the notion: "Let nature run its course - it's so beautiful! Why would you interfere?" Perhaps it is natural, but all idolatry comes from nature. This is New Age philosophy, dressed up in a suit as free-market capitalism. "If everyone has freedom, if everyone does what we want, then you will see," says the finance minister, "there will be growth. Give the wealthy bank manager a little more, and he will work harder."

What does that have to do with the Kotel ha-Ma'aravi (Western Wall), the ancient remnant of our Temple site, liberated on 28 Iyyar? Let us think back to Avraham Avinu, the first man to be commanded regarding circumcision, who almost sacrifices his son upon the Temple Mount, Mount Moriyya. Circumcision is a perfection of the natural; in the Midrash, Rabbi Akiva tells Turnus Rufus (Tanchuma Tazria 7) that nature has negative aspects, such as wild animals, poisonous fruits. Human beings must perfect nature, and this is not blasphemy, but the highest fulfillment of our God-given mission.

I wish to develop this concept further. In Moreh Ha-Nevukhim (III:45), the Rambam cites a gemara from Tractate Yoma (which we do not have in our version), wherein Avraham Avinu picks the ma'arav (west) of Mount Moriyya for the future site of the Holy of Holies, because "the Divine Presence is in the ma'arav" (Bava Batra 25a-b). This is because the Sun, the ultimate symbol of nature, rises in the east, and its worship was then popular. Avraham Avinu chooses to turn to the west, turning his back on the sun, which is antithetical to nature. Yechezkel (8:16) decries the Jews who turn their backs to the Temple, turning to the east, bowing down to the Sun. They defy the memory of their ancestor Avraham, the innovator of a new approach to the world.

We see that letting nature follow its course is not a new idea; it is the oldest form of turning away from God. The refrain is: "Return to nature; let people do what they want." Now, psychology speaks this way, arguing that shame is bad, an invention of religion; instead, we should stick with nature. This is the ideology of the new economic plan; remove regulations and benefits, and the economy will naturally grow. If the poor complain, the cognoscenti murmur, "They don't know that there will be growth; they will benefit eventually..."

As we stand here, almost 4,000 years after Avraham Avinu, the urgency of his message has not dimmed. We must take our cue from him, and look to the ma'arav, turning our backs on the cruelty and indifference of the natural world, embracing the obligation and involvement of the world of faith. That is the universal message we still get from the Kotel ha-Ma'aravi.

May God grant us the merit to rebuild the Temple, so His Presence may once again rest in the Holy of Holies — in the ma'arav.

(This sicha was delivered on Yom Yerushalayim, 5763 [2003].)

Jerusalem Post :: Friday, May 22, 2009

DOING FAVORS :: Rabbi Berel Wein

There is a concept of charity that is pretty paramount in Jewish life and law. The halacha even prescribes the minimum and sometimes even the maximum amounts to be donated to charity. Charity in this sense encompasses support of Torah institutions and scholars, donations directly to the needy and support of other well-established educational, social and health related institutions.

We are all aware of the continuing various drives and needs of such organizations and individuals. However, this charitable giving, vital and important as it is in its own right is not the full gambit of the Jewish concept and value of chesed – kindness to others. The word chesed itself indicates a breaking down of barriers between people, an ability to somehow relate to another's feelings, and mental and spiritual needs.

Thus when the prophet demands of us to love to do acts of chesed he is not only speaking about charitable donations of wealth and goods, he is also speaking about a donation of time, attitudes and creating a sense of empathy one with another. Home hospitality is an example of the fact that it is sometimes much more convenient to pay for someone's hotel lodging than having that person stay over in one's house.

It then becomes an act of charity – not to be minimized – but it is not yet an act of true chesed. For chesed requires and demands personal involvement with others and oftentimes in life people find it difficult to become involved. Human beings by nature are reticent about breaking down such barriers. Therefore the Torah goes out of its way, so to speak, to impress upon Jews the necessity to perform acts of chesed. Chesed somehow is against our inborn nature.

Part of this reticence is that no one wishes to be seen as a naïve patsy that can easily be taken advantage of. Therefore when someone asks a favor from us, not money but just a favor – pick up my mail or groceries, etc. – we have a natural tendency to refuse because of our vulnerability to exploitation by others. There is a voice within us that says "Why should I do you a favor? When have you ever done something for me?"

The Torah wishes to break us of thinking in such a mode. One is not allowed even to do a favor for someone else and at the same time remind that person that when the circumstances were reversed the other person refused to do the favor. Thus chesed becomes a very demanding goal. It

requires a revamping of attitudes towards others and a reworking of our individual personalities.

The Talmud sees that wishing others a good morning is an act of *chesed* that has the potential of lengthening one's life span. We do not often think of a friendly greeting in that vein but the Talmud views this ordinary act of sociability to be of cosmic importance. The Mussar movement placed such seemingly small gestures of sociability and concern for the feelings and well being of others at the forefront of its definition of Jewish ethical values. Being a good Jew meant being able to do favors for others without a feeling of resentment and reluctance. Not an easy task.

Many schools have instituted *chesed* programs wherein the students are required to help out at appointed times of the week to assigned people and groups. In an unguarded moment, a number of such students over the years have complained to me about being 'coerced.' The program instead of training these young people to love helping had a completely opposite effect upon them.

Coercion rarely breeds acceptance within the soul and mind of the coerced person. Very few good and believing Communists were created in Stalin's gulag or Chairman Mao's retraining camps. *Chesed* is basically a habit learned at home and emphasized in the general society. Here is Israel where the prevailing fear amongst all is not to be considered a 'freier' - a naïve simpleton who can be taken advantage of - *chesed* has a difficult struggle many times to burst forth.

Good defensive driving and giving consideration to others on the road, even to the idiot who is trying to get back in your lane is an ultimate act of *chesed*. Our father Avraham and our mother Sarah built the Jewish people on the pillar of kindness to others. The world itself is built on this idea of kindness. So we actually do ourselves a favor when we do a favor for others.

Shabat shalom.

Weekly Parsha :: BAMIDBAR :: Rabbi Berel Wein

In this week's parsha, the opening one of the book of Bamidbar itself, the Torah resumes the narrative of the story of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai which it left off - with a few exceptions - in the middle of the book of Shemot. The Torah begins this new phase of narrative with a recording of the count and numbers of the Jewish people and its individual tribes.

All commentators note that the numbers here are eerily about the same for all later counts of the Jewish people recorded later in this book. Though forty years will have passed and many momentous events will have occurred, the population figures for the people of Israel remain pretty constant. There are many reasons posited for this phenomenon - a low birth rate in the desert, the death of an entire generation not living past sixty, wars and plagues, etc.

Nevertheless, the lack of growth in numbers over the forty year span is noteworthy and seemingly exceptional. One can already see in it the harbinger of the words of Dvarim - 'I have not chosen you because you are many for in fact you are the smallest of all peoples.'

Certainly our experiences in the long exile and hostile Diaspora have proven the accuracy of this statement. Persecution, pogroms, Holocausts, assimilation and malnutrition, a high infant mortality rate, poverty and despair have all combined to inhibit any true proportionate growth in our numbers. Jewish population has only tripled since Roman times while world population has increased more than forty fold over that same period of time.

I would think that in a world that is willing to eliminate Jews by all sorts of means, it would seem logical and imperative for Jews to attempt to be more numerous. The low birth rate among Jews who are not yet part of the traditional observant Jewish world is a very worrisome fact.

All of the great ideas of Judaism that continue to influence the entire world nevertheless require human physical bodies. Judaism is certain to vanish without the presence of actual living Jews who advance its causes and live its lifestyle. Judaism has shown throughout its history that numbers are certainly not everything. But on the other hand they are also certainly something.

The Talmud teaches us that out of a thousand students perhaps only one achieves greatness and leadership. But without the thousand the one will also never appear. The current trends of conversion to Judaism and of *baalei teshuva* returning to live a traditional Jewish life are heartening. But so to speak this is "outside" growth. The real key to Jewish survival and vibrancy is "internal" growth.

A stronger birth rate and a stable home life, wise parenting and a commitment to marriage and family can contribute greatly to the development of this necessary "internal" growth. Individually, no one can instruct someone else how to live one's life. But setting a sense of national priorities and extolling it as the norm in a Jewish society will certainly help the Jewish people demographically and spiritually.

Shabat shalom

TORAH WEEKLY—Parshat Bamidbar

For the week ending 23 May 2009 / 28 Iyyar 5769

from Ohr Somayach | www.ohr.edu

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

OVERVIEW

The Book of Bamidbar - "In the desert" - begins with G-d commanding Moshe to take a census of all men over age twenty - old enough for service. The count reveals just over 600,000. The *levi'im* are counted separately later because their service will be unique. They will be responsible for transporting the Mishkan and its furnishings and assembling them when the nation encamps. The 12 Tribes of Israel, each with its banner, are arranged around the Mishkan in four sections: east, south, west and north. Since Levi is singled out, the tribe of Yosef is split into two tribes, Ephraim and Menashe, so there will be four groups of three. When the nation travels, they march in a formation similar to the way they camp. A formal transfer is made between the first-born and the *levi'im*, whereby the *levi'im* take over the role the first-born would have had serving in the Mishkan if not for the sin of the golden calf. The transfer is made using all the 22,000 surveyed *levi'im* from one month old and up. Only *levi'im* between 30 and 50 will work in the Mishkan. The remaining first-born sons are redeemed with silver, similar to the way we redeem our first-born today. The sons of Levi are divided into three main families, Gershon, Kehat and Merari (besides the *kohanim* - the special division from Kehat's family). The family of Kehat carried the menorah, the table, the altar and the holy ark. Because of their utmost sanctity, the ark and the altar are covered only by Aharon and his sons, before the *levi'im* prepare them for travel.

INSIGHTS

The Good Book "In the desert" (1:1)

This week we start reading the Book of Bamidbar/Numbers. The Hebrew name "Bamidbar" means "in the desert". Why was the Torah given in the desert?

The desert is the archetype of desolation, the antithesis of life and activity. The symbol of civilization, of the flow and vitality of life, is the city. A city consists of houses, and the houses, stones.

The words of a sentence are like stones. Just as each stone by itself is devoid of life but when combined together into a house they form a setting for life and vitality, so too are the letters of a word. When left by themselves they radiate no light or life. They are merely lifeless stones. But when they are built into words and sentences, sayings and utterances, they radiate the light of intellect that infuses life into man, that leads him and guides him.

"With the word of G-d the heavens were made." The entire world was created with the combination of the letters of the Hebrew *aleph-beit*. The letters and the words are spread out and dispersed over the whole face of the earth.

We have a choice. If, through these letters and words, we recognize G-d in the world; if they are like beads of a necklace revealing the G-dly thread that weaves the world into One, then the world is no longer a desert of desolation but a populous city vibrant with life and purpose.

However, if we fail to comprehend the writing of the Divine Hand, if we make no effort to assemble the letters of existence into words and sentences, then the world remains a desolate wilderness.

Picture two people reading the same book. One reads with insight and understanding; the other spews forth a jumble of letters and words without grasp or comprehension. The first reader kindles the light of wisdom that is in the words and he brings them to life. The second leaves behind him a trail of dead stones.

The world is a large book. Fortunate is he who knows how to read and understand it.

Sources: Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin in Torah U'Moadim

Written and compiled by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Rabbi Yissocher Frand on Parshas Bamidbar

Rallying Round The Flag

In the beginning of Parshas Bamidbar [2:2], the pasuk [verse] says, "The Children of Israel shall encamp, each man by his flag (banner) according to the insignias of their fathers' household..." In addition to the census that begins the Book of Bamidbar, the Torah describes the method and order by which the Children of Israel traveled in the Wilderness. The 12 Tribes were divided into four camps. Each camp had its own flag. Today there are some who might think that the idea of a flag is a Gentile concept. However, we see that on the contrary, this idea has roots in the Torah. Each tribe had its own flag and each of the four camps had its own flag.

The Medrash in Bamidbar Rabbah states that the Almighty demonstrated great love for the nation of Israel by making them flags like those of the ministering angels, so that they might be easily recognizable. "And from where do we know," the Medrash continues, "that this was such a great demonstration of love for the Jewish people?" The Medrash cites the pasuk in Shir HaShirim [2:4]: "He brought me to the chamber of Torah delights and clustered my encampments about Him in love." (Heviani l'beis hayayin v'Diglo alai ahavah).

The Medrash further states that when G-d revealed Himself on Mt. Sinai, there were 22 myriads of angels with him and all of the angels had flags (as is written -- "Dagul m'revava" [Shir HaShirim 5:10]). When the Jews saw that the angels had flags, they too had a strong desire for flags. They said "If only we too could have flags like the angels." G-d then swore to them that the time would come when they too would have flags. That time came in Parshas Bamidbar, when the tribes and encampments were each assigned flags (degalim).

A flag is a very physical item. Angels are entirely spiritual. Why would angels need flags? Furthermore, what was the strong desire that the Jews had for flags? The Nesivos Shalom writes that flags demonstrate the mission (tachlis) of every single group. This is true. We are not necessarily very conscious of the military, but think about it: The army has its own flag, the navy has its own flag, the air force has its own flag. Every branch of the service has its own flag. Every flag somehow identifies what the unit or group is all about.

When Chazal say the angels came down with flags, it is a way of saying that every angel has its own mission and purpose of existence. The flag demonstrates what the angel is all about. This also explains the tremendous passion that Klal Yisrael had for flags. When the Jews saw the flags that proclaimed that every angel had a mission and purpose they proclaimed "Halevai (if only) we too would have such flags!"

Is there anything greater that a person wants out of life other than to know what his 'tafkid' (mission) is and what his purpose is and what he should do with his life? They strongly desired something which would testify to the fact that each of them had a defined purpose, as was the case with the angels. The Almighty responded "Yes. Every tribe will have its flag. Every camp will have its flag. "Even though physically, every Jew does not walk around with his own personal flag, he does have his 'tafkid' (mission). He has his purpose (tachlis). That is what the flags are all about.

This is perhaps why Parshas Bamidbar always precedes Shavuot. The Halacha teaches: "Manu V'atzru" - Count then observe the Holiday of Atzeres. First experience Parshas Bamidbar and then experience Shavuot.

One of the conditions of receiving the Torah was that "Israel encamped (singular verb) opposite the mountain." When the Almighty saw that Israel rejected disputes and loved one another, He concluded that the time had arrived to give them the Torah. Unity amongst Klal Yisrael is a prerequisite for Kabbalas haTorah. There can not be competition and jealousy. There can not be "I want this guy's job. I want this thing. I want that thing." People will not be jealous of one another if they know they are fulfilling their purpose in life. In order for that to be true, they must know why they are here and what purpose they are fulfilling. Only when there is confusion of personal mission does dispute enter into the picture.

Therefore, first count, then celebrate Atzeres. When we learn the lesson of the flags -- that every angel has his purpose and every Jew has his purpose (every Jew counts) -- then we can arrive at Kabbalas HaTorah (receiving the Torah).

The Message of the Book of Ruth

I found the following idea in Rabbi Mirsky's sefer on the Jewish holidays:

On Shavuot, we read the book of Rus [Ruth], written by the prophet Shmuel. Rus is one of the 24 books of the Bible. It is a beautiful story. But what is so vital about this narrative that it must be part of Tanach? Furthermore, why do we specifically read it on the holiday of Shavuot?

Rav Shlomo Alkabez, in his commentary to Rus, writes "This megillah was written to authenticate King David and to publicize the concept that a Moabite woman may marry a Jew. Shmuel wrote this book to preempt any murmuring that might threaten the monarchy of the anointed king (David)."

There was indeed controversy as to whether Boaz was permitted to marry Rus. Rus was from Moab. The simple reading of "Neither an Ammonite nor a Moabite shall enter the Congregation of the L-rd" [Devorim 23:4] would seem to preclude her ability to marry Boaz or any other native born Jew for that matter. There was a dispute that raged for generations whether the prohibition included female Moabites or just the males. Boaz made a bold move to demonstrate the permissibility of such a union, even though the closer relative (a man named Tov) refused to enter into such a marriage out of fear that it was prohibited.

Shmuel, the prophet who anointed David as King, decided to set the record straight and recorded Boaz's public decision to marry this woman -- in Tanach. This explains, perhaps, why Rus is read on Shavuot. The story of Boaz's bold decision to marry Rus dramatizes his faith in the veracity of the Oral Tradition. Boaz had faith in the "Halacha of Moshe tracing back to Sinai" that the interpretation of the above cited pasuk in Devorim is "An Ammonite male is forbidden, but not an Ammonite female; a Moabite male is forbidden, but not a Moabite female."

When a Jew sits down on Shavuot, the holiday marking receipt of the Torah, he is confronted with the question of why Boaz did marry Rus. Why was he so confident that he was allowed to marry her? The answer is that he knew it was permissible because of the Oral Law. Shavuot is not merely the holiday celebrating receipt of the Written Torah. As indicated by the story of Rus, Shavuot is also the holiday when we celebrate the receipt of and the veracity of the Oral Torah.

The issue of the veracity of the Oral Torah was an issue in Talmudic times and it is an issue in modern times as well. When we tell people "the Torah says such and such," they question us because they cannot find it in the Written Torah. So much of the divisions that we have with our non-observant brethren boil down to this point: Is there an Oral Law or not?

On Shavuot, we come to this clear understanding that Torah means the Written Torah PLUS the Oral Torah. There is no better narrative than the Megillah of Rus to drive home this lesson.

The Vilna Gaon reads this whole idea into a few pasukim in Tehillim [119:161-162]: King David writes: "Princes have pursued me without cause, but my heart has feared Your word (m'devarcha pachad leebi). I rejoice over Your Word, (sos anochi al imrasecha) like one who finds abundant spoils." The meaning of M'devarcha pachad leebi is I was afraid of the words of Your Torah, which seems to imply that even a Moabite woman may not marry into the Jewish people. But sos anochi al imrasecha -- I rejoiced over your Oral Teaching, which taught to the contrary, that the prohibition was limited only to the Moabite males.

Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum PARSHAS BAMIDBAR

Hashem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai. (1:1)

The Midrash wonders why Hashem chose the wilderness as the place for the Giving of the Torah. Chazal explain that the Torah was given through three media: fire; water; and wilderness. In other words, these three natural phenomena each played a prominent role in the transmission of the Torah to the Jewish People. Obviously, we are to learn something crucial to our achievement in Torah study from these three models. Why does Hashem note these three phenomena? They are free and available to everyone. So, too, are the words of Torah costless and accessible to anyone who seeks them. The Midrash cites pesukim to support its thesis that Torah was presented via these three media. Only one of these, however, is supported by a pasuk in our parshah: midbar, wilderness. The Midrash implies that "from here" we derive that Torah was given through three media. Where is the "from here"? Furthermore, why is it necessary to have three models to impress that Torah is free to everyone? Why is one not sufficient?

In his Nachalas Eliezer, Horav Eliezer Kohn, zl, explains that the Midrash is teaching us something altogether different. Since the Torah is comprised of two forms of mitzvos - prohibitive and positive - man is subject to the need to garner two forces of support in order to observe the Torah's commandments. He needs kochos, forces, of kum v'asei, positive, active forces to motivate him to go forward, to act, to elevate himself. He also needs the forces of lo saasei, do not do, forces that will help him to curb his desire to act inappropriately in order to prevent him from destroying his spiritual future. The active forces rely on the power of aish: fire, passion, religious fervor, ardor and enthusiasm. They burn fiercely within him until a fire is ignited, a fire that burns passionately for Hashem. On the other hand, in order to refrain from acting inappropriately, one must employ the negative traits of laziness, slow movingness and heavy-handedness to counteract the desire to do evil.

These, however, are still insufficient protection, both for good and from bad. The yetzer hora, evil inclination, is very crafty. It is filled with guile and knows exactly how to present the good, coloring it as bad, and the evil under a fa?ade of appropriate and positive behavior. Thus, the only way that one can succeed in overcoming the impediments that the wily yetzer hora casts in his way is by maintaining a clear and straight course, focused on one goal: service to Hashem, engendering a nachas ruach, sense of satisfaction, for his Creator.

When vested interests and personal prejudice guide an individual, he sees only what he wants to see. He is blind to the truth. Therefore, he gains nothing from the use of the power of aish. Conversely, the power of water, with its cold nature, abates the desire for spiritual growth. Conceivably, he can redirect these forces. Therefore, instead of cooling his desire, he will ignite it, so that he acts enthusiastically and passionately. When he sins, he has been bribed by the yetzer hora who encourages him to see only himself, to act only on his own behalf. He has been blinded.

This is why Chazal insisted on prioritizing the role of midbar, wilderness, in one's life. Once a person negates "himself," he begins to see beyond his personal needs and begins to recognize the truth. His subconscious proclivities suddenly disappear, as the picture in front of him becomes crystal clear.

We now understand the statement in the Midrash that all three concepts are derived from the words Midbar Sinai. The other two, aish and mayim, fire and water, passion and cold, are inanimate, and dependent upon midbar. Unless a person practices self-abnegation, whereby "he" comes first and everything revolves around him, he will not know when to use "hot" and when to be "cold," when to be enthusiastic and filled with alacrity and when to be laid-back and indolent. The Torah was given in the wilderness to indicate our state of mind upon accepting the responsibility to carry out its dictates.

One area in which vested interests are difficult to overcome is tzedakah, charity. While we are blessed with many individuals who open their hearts and wallets to those in need, many others, unfortunately, have personal agendas. The benefactor who writes a sizeable check without making demands or intimating favors is not that common. Selfless devotion in the area of chesed, acts of loving-kindness, is a commodity that reaches to the highest spiritual heights. Thus, it must be as free of any vestige of personal interest as Torah study itself. Horav Aharon Kotler would reiterate to his students the need to live as a ben Olam Haba, one who is worthy of a place in the World to Come. In order to achieve this coveted place, one must live such a unique lifestyle in olam hazeh, this world.

In lauding the support for Torah exemplified by a certain layman, Rav Aharon said, "His love for Torah knew no bounds. He was strong like a lion in his work on behalf of Torah and chesed. No effort was too much for him. He did what had to be done, regardless of whether it fit into the parameters of convention and normalcy.

"An incredible example of his selfless dedication occurred at a time when the rebbeim of a well-known yeshiva had not been paid for a number of months. He was

a leading askan, public figure, who was involved heavily with this distinguished yeshiva. At the wedding of his only daughter, he stood up in the middle of the meal and made an appeal! This was despite the natural difficulty for such a considerate, refined person to do something that would render his many guests who had come to share in his simchah ill at ease. He rose above the constraints of conventional and respectable behavior, with enormous strength, to carry out Hashem's will. Such a deed was possible only for one who possessed a pure heart and whose commitment to the Almighty was selfless and unequivocal. Indeed, the guests understood his actions, because they knew that he had acted solely l'shem Shomayim, "for the sake of Heaven."

Take a census of the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael, according to their families, according to their father's households. (1:2)

Rashi cites the reason for the census of Klal Yisrael: Hashem's love for them. Because of His abiding love for the Jewish People, Hashem counts them often. The Navi Hoshea says: "The number of Bnei Yisrael will be like the sand of the sea, which can neither be measured nor counted" (Hoshea 2:1). In Yoma 22, the Talmud notes the inconsistency in the text of the pasuk. It begins by saying, "The number of Bnei Yisrael will be like the sand of the sea," which implies a great-- but countable-- number. It ends, "which cannot be measured nor counted," clearly stating that it is impossible to count the Jewish People. How are we to reconcile these two phrases? Chazal explain that when Klal Yisrael is worthy, when they perform the will of the Almighty, their number is incalculable. When they do not carry out the will of Hashem, they have a specific number which is countable. Chazal's explanation is somewhat difficult to understand. How is being worthy related to being counted? The numbers are either present, or they are not. Being "good" should not play a role in the matter. The criterion should be the actual statistics.

In his Duda'ei Reuven, Horav Reuven Katz, zl, explains this pragmatically. The concept of Yisrael is a reference to our people at a time in which we reflect our mission and we are in good standing. Essentially, we are a nation in whom Hashem takes great pleasure and satisfaction. As a rule, when one visits a community and asks how many tzadikim, righteous persons, reside within, the reply will be commensurate with the proportion of tzadikim in the city. In other words, if the proportion of righteous persons is minimal in comparison to the rest of the community, they will state the actual number. If however, righteous persons comprise the majority of the community, the reply will be to state the number of individuals who are not counted among the righteous. The number always reflects the lesser proportion. If the righteous are in the minority, their number will be the focus of the reply. If they are the majority, then the number of non-tzadikim will be mentioned.

Thus, Chazal are teaching us that when the proportion of the righteous in Klal Yisrael is the majority, the nation as a whole is counted, since the only individuals mentioned are those who do not fit into the tzadik category. If, however, they are not worthy, and the righteous are but few, then the number of righteous is a number to be acknowledged and emphasized.

Rav Reuven adds that, in reality, if we delve deeper into this idea, we will discover a lesson that serves as the foundation stone for defining the essence of Klal Yisrael and their mission in the world.

In Sefer Bereishis 15:5, the Torah quotes Hashem in dialogue with Avraham Avinu: "And He took him outside and said, 'Gaze, now, toward the Heavens, and count the stars if you are able to count them!' And he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be!'"

This pasuk begs elucidation. If the entire purpose of Hashem's statement was to impress upon Avraham that he was unable to count the stars, it would hardly have been necessary to have him go outside and look up at the stars. Clearly, Avraham could have remained within the confines of his home and still have been aware of his inability to count the stars. What was the point?

When we view Klal Yisrael perceptively, we note that their success and power as a nation is achieved when they are unified and living in harmony. Under such circumstances, they have the ability to withstand adversity and weather the most difficult challenges. This is when the individual views himself not as a separate entity, but rather, as a component in the collective group called "Klal" Yisrael. He does not maintain his own singularity, but he is a constituent integral to the general community - a part of the whole.

In the Talmud Chullin 92A, Chazal compare Klal Yisrael to a gefen, grapevine. A gefen is comprised of branches, clusters of grapes and tendrils. These various components are each intrinsically connected and vital to the identity of the "whole" gefen. Likewise, the Jewish People is comprised of various groups, all necessary and focused on contributing to the entity known as Klal Yisrael. When the nation as a whole achieves unity and stands on an elevated spiritual pedestal, the individual is a part of the group, the prat, individual, part of the klal, general group. At such a time, it is impossible to discern the individual, because he is melded into the group, similar to the grapevine whose individual components are not counted separately. It is all one grapevine. Thus, we view Klal Yisrael as one entity - not as a group of laymen, a group of roshei yeshivah, a group of rabbonim, etc.

A person's body is comprised of various organs, each one providing its vital contribution to the body's continued existence. Nonetheless, we do not count the

individual organs of a body since they are all part and parcel of the body as a whole. Chazal are teaching us that when Klal Yisrael performs Hashem's will, and the people maintain themselves on a madreigah, plateau, of shleimus, perfection, whereby each individual Jew feels he is part of the large collective group of the Jewish People, then they are not countable. Indeed, if anything, their census is one unit. When Hashem was teaching Avraham the correct way to train his descendants, He instructed him to leave his home, go outside, and gaze up at the stars. The stars are numerous, but they all serve one purpose: serving Hashem's Creation. This is the mission which Hashem gave them during Creation. The moment that each individual views himself as a distinct entity, separated from the rest, he loses his right to exist.

This same idea applies to chinuch ha'banim, educating our children, and the existence of Klal Yisrael. If we want to have a nation that is successful, that serves as an inspiration to others, as a model of excellence, then we must take the lesson imparted by the stars. We are all cogs in the great wheel, all components in the collective totality of the Jewish People. Hashem was not showing Avraham the stars for the purpose of indicating their inability to be counted, but rather, He was highlighting their common character and the nature of their success as a cumulative entity.

Every man shall encamp by his own banner with the sign of their father's house. (2:2)

Chazal teach us that the arrangement of the Jews' encampment in the wilderness paralleled the arrangement of the Heavenly entourage which accompanied the Shechinah as it descended upon Har Sinai when Hashem gave us the Torah. Myriads of Heavenly angels descended with Hashem, all grouped under Degalim, banners. When Klal Yisrael saw this pattern, they craved a similar grouping for their encampment. Hashem fulfilled their wish. The Tiferes Tzion explains that this craving was the result of the unprecedented level of prophecy which Klal Yisrael had achieved prior to the Revelation. Thus, they were able to perceive the spiritual significance which the arrangement of the angels represented. The Degalim indicated the unique sanctity and attachment to the Almighty accorded the Heavenly entourage, something for which Klal Yisrael yearned. The Jewish People wanted more - greater sanctity, a closer relationship. Despite all they had achieved, they sought even greater and more sublime levels of kedushah, sanctity.

This seems inconsistent with another Midrash which relates Moshe Rabbeinu's concern regarding the Jews' arrangement by banners. He felt that assigning each individual tribe its own special place would create a climate for strife and discord, with each tribe insisting that it wanted a different position. Hashem allayed Moshe's fears, explaining that they already knew their places of encampment. Indeed, in their possession was a document from their Patriarch, Yaakov Avinu, instructing them how to arrange the Degalim.

Prior to Yaakov's passing, he instructed his sons that only they-- and not their sons-- were to carry his coffin into Eretz Yisrael. In addition, he clearly defined each tribe's position, even indicating that Levi should not carry his coffin, since his descendants were destined to carry the Aron HaKodesh, Ark. Yosef should not carry it, since he was a ruler. These two vacated positions should be filled by Menashe and Ephraim. Having said this, we wonder about the basis of Moshe's fears. Would a nation of prophets, individuals who had collectively achieved a level of kedushah and deveikus, clinging to the Almighty, that had heretofore been unattainable, who perceived the Shechinah and its entourage and yearned for a similar lineup, lower themselves to bicker over position, to protest where to set up camp? Would a nation whose hearts and souls were directed Heavenward engage in such a petty squabble? Horav Yehudah Zev Segal, zl, the Manchester Rosh Yeshivah, says yes, even prophets who constantly aspire to achieve greater elevations of sanctity are capable of falling into the nadir of strife. No, Moshe's fears were not unfounded; they had basis. The lesson is clear and, unfortunately, timely and practical: A person can be soaring in the Heavens, he can be involved in the most sublime endeavors-- and even yearning for greater spiritual ascendancy-- and concomitantly become the victim of destructive middos ra'os, unseemly character traits, that have been laying dormant in his soul, waiting for an opportunity to rear their ugly heads. Regardless of how great a person is, his spiritual achievements notwithstanding, he must never ignore the inherent danger that is waiting to ambush him.

Yet, we wonder why Yaakov did not seem to be overly concerned about the possibility of discord among his sons. He assigned their positions in a sequence which he felt was appropriate. Why was he not as concerned as Moshe was? Horav Shlomo Margolis, Shlita, explains that we must take into account the circumstances that prevailed at the time that Yaakov issued his pattern of pallbearers. The Patriarch was laying on his deathbed, surrounded by his family. This is typically a time in which character traits of a baneful nature seem to disappear. Common sense reigns, and all the petty emotions that take us down just dissipate. During such times, there is no envy and no begrudging that leads to discord.

This was Hashem's reply to Moshe. He had nothing about which to be concerned, because the wilderness is a place of impermanence. There is constant movement, and no one really knows his destination or when his next move will take place.

Under such conditions, people have more important things on their minds than petty differences. Therefore, harmony prevails.

These are the offspring of Aharon and Moshe. (3:1)

The pasuk begins by introducing the progeny of Aharon Hakohen and Moshe Rabbeinu, but ultimately only mentions Aharon's sons. This question is raised in the Talmud Sanhedrin 19b. Chazal infer from here that one who teaches Torah to someone else's children is regarded k'ilu yoldo, "as if he had begotten them." Through the teaching of Torah, he becomes their spiritual father, similar to their biological father. In an alternate version of this Chazal, the Talmud Sanhedrin 99b says it is regarded k'ilu asahu, "as if he made them." Is there a difference between these two definitions, or does one complement the other?

Horav Eliyahu Schlessinger, Shlita, reconciles the two approaches. When we think about it, a father has a quality that is not found in a rebbe, and a rebbe has a quality which a father does not usually possess. A father is naturally compassionate. Hashem has ingrained in the parental psyche a unique sense of compassion toward his offspring. It is part of the parental DNA. On the other hand, because of a father's unusual compassion for his child, he finds it difficult to be overly demanding. This can impair his ability to make demands in the area of Torah study and mitzvah observance. He is afraid to push too hard, to ask too much of his son.

The educator has the ability to be more objective in his demands of the student, but, as an outsider, he lacks the fatherly compassion that is endemic to the father/son relationship. This is underscored with the words, k'ilu asahu, as if he made him. Chazal cite the pasuk in Bereishis 12:5, "and the souls they made in Charan," which Rashi interprets as a reference to those whom Avraham Avinu and Sarah Imeinu converted to the monotheistic faith. They were meshabed, obligated, to serve Hashem. Bringing a person into the fold is understood as "making" him.

We now are able to reconcile the k'ilu yoldo and the k'ilu asahu. In order to be a mechanech, Torah educator par excellence, one must possess the qualities inherent in a father, the compassion, the love and devotion, the sensitivity and caring that a father manifests towards his son. The rebbe must also maintain his objectivity, prodding his student on, assisting him to achieve greater heights in Torah erudition, with a deeper understanding of the Torah's message. He should be able to "make" him, obligating him in the Torah imperative, creating a bond between his student and the Torah. A mechanech who simultaneously maintains these two qualities in his approach to teaching truly becomes the student's spiritual father.

Moshe counted them according to the word of Hashem, as he had been commanded. (3:16)

Rashi cites the dialogue that ensued between Moshe Rabbeinu and Hashem concerning the counting of the infants. Moshe asked, "How can I enter into their tents to ascertain the number of nursing infants?" Clearly, it would be a breach of modesty. Hashem replied, "You do that which is yours to do, and I will do that which is Mine." Thus, Moshe would go and stand at the entrance to the tent, and the Divine Presence would precede him there. A Heavenly Voice would emanate from the tent and say, "There is such and such a number of babies in the tent." This is the underlying meaning of al pi Hashem, "according to the word of Hashem."

It seems like a wonderful process. Moshe walks over to the tent, and Hashem calls out the number of babies. Why only the babies? Why did they not employ this process for everyone? Indeed, why did Moshe have to go to the camp altogether? He could have remained in his "office" and recorded all of the numbers, "according to the word of Hashem."

Horav Baruch Mordechai Ezrachi, Shlita, explains that this is the principle that prevails throughout all avenues of life's endeavor. The person acts, and, when his actions have reached the limit of his ability, when he can achieve no more, Heaven responds and "takes over," completing the initiative. He must make the effort; he must put forth his endeavor, before Divine assistance is merited. Therefore, concerning the other individuals to be counted, Hashem had no reason to intervene. Moshe could do the census on his own. Since concerning the infants, he was prevented from completing the count due to reasons of immodesty, Heaven intervened.

Teitzei rucho yashuv l'admaso, bayom ha'hu avdu eshtonosav.

When his spirit departs, he returns to the earth, on that day his plans all perish.

Horav Zalman Sorotzkin, zl, relates the story of two men that came before the rav of their town with a dispute. Each one claimed that a certain parcel of land belonged to him. They asked the rav to render judgment. The rav asked them to walk with him to the land in question. Apparently, he wanted to see it. When they arrived, the rav put his ear to the ground and listened. After a few minutes, the rav stood up, faced the litigants, and said, "The ground says that both of you belong to it!" Veritably, this is the story of life. Neither one of the men would keep the land. Instead, it would be their final resting place.

This is the meaning of, "When his spirit departs, he returns to the earth." The pasuk says, l'admaso, which means "his earth." His whole life he thought that the earth belonged to him. On the day of his death, he finally discovered the truth: the earth does not really belong to him; he belongs to the earth!

We go through life wasting time, energy and money, fighting: for what objective? The earth which we think is ours? The earlier we wake up and realize that we belong to the earth-- and not vice versa-- the better off we will be.

Sponsored li"n R' Alter Chaim Dovid ben R' Menachem Shmuel z"l nifter 28 Iyar 5767 t.n.tz.v.h. from Menachem Shmuel and Roiza Devora Salomon In memory of Mr. David Salamon z"l

Drasha Parshas Bamidbar

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

A Cut Amongst the Rest (Volume 6 Issue 35)

This week's portion begins Sefer Bamidbar, telling the story of the major events that occurred during the forty year trek though the Midbar towards the land of Israel. In secular terms the book is called Numbers, probably because of the first command in this third Book of the Pentateuch, "count the Jewish people," thus the name Numbers.

The Hebrew words for count are either s'ooch , which also means lift up, and p'kod, which can also mean appoint. Thus, when the Torah commands, "s'ooch es rosh kol adas Yisrael, count the heads all the assembly of Israel (Numbers 1:2), it is telling Moshe to uplift them as well.

It was not merely a matter of numbers, explains Rebbe Rav Shmuel of Sochatchov: counting the nation was not only a means of enumerating them, but also of appointing a special dignity to each and every one who was counted. Every individual was important, there were no communal estimates, and the appointment actually lifted them.

But one of the tribes was not counted with the rest. Regarding the tribe of Levi, which was designated as the spiritual leader of the Jewish people, Moshe was told, "But you shall not count (p'kod) the tribe of Levi; and their heads you shall not lift (v'es rosham lo sisah) among the Children of Israel" (Numbers 1:49).

The questions are simple. Why is there a double expression prohibiting a count "do not count and do not lift their heads"? In addition, why does the Torah add the words, "amongst the children of Israel"? True, they were counted separately, and so the Torah should rather state, "And the tribe of Levi shall be enumerated separately." Can there be a deeper intonation with the expression, "Do not lift their head amongst the Children of Israel"?

Rav Eliyahu Chaim Meisels, the Rav of Lodz, would raise money for the poor widows and orphans of his city. During one particularly freezing winter, he went to visit one of the prominent members of his community, Reb Isaac, a banker who served as the president of the community council.

Bundled in a coat and scarf, the Rabbi approached the banker's mansion and knocked on the door.

The valet who answered the door was shocked to see the great Rabbi Meisels standing outside in the bitter cold. He immediately asked him to enter the home where he said there would be a hot tea waiting.

Rabbi Meisels refused. "It is not necessary. Please tell Reb Isaac to see me by the door."

The banker heard that the Rav was waiting near the portal and rushed in his evening jacket to greet him. Upon seeing the Rabbi standing in the frigid weather, he exclaimed. "Rebbe, please step inside. I have the fireplace raging, and my butler will prepare a hot tea for you! There is no need for you to wait outside!"

"That's alright," countered Reb Eliyahu Chaim. "It won't be long, and all I need could be accomplished by talking right here. I'm sure you won't mind. Anyway, why should I dirty your home with my snow-covered boots?"

By this time, Reb Isaac was in a dilemma. The frigid air was blowing into his house. He did not want to close the door and talk outside in the cold, and yet the Rabbi did not want to enter!

"Please, Rabbi, I don't know about you, but I am freezing," cried the banker. "I don't mind if your boots are wet! Just come on in!"

But the Rabbi did not budge. He began talking about the plight of some of the unfortunate members of the community as the bankers teeth chattered in response.

"Please, Rebbe, just tell me what you need! I'll give anything you want, just come inside!"

With that, Reb Elya Chaim relented. He entered the man's home and followed him to the den, where a blazing fire heated the room. Then he began: "I need firewood for 50 families this winter." The banker smiled. "No problem, I commit to supplying the wood. Just one question. You know I give tzedaka, so why did you make me stand outside?"

"Reb Isaac," smiled Reb Eliyahu Chaim. "I know you give, but I wanted to make sure you understood what these poor people are going through. I knew that five minutes in the freezing cold would give you a different perspective than my initial asking while basking in the warmth of your fireplace."

The Chasam Sofer explains that because Levi was a special tribe of teachers and leaders it could be possible they would be aloof. Thus, though they were counted separately, they could not be above the crowd. Therefore, the Torah's command was stated in clear terms, "their heads you shall not lift (v'es rosham lo sisah) among the

Children of Israel". Leadership may put you in a class by yourself, but remember, says the Torah, you must not feel that you are above the folk. You cannot bask in warmth while you are oblivious to those who suffer in the cold. Your head can not be "lifted" from among the children of Israel.

Good Shabbos

Rabbi M. Kamenetzky is the Associate Dean of the Yeshiva of South Shore.

h a a r e t z

Portion of the week / The prerequisite of freedom

By [Rabbi] Benjamin Lau

This Shabbat we embark on the Book of Numbers and our annual summer voyage of reading the Torah portions that describe the life of the generation that left Egypt and wandered the desert for 40 years. The formal reason for the Israelites' stay in the desert has to do with the sin of the spies and their despising the land. But many commentators, from the days of the sages to the modern era, sought some positive aspect to the wilderness period.

A generation of slaves, lacking responsibilities and vision, cannot suddenly enter on a life of action, which ties a person to his source of livelihood, to his surroundings, and to society. Only the slaves' death (from natural causes) can generate change and allow the nation to begin life in its land. The midrash (Tanhuma) enters the thoughts of the Creator and explains this divine resolution: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said: If I lead them into the land by the most direct route, they will each take possession of a field and vineyard and neglect the law. Therefore I will lead them through the wilderness for 40 years and cause them to eat the manna and drink the water of the well so that the law may penetrate into their very beings."

A slave (or anyone unaccustomed to shouldering a burden) who receives a plot of land and a vineyard will not be a partner to any national vision or social contract. He will not look beyond his own land. Yesterday he was a slave to his master and today he is engrossed in the abundance of his fruit. But he is not "at fault." He never had the experience of observing some value or content. Work in itself cannot turn a laborer into a free man. In order to be a free man he must sear into his personality values and content. "Only one who occupies himself with Torah study is free." Occupying oneself with Torah does not exempt a person from work; rather doing so upgrades one's life from slavery to freedom. This occupation cannot be accomplished while the people of the land are engaged in daily working life. A period of "wilderness" is necessary to attain freedom. The desert is a place without ownership, without property, without hoarding, without a home. Its power lies entirely in what it lacks.

This experience is sometimes counter-intuitive. When the manna began raining down from heaven, Moses ordered the people to refrain from hoarding (Exodus 15): "And Moses said, Let no man leave of it till the morning. Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto Moses; but some of them left of it until the morning, and it bred worms, and stank." Thus the people learn the experience of being released from bondage. Thus is enhanced the people's spiritual awareness, internalizing the meaning of human existence, which strives for something above and beyond material goods.

It is true that more than half of the book is devoted to describing that generation's failings: worshiping the golden calf, yearning for meat, nostalgia for their slavery in Egypt, and refusal to cross over into the world of responsibility and liberty. But all this belongs to the first generation - the last to have been enslaved. The second part of the book (which describes the 40 years in the desert) demonstrates the people's discontent, fed up as they are with the desert and longing for a settled land.

Even as they entered the land, the Torah made sure to keep pockets of "wilderness." The divvying up of the land left one tribe without an estate and one estate without a tribe. The portion describes for us the Tribe of Levy, in charge of instilling the Torah in the people settled in the land. It is the guardian of the spirit and obliged to wander from village to village ensuring that material life does not mire the people in a worldly and corporeal slavery. The choice of the Tribe of Levy substitutes the need for primogeniture in each family (Numbers 3): "And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of all the firstborn

that openeth the matrix among the children of Israel: therefore the Levites shall be mine."

Normally, each family would have a firstborn who assumes responsibility for its path and values. The choice of the firstborn is natural and innate, so long as he leads and carries the family on his shoulders. If he instead gets carried along and does not do the carrying, then his leadership is out of place. Rashi elucidates the substitution of Levites for firstborn for precisely this reason: "When they committed the sin of the Golden Calf, the Levites, inasmuch as they had not erred in the matter of the Calf, were privileged to enter in their stead."

The sin of the calf embodies the masses getting carried away. A leader is not meant to go with the flow; he is supposed to pull his family out after him. Hence the choice of the Levites, who kept apart and maintained the high ground. They do not receive an estate, so as to be available to instill the Torah in every corner of society. That is the first organizational infrastructure for an educational system in Israel, responsible for all the people and dependent on the public coffers.

In the early days of the Second Temple, the last of the prophets came to voice harsh protest over the laziness of the Levites, who, instead of wandering the land and devoting themselves to the general public, had holed up inside the Temple and tending to their own interests (Malakhi 2): "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of hosts. Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law."

Thus began the period of the sages who bore the burden of spreading the Torah in place of the Levites, who had replaced the firstborn. Just as there is a tribe that has no estate, there is an estate in the land lacking a tribe. Jerusalem was not divided among tribes. It is preserved as a "wilderness" - without any ownership claim, without the owners setting foot in it, and without struggles over sovereignty. It belongs to everyone and anyone who enters it connects: a city that makes all Israel friends. Over the centuries, Jerusalem, intended as a place of reconciliation, became a city of struggle and war. Everything is explosive, everything is fragile, everything is tense. A rocky and existential life that leaves no room for making do with less and no room for listening.

Today, on the day celebrating Jerusalem, I am surrounded by symbols: The Sabbath - a temporal wilderness in which a person has no ownership and no running to the mall. Jerusalem - the wilderness of life in the land, where no man has claim and there is no room for conflict. It takes a lot of patience and hope for the best to see how the Sabbath blessing and the peace blessing together are tied to Jerusalem's crown.

YatedUSA Parshas Bamidbar 22 Iyar 5769

Halachah Discussion

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Birkas Kohanim - Nesias Kapayim

Even today when the Beis ha-Mikdash is no longer standing, the Biblical mitzvah of nesias kapayim — the obligation of the kohanim to raise their hands and bless the Jewish people with the three verses recorded in Parashas Naso — remains.¹ The mitzvah of nesias kapayim, however, like certain other mitzvos of the Torah, is not strictly obligatory.² A kohen is not obligated to enter a shul so that he will find Jews to bless. Even if a kohen is in shul but is not summoned to come and bless the people, he is not obligated to do so.³ But if he is summoned, then he must comply, and if he fails to comply he violates a positive Biblical commandment.⁴

Many authorities maintain that in addition to the mitzvah of the kohanim to bless the Jewish people, there is also a separate mitzvah for every Jew to be blessed by the kohanim.⁵ Women, too, are included in this mitzvah.⁶

At the conclusion of birkas kohanim, the custom is for the congregation to thank the kohanim for their blessing.⁷ While some kohanim have the custom of responding with beruchim tihyu,⁸ others advise against responding in those words in order to avoid a halachic debate as to whether

their response constitutes an additional blessing over and beyond what is mandated by the Torah.⁹

Question: How often must the mitzvah of nesias kapayim be fulfilled?

Discussion: Although this mitzvah applies at all times and in all places,¹⁰ it is customary in most Ashkenazi congregations, especially outside of Eretz Yisrael, to perform it only during the Mussaf service of Yom Tov,¹¹ The poskim suggest several reasons for the restriction of nesias kapayim to those few occasions:

- ◆ It is proper for kohanim to immerse themselves in a mikveh before nesias kapayim, and it is difficult for them to do so on a daily or even a weekly basis.¹²

- ◆ Nesias kapayim should be performed when people are relaxed and not in a hurry to go to work. Even on Shabbos, people are preoccupied with concerns about their livelihood. Only at the end of Mussaf on Yom Tov, when people are in an elevated mood and are ready to leave shul and partake of the simchas Yom Tov, is the hour conducive for nesias kapayim.¹³

- ◆ It was common in the olden days for non-Jews to barge into shuls at will, and birkas kohanim may be said in the presence of Jews only.¹⁴

- ◆ With the passage of time, the lineage and yichus of the kohanim have become blurred. We nevertheless allow them to bless the people on Yom Tov at least so that this mitzvah will not be completely forsaken and forgotten.¹⁵

In the past, many poskim disputed and refuted the above-stated reasons,¹⁶ and some even sought to change the long-standing practice and reinstate birkas kohanim on a daily basis.¹⁷ Ultimately, all these attempts failed — almost as if a bas kol min ha-shamayim decreed that nesias kapayim must be relegated to Yom Tov Mussaf alone¹⁸ — and the vast majority of congregations outside of Eretz Yisrael recite birkas kohanim on Yom Tov only.

Regrettably, the discussion involving the proper time and occasion for performing nesias kapayim led to some confusion. Some congregations have the custom not to recite birkas kohanim on a Yom Tov which falls on Shabbos. Although several poskim have attempted to explain the reason behind this practice¹⁹ and many prominent congregations practice this custom even today, the consensus of the poskim is that it has "no ta'am or rei'ach,"²⁰ it has no basis in halachah,²¹ it is not a minhag tov²² and it should be discontinued,²³ provided that there will not be any strife or discord within the congregation if the practice is abandoned.

Question: What should members of the congregation be doing during nesias kapayim?

Discussion: The congregants must give their undivided attention to the words of the blessings. In order to fulfill the mitzvah properly, they must hear every single letter of every single word.²⁴ The custom is for the entire congregation to stand²⁵ — with reverence and awe — during the birkas kohanim.²⁶ A weak or sick person, however, may sit.²⁷

Since complete concentration is required while listening to the blessings, it is forbidden to look around the shul or to stare at the kohanim while birkas kohanim is being recited.²⁸ It is customary not to look at them at all, neither at their faces nor at their hands.²⁹ For this reason, many have the custom of covering their face with a tallis during birkas kohanim.³⁰

It is prohibited to speak, learn, daven or recite Tehilim during birkas kohanim.³¹ It is improper to recite any other verses — even those verses which appear alongside in many siddurim and machzorim — or prayers while birkas kohanim is being recited.³²

Every person present must answer Amen to each of the three verses that the kohanim recite. One who is in shul and does not answer Amen excludes himself from the blessing and does not fulfill the mitzvah.³³ When answering Amen, it is important to make sure that the kohanim have completely finished the word that they are pronouncing.³⁴

The poskim debate whether it is proper to recite Baruch hu u'varuch shemo when the name of Hashem is mentioned during the blessings. One may follow his customary practice, but he should do so quietly.³⁵

One who is reciting Kerias Shema (or its blessings) when the congregation is reciting birkas kohanim should stop and listen to the blessings. He must answer Amen to the blessings of the kohanim but not to the blessing of Levareich es amo Yisrael.³⁶

One who is reciting Shemoneh Esrei when the sheliach tzipbur is about to recite birkas kohanim should stop and listen.³⁷ He may not, however, leave his place to face the kohanim nor may he answer Amen to the blessings of the kohanim. In view of this potential conflict, one should not start Shemoneh Esrei unless he is sure to finish before birkas kohanim.³⁸

Question: Where should the people be standing during nesias kapayim?

Discussion: Since the kohanim must face the congregants during birkas kohanim,³⁹ anyone standing behind the kohanim must leave his seat and face the kohanim.⁴⁰ The people who are standing to the side of the kohanim should turn their faces so that they face the kohanim.⁴¹

It is preferable that the congregation not be standing on a surface higher than the kohanim. Consequently, one should not stand on the bimah during birkas kohanim.⁴²

Some have the custom of moving up to the front of the shul so that nothing intervenes between them and the kohanim. There are valid sources and reasons for this custom.⁴³

Footnotes

1 Footnote to Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 128:133, who flatly rejects the minority opinion which maintains that it is merely a rabbinical mitzvah. See Kol Bo (Tefillah 11) who says that Shlomo ha-Melech instituted birkas kohanim outside the Beis ha-Mikdash.

2 See explanation in Responsa Devar Avraham 1:31.

3 See Minchas Chinuch 378 quoting the Yerushalmi and Tur, and Beur Halachah 128:4, s.v. einam, quoting Chemed Moshe.

4 O.C. 128:2 and Mishnah Berurah 9.

5 This is the view of Sefer Chareidim 12:18 (and other Rishonim), and it is quoted as halachah by many later authorities, including the Beur Halachah (beginning of 128) and Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:21. There are also dissenting opinions. See Responsa Chasam Sofer 22 and 167 and Devar Avraham 1:31 for a review of this issue.

6 Minchas Chinuch 378-4; Igros Moshe, O.C. 5:20-23.

7 Mishnah Berurah 128:60. See R'shosh Shevi'is 4:2 for an explanation.

8 Aruch ha-Shulchan 128:24.

9 Har Tzvi 1:62 based on the view of the Rambam, quoted by Beur Halachah 128:27.

10 Chinuch 378.

11 In certain parts of Eretz Yisrael, nesias kapayim is performed only on Shabbos.

12 Sefer Chasidim 1613, quoted by Beis Yosef, O.C. 128, who rejects this explanation for several reasons.

13 Rama, O.C. 128:44; Mishnah Berurah 167. Yom Kippur, too, is a day of happiness, since Hashem forgives our sins; *ibid.* 166.

14 Responsa Maharil 21; Responsa Zera Emes 3:13 quoting the Zohar.

15 Responsa Beis Efrayim, O.C. 6.

16 See Responsa Rama Mi'pano 95 and Beis Yosef, O.C. 128.

17 The Gaon of Vilna, Rav Chaim of Volozhin and the Ba'al ha-Tanyah repeatedly attempted to change the custom. Rav Nosson Adler, in his own beis medrash, performed birkas kohanim daily.

18 Aruch ha-Shulchan 128:64. See similar idea in Meishiv Davar 2:104.

19 There are several theories as to how this custom developed: 1. The Ribbono shel olam prayer is not said on Shabbos (Magen Avraham 128:70); 2. Birkas kohanim is not said unless the kohanim have immersed themselves, which is not done on Shabbos (*ibid.*); 3. Shabbos itself serves as a shemirah and no additional blessing is needed (Da'as Torah 128:44); 4. To avoid inadvertently transgressing the prohibition of carrying water which is needed to wash the hands of the kohanim (Eishel Avraham 128). 5. So that presents for the kohanim would not be carried on Shabbos (Mor V'ahalos).

20 Taz 128:35; Aruch ha-Shulchan 128:64.

21 Shulchan Aruch ha-Rav 128:57; Chayei Adam 32:11; Meishiv Davar 1:47; Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 100:1; Maharsham 8:25; Mishnah Berurah 128:165; Minchas Elazar 3:56.

22 Igros Moshe, O.C. 3:18.

23 Igros Moshe, O.C. 5:15.

24 Mishnah Berurah 128:65 and 67.

25 Leaning heavily on a shtender, etc. is considered like sitting; Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 607:8.

26 Mishnah Berurah 128:51.

27 Tzitz Eliezer 14:18; Yechaveh Da'as 5:15.

28 O.C. 128:23.

29 Mishnah Berurah 128:88. In addition to being a distraction, it is also not proper to look at the kohanim since the Shechinah rests on their hands; Kaf ha-Chaim 128:140.

30 Mishnah Berurah 128:92.

31 O.C. 128:26, Be'er Heitev 46, and Mishnah Berurah 102.

32 Mishnah Berurah 128:103.

33 Igros Moshe, O.C. 2:31.

34 O.C. 128:18.

35 See Yechaveh Da'as 4:9 for the various views.

36 Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:21; Teshuvos v'Hanhagos 1:78; Az Nidberu 11:36; 12:25.

37 Chazon Ish (Dinim v'Hanhagos 4:29); Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:21; Shevet ha-Levi 3:15. A dissenting opinion maintains that he need not do so; Rav Y.S. Elyashiv (Avnei Yashfei on Tefillah, pg. 205); Teshuvos v'Hanhagos 2:77.

38 Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:21. See, however, Igros Moshe, O.C. 5:20-23 where he rules that even during Shemoneh Esrei one should leave his place to face the kohanim.

39 O.C. 128:10.

40 O.C. 128:24. Since, as mentioned earlier, women are also included in this mitzvah, they, too, should make sure not to stand behind the kohanim.

41 Beur Halachah 128:24.

42 Ko Sevarchu (Tzadik 1).

43 See Minhagei Chasam Sofer 88 and Orchos Rabbeinu.

YatedUSA Parshas Bamidbar 22 Iyar 5769

Halachah Talk

by Rabbi Avraham Rosenthal

Pirkei Avos

One of the better known and cherished minhagim in Klal Yisroel is the study of Pirkei Avos on Shabbos afternoons. This minhag is well over a thousand years old, as it was practiced at least as far back as the period of the Geonim. Hundreds of seforim have been written throughout the centuries on these few perakim of mishnayos and an untold number of weekly shiurim have been organized for its study. Let us spend some time examining this most ancient minhag.

THE NAME OF THE MASECHTA

Before delving into the various minhagim of learning Pirkei Avos and their reasons, we must first discuss something much more basic. Namely, why is this masechta called "Avos"? Of the sixty-three masechtos in Shas, Avos is one of a handful whose name does not apparently match the topic of the masechta. The only other exceptions to this are the three "Bavos" – Bava Kama, Bava Metziah and Bava Basra – the first, middle and last "gates." However, these three are actually part of one masechta called "Nezikin" – damages, and divided into three parts.

Pick a name of just about any other masechta, and one would be able to figure out what halachos he would find there. Shabbos deals with the laws of Shabbos. Nazir covers the halachos of one who accepts upon himself to abstain from wine and haircuts. And Sanhedrin discusses the halachos relevant to the Sanhedrin and batei din.

But what about "Avos," which literally means "fathers"? What is the reason for this name that seems to have little to do with the content of the masechta? The commentators to this masechta offer the following explanations:

1) The Gemara states (Sanhedrin 19b), "Anyone who teaches Torah to his friend's son, it is considered as if he fathered him." The ethical teachings contained in this masechta are life's lessons and they direct those who learn them on the correct path through which he can obtain Olam Haba. Hence, it can be said that this masechta is the "father" of those who learn it (Tosafos Yom Tov and Medrash Shmuel, cited by Yalkut Mei'am Lo'eiz).

2) Many of the great Torah leaders who were primarily responsible for the transmission of Torah through the generation are listed in this masechta. As leaders, they can be also referred to as the "fathers" of their respective generations (Yalkut Mei'am Lo'eiz; Rashbatz, Introduction to Magen Avos).

3) In Talmudic literature, the word "avos" can also refer to a group of main principles from which other rules, called "toldos" – "offspring," can be derived (see Mishnah Shabbos 1:1). All the mussar and ethical teachings that were said subsequent to the compilation of Maseches Avos can find their roots in this masechta. Therefore, this masechta contains the "avos" or general principles of all such teachings (Yalkut Mei'am Lo'eiz).

4) The Torah relates that since the people of the dor hamabul, the generation of the flood, were lacking in their interpersonal relationships, Hashem found it necessary to destroy them. It follows then that if one follows the lessons contained in this masechta and thereby improves upon his relationships of *bein adam lechaveiro*, this will cause the continuation of the world's existence. Thus, in a certain sense, it can be said that the authors of these ethical teachings are "fathers," as it is through them that the world continues to exist (Tiferes Avos, cited in Yalkut Mei'am Lo'eiz).

5) Every father has a responsibility to know this masechta well in order to educate his children properly and transmit to them its ethical teachings in order that they obtain yiras Shomayim and midos tovos. Hence, it can be said that this masechta is especially for "fathers" (*ibid.*).

6) Chazal state (Bava Kama 2a) that any concept taught in the Torah is called an "av." Therefore, by calling this masechta "Avos," they wished to indicate that all of the teachings contained therein have their sources in the Torah (Dover Shalom in the name of the Gra; Yalkut Mei'am Lo'eiz).

7) Just as a father may divide up his property before his death and distribute it as he sees fit, so too a rebbi can choose to which of his talmidim he will transmit his teachings and how much he will teach them. We thus find that Moshe transmitted more to Yehoshua than anyone else, and Yehoshua became the leader of his generation. In this respect a teacher is like a father. Hence, this masechta is called "Avos" to indicate this idea (Pnei Shlomo, cited in Yalkut Mei'am Lo'eiz).

THE MASECHTA'S PLACEMENT

As is well-known, Shas is divided into six sedarim, or orders: 1) Zeraim, which deals primarily with agricultural mitzvot; 2) Moed, which deals with hilchos Shabbos, yomim tovim, and fasts; 3) Noshim, which covers laws of marriage and related issues; 4) Nezikin, which deals with torts and laws connected with beis din; 5) Kodshim, which covers the various korbanos and the laws pertaining to the Bais Hamikdash; and 6) Taharos, which deals with halachos of tumah and taharah. Maseches Avos is placed in Nezikin. At first glance, this seems strange. What do ethics have to do with tort law and the rules governing batei din? One would think

that Avos should be the very first masechta in Shas – after all, derech erez kadma laTorah – a prerequisite to learning Torah is derech erez and midos tovos.

The Rishonim provide us with two reasons why Avos is in Seder Nezikin:

1) As we mentioned, one of the topics covered in Seder Nezikin is the halachos governing batei din. The mussar and ethics of maseches Avos are especially applicable to dayanim. This is because if a layman were to act unethically, the scope of people that he could damage would be limited. However, if a judge on a beis din is not a baal mussar and a yarei Shomayim, the harm that he could inflict is virtually limitless (Rambam, Introduction to Mishnah; Rashbatz, Introduction to Magen Avos).

2) Through the learning of Maseches Brachos, which deals with the mitzvos of Krias Shema, tefillah, brachos recited over food and Bircas Hamazon, a person can attain yiras Shomayim and improve upon his bein adam laMakom. By learning the three Bavos, which deal with damages and torts, one can learn how to be careful in issues of bein adam lachaveiro. Avos was placed after both Brachos and the Bavos because Avos includes both facets – improvement in bein adam laMakom and bein adam lachaveiro (Rashbatz, Introduction to Magen Avos).

AN ANCIENT MINHAG

As we mentioned, the custom of studying Pirkei Avos on Shabbos afternoon after mincha is a very old one and dates back to at least the era of the Geonim, over a thousand years ago (Machzor Vitri, #141, in the name of Rav Sar Shalom Gaon; Siddur Rav Amram Gaon; Siddur Rav Saadyah Gaon). It should be pointed out that although this is the minhag among many Ashkenazic communities, many Sephardic kehillos recite Pirkei Avos after davening on Shabbos morning (Tur, Orach Chaim 292).

Although the primary minhag of studying Pirkei Avos is agreed upon, it is interesting to note that various customs have developed concerning which Shabbos this is done:

1) According to some, Pirkei Avos are studied from the first Shabbos after Pesach up to and including the last Shabbos prior to Rosh Hashanah (Machzor Vitri, citing the minhag of Germany and France; Sefer Minhagim [Tirna], Minhagei Shabbos).

2) Some maintain that this is done only on the Shabbos between Pesach and Shavuot (Avudraham, Seder Yemay Ha'omer, pg. 3; Kaf HaChayim 292:23; Siddur Baal HaTanya).

3) Some have a custom to study Pirkei Avos from after Pesach until Shiva Asar B'Tammuz (Minhagei Maharil; Yosef Ometz #857).

4) There was another minhag to study these mishnayos between Shavuot and Shiva Asar B'Tammuz (Minhag Virmach, cited in Yosef Ometz).

5) Some Rishonim cite a minhag to study Pirkei Avos on the Shabbos between Shavuot and Succos (KolBo #40).

6) One of the Rishonim writes that since the days of the summer are long and the people are not working, the minhag is to learn Pirkei Avos throughout the summer in order that they do not sit idly (Sefer HaManhig, Hilchos Shabbos #64).

7) Some places were accustomed to learn Pirkei Avos “from the dibros to the dibros.” However, it is not clear whether this is referring to the several days in between Shavuot and Shabbos Parshas Va'eschanan, or between Shabbos Parshas Yisro and Va'eschanan, as these are all days when the aseres hadibros are read (ibid.; Sefer Bein Pesach LeShavuot [Rav Tzvi Cohen, shlit"l], pg. 160).

8) Some communities studied Pirkei Avos from Parshas Yisro until Parshas Masei. This minhag was meant to be an allusion to the connection of matan Torah of Parshas Yisro to the beginning of Sefer Devorim, also referred to as Mishnah Torah. Mishnah Torah in turn alludes to the concept that Moshe received the Torah on Har Sinai (KolBo #40).

Most Ashkenazic communities follow the first minhag above, and learn Pirkei Avos from the first Shabbos after Pesach until the Shabbos before Rosh Hashanah. Most Sephardic communities act in accordance with the second minhag and only learn these Mishnayos during the six Shabbos between Pesach and Shavuot.

THE REASON BEHIND THE MINHAG

Numerous reasons for the study of Pirkei Avos have been suggested. They include:

1) There is a tradition that Moshe Rabbeinu passed away on Shabbos afternoon after mincha. Since Pirkei Avos begins with “Moshe received the Torah at Sinai,” and since there is a minhag to recite praises of a person after his death, it is apropos to study these mishnayos at the time that Moshe passed away (Sefer Pardes [Rashi] #4; Siddur Rav Amram Gaon).

2) Shabbos Mincha is a time when the simple, unlearned people come to shul in order to hear the leining. Since these people are anyway in shul, it is an opportune time to instill in them midos tovos and yiras Shomayim and to bring them closer to Torah (Machzor Vitri #429; Minhagim of Maharam mei'Rotenburg).

3) According to the Rishonim, Shabbos is a good opportunity to study aggadata (see Rokei'ach, end of #56). This is especially so when it contains divrei mussar and yiras Shomayim. It therefore became the custom to study Pirkei Avos, as it contains both of these elements (see Likutei Mahariach, vol. II, pg. 75a).

Based on these first three reasons, it would seem that in actuality, Pirkei Avos should be studied throughout the year. However, it is possible that the minhag only evolved during the summer months due to the longer afternoon. Although the

custom is to recite Borchy Nafshi and the fifteen perakim of Shir Hamaalos during the winter, which also take time, perhaps since people are more familiar with those pirkei Tehillim, it is not as time consuming (ibid.).

4) During the summer months, people generally involve themselves with different types of health measures in order to maintain their health for the entire year. The study of Pirkei Avos and the mussar that it contains is meant to remind us that while we are concerned about our physical well-being, we should also take steps to improve our spiritual health as well (Yalkut Mei'am Lo'eiz, Avos, pg. 2).

5) The days of sefirah are days of Divine judgment, as it was during this period that the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died. Therefore, a person should feel trepidation during this time. For this reason, it became the minhag to study the divrei mussar contained in Pirkei Avos during sefirah, as a person is more receptive to mussar and chastisement when he is apprehensive (ibid.).

6) It is during the summer months when we read from the Torah about the first and second sets of luchos given to Moshe at Har Sinai; the first luchos in Yisro, which is read on Shavuot and the second luchos in Va'eschanan. Therefore, in preparation for this we learn Pirkei Avos, which describes how the Torah was transmitted from generation to generation (Comments of the Chasam Sofer to Shulchan Aruch 430:5, printed at end of Chidushei Chasam Sofer, Pesachim)

7) The days of sefirah are a preparation for the kabbolas haTorah that takes place on Shavuot. The ethical teachings of Pirkei Avos are a true preparation for such an event, as “derech erez kadma laTorah.” Incidentally, this is the reason why the Torah first relates the actions of the Avos before introducing the mitzvos, as it is from the Avos that we learn midos tovos, which is a prerequisite for learning Torah and fulfilling the mitzvos. Based on this, perhaps another reason why this masechta is called “Avos” is because the basis and source of all the midos tovos contained therein are the actions of the Avos (Bnei Yisaschar, Iyar 1:5).

THE LEARNING

Although there are many reasons why Pirkei Avos are studied the entire summer, all agree that the main institution of this study was for the six Shabbos between Pesach and Shavuot. However, since maseches Avos itself contains only five chapters, the sources state that a sixth perek, “Shanu Chachomim,” was added in order to allow the learning of one perek each week (Siddur Rav Saadyah Gaon; Sefer HaPardes #4; Magen Avos [Rashbatz]; Medrash Shmuel).

It is interesting to note that this perek, often referred to as Perek Kinyan Torah, is not composed of mishnayos, but rather braisos. Although this is not really our topic, we will briefly explain the difference. Mishnayos are halachic teachings of the Tannaim, which were edited and arranged by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi. He lived during the last generation of Tannaim and organized all of the Mishnaic teachings. Most Braisos, on the other hand, were recorded by Rabbi Chiya, one of Rabbi Yehuda's students, and they contain what Rabbi Yehuda added to the Mishnayos by way of explanation. (This explanation is an over-simplification, as there are various nuances in the Rishonim on this topic. However, anything further is beyond the scope of this article.) [See: Tosafos, Bava Kamma 94b, s.v., b'yemay; Introduction to Yad HaChazakah; Rav Shmuel HaNagid, Mavo HaTalmud; Mavo She'arim, chap. 3.]

LEARNED FOUR TIMES

According to Minhag Ashkenaz, upon completing the six chapters of Pirkei Avos in time for Shavuot, we begin again on the Shabbos following Yom Tov. This year, when the second day of Yom Tov is on Shabbos, we wait until Parshas Naso before restarting. It is interesting to note that after Shavuot we start Pirkei Avos on Parshas Naso, Pinchos, and Shoftim. The first letter in these three names, nun-pey-shin, spell the word “nefesh” (Minhagei Maharil, Seder Bircas Ha'omer). It must be pointed out that, owing to various adjustments of the parshiyos in the calendar year, this mnemonic is only applicable on the average in two out of every three years. Unfortunately, to explain the details of these adjustments are beyond the scope of this article.

From the time that we begin Pirkei Avos again on Parshas Shoftim, there are only three or four Shabbos until Rosh Hashanah. Therefore, in order to facilitate completing it in its entirety four times, we learn two perakim a week for one or two weeks. The reason why we learn Pirkei Avos specifically four times is because it alludes to the fact that Moshe taught the Torah four times (ibid.).

OUT OF SYNC

It is worthwhile to point out that there are two situations when the Jews of Eretz Yisroel and of the Diaspora do not learn the same perek every week. This often causes confusion for those people who travel to Eretz Yisroel in the summer. The two situations are:

1) When Shavuot occurs on Friday and Shabbos, as it does this year. The inhabitants of Eretz Yisroel will start the first perek on that Shabbos, which is for them Isru Chag. However, the Diaspora Jews will not begin Avos until the following Shabbos.

2) When the first day of Pesach occurs on Shabbos. The seventh and eighth days will be on Friday and Shabbos, thus causing the two communities to be out of sync. Incidentally, these scenarios also create an issue concerning parshas hashavuah, which similarly causes Eretz Yisroel to be ahead. Although this problem is

eventually rectified later in the summer, with regards to Pirkei Avos, chutz la'aretz lags behind until the last week before Rosh Hashanah.

NOT ON YOM TOV

Since we have mentioned that Pirkei Avos is not studied on Shavuot when it occurs on Shabbos, let us explain why this is true. But first, let us review the various texts recited at Shabbos mincha throughout the year and we will then explain why they are said.

As we all know, the generally accepted custom is to study Pirkei Avos from the Shabbos after Pesach up to and including the Shabbos before Rosh Hashanah. During most of the Shabbosos in Tishrei, from Rosh Hashanah through Succos, nothing extra is recited at mincha until Shabbos Bereishis when we begin reciting Borchi Nafshi and the fifteen chapters of Shir Hamaalos. This continues up to and including the Shabbos before Shabbos Hagadol. On Shabbos Hagadol, we stop saying Borchi Nafshi and Shir Hamaalos and many have the minhag of reciting the haggadah from "avadim hayinu" until "lechaper al kol avonoseinu." As in Tishrei, over Pesach nothing is added to Shabbos mincha.

The reason why we recite Borchi Nafshi and Shir Hamaalos starting with Shabbos Bereishis is because these perakim remind us that Hashem created the world. Borchi Nafshi is obviously discussing maase bereishis. According to the medrash, the chapters of Shir Hamaalos were recited by Dovid Hamelech when the waters of the depths threatened to flood the world and destroy (Levush, Orach Chaim 669:1).

The reason neither Borchi Nafshi nor Pirkei Avos are recited on Yom Tov is because of the rule that Yom Tov is "chetzi laHashem, vechetzi lachem." Meaning, that one may divide up the day of Yom Tov and spend half involved in spiritual pursuits such as davening and learning, while during the second half he can fulfill the physical pleasures of eating and resting. Since Borchi Nafshi and Pirkei Avos are recited in the afternoon, the part of the day reserved for "lachem," the physical enjoyments of Yom Tov, the minhag is not to recite them at all. Since we do not recite anything on Yom Tov, we also do not do so on Shabbos Chol Hamoed or between Rosh Hashanah and Succos (ibid.).

ANOTHER SHABBOS OFF

Aside from not studying Pirkei Avos on Shabbos when it is also the second day of Shavuot, there is another Shabbos when it is also not learned: when either Tisha B'Av or Erev Tisha B'Av occurs on Shabbos. Although this is the accepted practice nowadays, it is far from straightforward.

Unfortunately, a full discussion of this is beyond the scope of this article. However, we will give a brief outline of the issues at hand. There is a prohibition of learning general Torah topics on Tisha B'Av, and we are only permitted to learn more subdued texts (Shulchan Aruch 554:1-2).

In addition to this prohibition, there is a minhag cited by the poskim not to learn on Erev Tisha B'Av after chatzos (halachic midday) as well. According to this opinion, it does not make a difference whether Erev Tisha b'Av is during the week or on Shabbos. These poskim therefore maintain that one may not learn Pirkei Avos on Shabbos that is either Erev Tisha B'Av or Tisha B'Av (Rama 553:2).

However, many Acharonim contend that the restriction on Torah learning is sufficient, and one need not be strict and refrain from learning general Torah topics on Erev Tisha B'Av. This is especially true when Erev Tisha B'Av or Tisha B'Av occur on Shabbos (Mishnah Berurah ad loc.). According to this opinion, learning

Pirkei Avos would be permissible on Shabbos Erev Tisha B'Av. However, as we mentioned, the custom is not to learn Pirkei Avos on that Shabbos.

BEFORE AND AFTER

When studying the weekly perek, two additional mishnayos are also recited, one beforehand and one afterwards. The mishnah recited as an introduction, "All of Yisroel have a portion in the World to Come," is actually a mishnah in Sanhedrin (90a) [KolBo #40; Mateh Moshe #486; Sefer Hamanig, Hilchos Shabbos]. Why is this the introduction to the study of Pirkei Avos? Several reasons have been suggested:

1) When studying Pirkei Avos, a person might mistakenly believe that if he does not succeed in fulfilling all of the ethical teachings of Avos that he will not have a portion in Olam Haba. Therefore, in order to counter this, the Mishnah of "All of Yisroel have a portion in the World to Come" precedes Pirkei Avos (Medrash Shmuel, end of Introduction).

2) Whenever a person wishes to perform any action, it is preferable if at the outset he realizes what the purpose of this action is. This is because, usually if a person is not aware of why he is doing something, he will not complete it. Furthermore, if a person understands at the outset that his goal is easily attainable, his whole approach to the task will be different. It will suddenly become much easier to see it through.

For this reason, the Mishnah of "All Yisroel have a portion in the World to Come" is the introduction to Pirkei Avos. This Mishnah encapsulates these points: a) the purpose of following the ethical teachings of Avos is to obtain his portion in Olam Haba and b) reaching this goal is easy, for everyone already has a portion. All one has to do is earn it (Rav Moshe Almushnini, cited by Medrash Shmuel, Introduction).

CONCLUDING POSITIVELY

The concluding Mishnah of Pirkei Avos, "Said Rabbi Chananya ben Akasha: 'HaKadosh Boruch Hu wished to bestow merit on Yisroel, therefore He increased for them Torah and mitzvos,'" is the last Mishnah in Makkos (23b). Some of the reasons for reciting this Mishnah at this point include:

1) Through the learning of Pirkei Avos a person begins to realize the great responsibility he has in fulfilling its teachings. This might cause him to become overwhelmed. In order to counter this, he reads in the concluding Mishnah that Hashem did not give us the mitzvos to be overbearing, but rather in order to bestow merit upon us. This, though, is meant to give him the fortitude he needs to fulfill his obligations (Medrash Chachomim, Avos).

2) There is a minhag that when Pirkei Avos is learned publicly, kaddish is recited upon concluding. According to some opinions, kaddish is not recited after learning Mishnayos, but rather after aggadata (see Mishnah Berurah 54:9). The Mishnah of Rabbi Chananya ben Akasha is also aggadata. Therefore, we recite it at the end of the Pirkei Avos, in order to be able to recite kaddish afterwards.

Through the learning of Pirkei Avos may we all be able to improve our bein adam lechaveiro and merit to a true kabbolas haTorah on Chag HaShavuot!

**Please address all comments and requests to
HAMELAKET@hotmail.com**