

Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet

BAMIDBAR 5784

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

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Home Weekly Parsha BAMIDBAR Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

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

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

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

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

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

No matter how bleak and barren the desert landscape in which we currently find ourselves, we should always be cognizant of the ability of Torah to refresh and renew us. The Jewish people are an old nation and yet our powers of

rejuvenation have never waned. We were and are constantly nourished by the waters of Torah irrespective of whatever desert we found or find ourselves in. The choice of Jewish tradition to call this book of the Torah by the name of Bamidbar - in the desert – is meant to convey to us this message of hope, constant redemption, and rebirth.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

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Liminal Space

BAMIDBAR

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

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

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

Arnold Van Gennep, in his *The Rites of Passage*, argued that societies develop rituals to mark the transition from one state to the next – from childhood to adulthood, for example, or from being single to being married – and they involve three stages. The first is separation, a symbolic break with the past. The third is incorporation, re-entering society with a new identity. Between the two is the crucial stage of transition when, having said goodbye to who you were but not yet hello to who you are about to become, you are recast, reborn, refashioned.[1]

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

descendants, alone with God, cast off one identity and assume another.

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

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

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

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

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

"Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her . . . There she will respond as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt. "In that day," declares the Lord, "you will call Me 'my husband'; you will no longer call Me 'my Master.'"

Hos. 2:14-16

We also now understand the significance of the account at the beginning of *Bamidbar*, in which the twelve tribes were encamped, in rows of three on the four sides of the Tabernacle, each equidistant from the holy. Each tribe was different, but (with the exception of the Levites) all were equal. They ate the same food, manna from heaven. They drank the same drink, water from a rock or well. None yet

had lands of their own, for the desert has no owners. There was no economic or territorial conflict between them.

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

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

Yet *Bamidbar* opens, as does the book of *Bereishit*, with a scene of blessed order, there natural, here social, there divided into six days, here into twelve (2x6) tribes, each person in *Bamidbar* like each species in *Bereishit*, in his or her rightful place, "each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house" (Num. 2:1).

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

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

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

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

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

Astrology and Jewish Law

Revivim

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

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

Q: According to the Sages of Israel, is there truth in astrological prediction? And is it permissible to use

astrology to inquire about future predictions, and personality analysis?

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

Astronomy and Astrology

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

The Position of the Sages of Israel

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

The Explanation and Debate on the Status of Astrology

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

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

The Development of Science and the Decline of Intuitive Wisdom

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

It turns out that those who believed in the truth of astrology relied on cases where astrologers succeeded in predicting the future. In contrast, those who denied its truth subjected it to a more severe test, demanding higher levels of accuracy that it could not meet, especially in generations where the best talent was directed toward precise science, at the expense of developing the mystical sense.

Three Opinions

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

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

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

The Practical Halachic Ruling

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

Is it Permissible to Use Astrology for Personality Assessment?

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

As we have learned, according to Rambam, there is no truth in astrology, both because it relies on incorrect assumptions, and because a person’s fate can change through good or bad deeds (Iggeret Le’Chachmei Marseille). Therefore, it is forbidden to seek astrological advice, since the Torah has warned us to distance ourselves from falsehood. One who follows false advice misleads himself into thinking he has character traits that he does not actually possess, and lacks qualities he truly has. Instead of striving to develop his character traits according to his understanding, and the guidance of his rabbis and friends, he will pursue vanities, and neglect developing his character traits and talents properly. Over the years this view has strengthened, and its proponents cite evidence from cases of people who, following such advice, invested

effort in a direction that turned out to be extremely harmful – such as being told they were gifted in business, only to ultimately lose their entire fortune, or hearing that they lacked talent in a certain field, only to succeed greatly in that very field many years later.

However, on the other hand, according to those who hold that astrology sometimes contains truth, it would be permissible for a person to use astrology to deepen his understanding of his character and traits. For if one knows he is prone to a certain sin, he can be more careful to avoid it, and if he knows he has talent in a certain area, he can develop it further. As our Sages said (Shabbat 156a) about one born under the constellation of Mars, that by nature, he will tend toward bloodshed, but it is within his ability to choose whether to be a murderer, a ritual slaughterer, a doctor who performs therapeutic bloodletting, or a mohel (circumciser). Likewise, our Sages related (Shabbat 156b) about the mother of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak, that astrologers told her that her son would be a thief, therefore she was insistent that he always wear a head covering, so that he would have fear of Heaven. When he grew older, she implored him to always be careful to wear a head covering and pray to God for mercy that the evil inclination not control him. At first, he did not understand why his mother was so concerned. But one day, while sitting and studying under a date palm tree, his head covering fell off. He raised his eyes to the palm tree and saw the dates there. His desire overcame him, and due to the intense craving to steal them, he climbed the palm tree, and pulled off a cluster with his teeth. At that moment, he understood his mother’s concern, for the astrologers were correct, that by nature, his desire drew him to theft. However, ultimately, they erred – for by virtue of his faith and Torah study, Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak became one of the great Torah Sages of Israel.

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

In Practice

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

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

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Parshat Bemidbar: Desert, Divine Word, and Divine Habitation

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“And God spoke unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they were come out of the Land of Egypt.” (Numbers 1:1)

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

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

The Hebrew word for desert, midbar, is also pregnant with meanings and allusions which in many ways have served as a beacon for our Jewish exile. The root noun from which midbar is built is d-b-r, which means leader or shepherd. After all, the most ancient occupation known to humanity is shepherding, and the desert is the most natural place for the shepherd to lead his flock: the sheep can comfortably wander in a virtual no-man’s land and graze on the vegetation of the various oases or their outskirts without the problem of stealing from private property or harming the ecology of settled habitations. And perhaps d-b-r means leader-shepherd because it also means word: the shepherd directs the flock using meaningful sounds and words, and the leader of people must also have the ability to inspire and lead with the verbal message he communicates; indeed, the “Ten Words” (or Ten Commandments, Aseret HaDibrot) were revealed in the Sinai desert, and they govern Israel – as well as a good part of the world – to this very day.

Moreover, it must be noted that wherever the Israelites wandered in the desert, they were always accompanied by the portable desert Mishkan, or Sanctuary, which is derived from Shekhina, Divine Presence. However, God was not in the Sanctuary; even the greatest expanse of the heavens cannot contain the Divine Presence, declared King Solomon when he dedicated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem (I Kings 8:27). It was rather God’s word, dibur, which was in the Sanctuary, in the form of the “Ten Words” on the Tablets of Stone preserved in the Holy Ark, as well as the ongoing and continuing word of God which He would speak (vedibarti, Exodus 25:22) from between the cherubs on the ends of the Kapporet above the Holy Ark. It was by means of these divine words that even the desert, the midbar – a metaphor for an inhospitable and even alien exile environment which is boiling hot by day, freezing cold by night, and deficient in water which is the very

elixir of life – can become transformed into sacred space, the place of the divine word (dibur). And indeed those words from the Desert of Mount Sinai (diburim) succeeded in sanctifying the many Marrakeshes and Vilnas and New Yorks of our wanderings! God’s word can transform a desert – any place and every place – into a veritable sanctuary; indeed the world is a midbar waiting to become a dvir (sanctuary) by means of God’s dibur, communicated by inspired leaders, dabarim.

Postscript: A Story

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

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

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

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

Before I could say “Jackie Robinson,” he was inside the disco – and as a good host, I felt obliged to follow him. He sported a long beard and side-locks, and was wearing a shtreimel (fur hat) and kapote (silk gabardine), and I was dressed in my Sabbath Prince Albert, kippa and ritual fringes out. As we entered the disco, the band of Israelis immediately stopped playing. I recognized three young men from the synagogue, who seemed totally discombobulated; two ran out covering their faces, and the third tried to explain to me that he wasn’t really there, that

his mother had had some kind of attack and he thought that her doctor might be at the disco.... Rabbi Grossman began to sing Sabbath melodies. Almost miraculously, the men danced on one side, the women on the other. After about twenty minutes he urged me to speak to them in English. I told them of the magical beauty, the joy, and the love of the Sabbath, and they listened with rapt attention. Rabbi Grossman led them in one more song – and we left.

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

Shabbat Shalom

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Rav Yehudah Hachassid and His Shidduchin

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: A Shidduch Crisis

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

Question #2: Must we turn down this shidduch?

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

Answer:

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

Who was Rav Yehudah Hachassid?

Well, to complicate matters a bit, there were two people in Jewish history who were called Rav Yehudah Hachassid. These two individuals lived hundreds of years apart, and, to the best of my knowledge, had no known connection to one another, other than that they were both esteemed Ashkenazic leaders in their respective generations. The Rav Yehudah Hachassid of the seventeenth century, famed as the builder of a shul in the Old City of Jerusalem, now called the Churva shul, spearheaded the first “modern” effort to establish an Ashkenazi community in the holy city. Although this failed attempt had political and practical

ramifications that lasted until the middle of the twentieth century, I have never heard him blamed for the blocking of a potential shidduch.

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

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

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

The tzava'ah of Rav Yehudah Hachassid

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

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

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

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

- Two mechutanim should not have the same name.

- Two mechutanim should not make two shidduchim, a son with a daughter and a daughter with a son.

- One should not marry one's niece, either his brother's daughter or his sister's daughter.

- A father and son should not marry two sisters.

- Two brothers should not marry two sisters, nor should they marry a mother and her daughter.
- A stepbrother and a stepsister should not marry.
- Two married brothers should not live in the same city.

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

Selective service

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

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

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

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

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

The responsum of the Noda Biyehudah

No discussion of the instructions of Rav Yehudah Hachassid is complete without mentioning a responsum of the Noda Biyehudah, the rav of Prague and posek hador of the eighteenth century. The Noda Biyehudah (Shu't Even Ha'ezer II #79) discusses the following case: A shidduch was suggested for the sister-in-law of a certain Reb Dovid, a close talmid of the Noda Biyehudah, in which the proposed chosson had once had his name changed, because

of illness, to the name of the girl's father. The Noda Biyehudah replied to Reb Dovid that generally he does not discuss questions that are not based on sources in Talmud and authorities. Nevertheless, he writes that he will break his usual rules and answer the inquiry.

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

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

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

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

Explaining Rav Yehudah Hachassid's concern

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

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

Marry a talmid chacham

Aside from the other reasons why the Noda Biyehudah feels that this shidduch can proceed, he adds another rule: It is more important for someone to marry off his daughter to a talmid chacham, which the Gemara says is the most

important thing to look for in a shidduch, than to worry oneself about names, a concern that has no source in the Gemara.

At this point, let us examine one of our opening questions: “My husband’s name is Chayim Shelomoh, and an excellent shidduch possibility was just suggested for my daughter. However, the bachur’s name, which was originally Shelomoh, was changed to Chayim Shelomoh when he was ill as a child. May we proceed with this shidduch?”

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

Stricter approaches

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

In conclusion

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

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

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Perceptions

By Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Parshas Bamidbar

What's For Desert?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But if you had asked Moshe who the humblest person in the world is, he would have told you that he was. But it would not have been self-praise at all, just a statement of fact. Humility does not mean you have to lie about your

greatness, just that you realize its source, God Himself. Therefore, when you talk about it, it is as if you are referring to someone else, even though you know you are talking about yourself.

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

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

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

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Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Bamidbar

Counted Out

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Israelite has the mitzvos that the Kohen cannot perform. He may visit the dying and assist in the burial of any deceased. It is the Israelite who gives the tithes and supports the poor. The Kohen and Levi inherit no land from which they could perform myriad commandments. True, the Israelite cannot serve in the Temple, but his trumpeting may resound as loud as his brother's. As long as he plays it in the right position.

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

Good Shabbos

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Bamidbar: She's family

In Jewish law, a maidservant isn't a lowly slave.

Dr. Elliot Resnick

Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch

"Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families..." (Numbers 1:2).

The Hebrew word for "family" is mishpacha, which comes from the root shefach. Interestingly, the word for "maidservant" – shifchah – also comes from this root. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch writes that this linguistic connection teaches us that the "person who, in the non-Jewish point of view, stands at the very lowest social grade

is raised, in the Jewish point of view, to a member of the family.”

There’s more. Every *kesubah* (Jewish marriage contract) declares that a husband must provide his wife three items (food, clothing, and intimate attention). Where does this obligation appear in the Torah? In the context of a maidservant whose father sold her into slavery (Exodus 21:10)! In other words, when the Torah “wants to lay down...the elementary rights of the daughters of its people, it picks out for its example a woman of the very lowest social grade, the child of a beggar, of a man who...to save his child and himself from starvation, has to sell her as a slave.”

The “Torah takes this wife, and sets her beside an ordinary bride – a girl married out of a free rich family – and proclaims the great maxim: ‘Not by one hairbreadth may the treatment of the one differ from that given to the other.’” Amazing!

This command is hardly self-evident. Exodus 21:10 concerns a man who marries his father’s maidservant (whom his father rejected for himself). He, unlike his father, never knew this woman as a free individual. He always knew her as a slave. Moreover, the verse informs us that he subsequently married a second woman – a regular, free Jewess – in addition to his “maidservant wife.”

It would only be natural, then, for him to treat his first wife with a measure of disrespect or neglect. But the Torah has such a high regard for the inherent worth of each individual that it warns him to treat his “maidservant wife” exactly as he does his “regular wife”!

A *shifchah* – a maidservant – isn’t a lowly individual in the eyes of the Torah. She’s *mishpachah*. And when she marries, she’s an honored wife.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) – head of the Jewish community in Frankfurt, Germany for over 35 years – was a prolific writer whose ideas, passion, and brilliance helped save German Jewry from the onslaught of modernity.

Elliot Resnick, PhD, is the host of “The Elliot Resnick Show” and the editor of an upcoming work on etymological explanations in Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch’s commentary on Chumash.

Office of the Chief Rabbi Mirvir

Why the wilderness? D’var Torah for Parshat Bamidbar.

Surely the Torah didn’t need to use that term ‘Bamidbar’ and yet at the commencement of this week’s portion which is at the beginning of a new book of the Torah, we are told ‘Bamidbar Sinai’.

It was not just ‘in Sinai’, but ‘in the wilderness of Sinai’ that the tent of meeting was constructed and where the Torah was given.

Indeed, nearly every single year *Bamidbar* is read on the Shabbat prior to the festival of Shavuot, which recalls the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

So why is the wilderness of such great significance for us? So many of our commentators give beautiful reasons and I want to share with you just two.

The first is that a wilderness is a symbol of humility, it doesn’t contain much to boast about, and similarly for us to acquire Torah, to appreciate it, to be able and responsible representatives of a Torah way of life, we need to have humility.

We need to walk in the footsteps of Moses, our greatest teacher, who was ‘*anav mikol adam*’ – he was more humble than anyone else.

Then there is a second message conveyed by *Bamidbar*.

A desert is ‘*hefker*’, it belongs to the entire nation. There is no private property within it, it is there for everybody, and so too the Torah was given in a wilderness to let us know Torah belongs to everyone. It’s not the exclusive property of any one segment or group of Jewish people.

And that is such a strong message at this time of the year as we approach the festival of Shavuot.

Just as at the Seder of Pesach, we recognise that the Torah is given to four different types of Jewish people, those who are wise, those who let us down, those who are simple, those who do not even know how to ask – we include everybody.

So too, at this time, we recognise that Torah is there for absolutely every one of us.

So therefore, as we approach Shavuot this year, let us always remember to maintain that deep sense of humility and never to forget that Torah is there for absolutely every one of us.

‘*Vetein chelkeinu b’toratecha*’ – let every single person say ‘I want my portion in the Torah which belongs to us all’.

Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Bamidbar

Pagiel and Achira Took on Aliases to Remind Themselves They Were in a Bad Neighborhood

These *divrei Torah* were adapted from the *hashkafa* portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand’s *Commuter Chavrusah Series* on the weekly portion: #1338 — Can You Make The Second Day of Shavuot Early? Can American Mohel in Israel Perform A Bris on the Second Day of Shavuot. Good Shabbos

In *Parshas Bamidbar*, the Torah not only specifies the census of *Bnei Yisrael* when they came into *Eretz Yisrael*, it also specifies the “*seder hadegalim*” – the configuration in which they would travel. The twelve *shevatim* (tribes) were divided up into four “*machanos*” (camps), which were all positioned around the *Mishkan*.

Each machaneh (camp) included three shevatim. Machaneh Don (the camp of Don) included the shevet (tribe) of Don and also the shevet of Asher, led by Pagiel ben Achran and the shevet of Naftali, led by Achira ben Einan. These two princes, from the shevatim of Asher and Naftali, had rather strange names. We have never come across anyone named either Pagiel, Achira, Achran, or Einan! None less a personage than Rabbeinu Ephraim (one of the Ba'alei Tosefos) comments that these four rather strange names were not the names given to either of these princes or their fathers at their respective brissim. He says that they were all adopted names.

Why did they adopt these names? Rabbeinu Ephraim explains that Machaneh Don was situated at the north side of the travel configuration. It is known that Shevet Don brought along an idol, known as Pesel Michah, from the time they left Mitzrayim, until they entered Eretz Yisrael (and even after they entered Eretz Yisrael). Thus, there was an Avodah Zarah in Machaneh Don! The unfortunate neighbors of Shevet Don were Shevet Asher and Shevet Naftali. These two shevatim were none too pleased that they had a neighbor who was travelling with an idol!

Consider a situation where you know that your next-door neighbor is a drug dealer. How will that make you feel? It is not like they had the option to pick up and move because Hashem put them there! The princes of Shevet Naftali and Shevet Asher were very afraid that this proclivity for idols would rub off on them and their shevatim. Therefore, they changed their names to remind themselves of the fact that they were living in a very hostile spiritual environment.

The prince of Asher called himself Pagi-el, which is a short form of the statement "Pagah bi El" (G-d put me in a bad situation). Son of Achran – Achran means a person who corrupts Bnai Yisroel. He wished to announce "I am Pagiel ben Achran: Hashem put me in this situation where I am in proximity to the people of Shevet Don, who are ocher es Yisrael – they corrupt the rest of Klal Yisrael. He gave himself this name to constantly remind himself and others "I have very bad neighbors and if I don't watch myself, I am going to wind up like that." The prince of Naftali called himself Achi-Rah, literally "My Bad Brother," as if to say "I am next to my bad brother." Son of Einan – etymologically related to the anan (cloud), which expelled sinners.

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

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

The first lesson is that a person is affected by his neighbors and his neighborhood. A person can live in the best of

cities but if his particular neighbors or neighborhood is not up to snuff, it eventually affects him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

reminder: “This is how I felt THEN and that is the TRUTH.”

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

The Lesson of a Census Anomaly

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

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

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

There is a similar story mentioned by the Chofetz Chaim:

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

me. You were crying your eyes out. Do you have a problem?”

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

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

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

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Parshas Bamidbar

Yochanan Zweig

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

Making it Count

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

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

This is odd for a number of reasons; first, what is so significant about this counting that the event has come to

define the entire sefer? In other words, Sefer Bamidbar spans a period of forty years, so why does an event that took place at the beginning of the forty years define the entire volume?

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

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

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

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

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

In other words, true love is taking responsibility for the object of your affection. A true love relationship requires you to be a giver. This means making sure your beloved is well taken care of (obviously, the other party has to

respond in kind for it to be a relationship and not some kind of self-sacrificing martyrdom).

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

Patrilineal Descent?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

within the Torah – their own identity — and that it is why Moshe is credited in giving birth to them.

לע"נ

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