

Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet

BAMIDBAR 5783

Weekly Parsha BAMIDBAR

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

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

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

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

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

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

It is not only that the numbers don't change much, the people and the generations didn't and don't change much either. Human nature remains constant. But our task is to recognize that and channel our human nature into

productive and holy actions and behavior – to bend to a nobility of will and loyalty. Only by recognizing the propensity of our nature will we be able to accomplish this necessary and noble goal.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

The Sound of Silence

BAMIDBAR

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

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

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

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

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

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

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

Judaism?” Wiesel replied: “Judaism is full of silences ... but we don’t talk about them.”

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

So silence in Tanach often has a negative connotation. “Aaron was silent,” says the Torah, after the death of his two sons Nadav and Avihu (Lev. 10:3). “The dead do not praise you,” says Psalm 115, “nor do those who go down to the silence [of the grave].” When Job’s friends came to comfort him after the loss of his children and other afflictions, “they sat down with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, yet no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great.” (Job 2:13). But not all silence is sad. Psalms tells us that “to You, silence is praise” (Ps. 65:2). If we are truly in awe at the greatness of God, the vastness of the universe and the almost infinite extent of time, our deepest emotions will indeed lie too deep for words. We will experience silent communion.

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

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

Mishna Avot 1:17

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

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

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

1 Sam. 1:13

God hears our silent cry. In the agonising tale of how Sarah told Abraham to send Hagar and her son away, the Torah tells us that when their water ran out and the young Ishmael was at the point of dying, Hagar cried, yet God heard “the voice of the child” (Gen. 21:16-17). Earlier when the

angels came to visit Abraham and told him that Sarah would have a child, Sarah laughed inwardly, that is, silently, yet she was heard by God (Gen. 18:12-13). God hears our thoughts even when they are not expressed in speech.

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

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

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

“The heavens declare the glory of God

The skies proclaim the work of His hands.

Day to day they pour forth speech,

Night to night they communicate knowledge.

There is no speech, there are no words,

Their voice is not heard.

Yet their music carries throughout the earth.”

Tehillim 19

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

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

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

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

In the deserts of the heart

Let the healing fountain start.

From time to time we need to step back from the noise and hubbub of the social world and create in our hearts the stillness of the desert where, within the silence, we can hear the kol demamah dakah, the still, small voice of God, telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced by God's everlasting arms, we are not alone.[6]

[1] Mechilta, Yitro, Bachodesh, 1.

[2] Ibid., 5.

[3] Ibid.

[4] BBC television, first shown 1977.

[5] Koren Shalem Siddur.

[6] For more on the theme of listening, see parshat Bereishit, "The Art of Listening," and parshat Eikev, "The Spirituality of Listening."

Shabbat Shalom: Bamidbar (Numbers 1:1 – 4:20)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – "Count the heads of the entire witness-congregation of Israel" (Numbers 1:2).

The Book of Numbers opens with a most optimistic picture of a nation poised for redemption. The Israelites have been freed from Egypt with great miracles and wonders. They have received the Revelation at Sinai which provides them with a moral and ethical constitution for a soon-to-be-established sovereign state along with a faith commitment which establishes their mission to the world. The nation is now structured into 12 uniquely endowed and individually directed tribes who are united around the Sanctuary. Physical and spiritual defenses are organized with a standing army for military might, and the tribe of Levi dedicated to teaching Torah and arranging the sacrificial service. Everything seems ready for the conquest and settlement of the Promised Land of Israel!

Instead what follows is total degeneration. The Israelites become involved in petty squabbles and tiresome complaints, the reconnaissance mission advises against entering Israel (Numbers 13:27-29), Korah, Datan and Aviram stage a rebellion against Moses, and a prince of one of the tribes publicly fornicates with a Midianite woman. The result is that the entire generation that left Egypt is condemned to die in the wilderness, and only Moses' successor, Joshua, and the new generation which has been born in the desert may live in the Promised Land.

What happened, and why? How can a nation so committed to becoming a "kingdom of priest-teachers and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6) lose their idealistic sense of purpose and "gang up" against the very person who was their great liberator and law-giver?

This fourth Book of the Bible is called "Numbers," or "Sefer Pikudim," – The Book of the Censuses – referring to the two population counts which are taken between its covers.

Indeed, our Book opens with a command to count the Israelites, stipulating as follows:

"Count the heads of the entire witness-congregation of the children of Israel, in accordance with their families, with their household parents, with the number of names of each male body, from 20 years of age and above, everyone eligible for army conscription..." (Numbers 1:2, 3).

These are the details required for the census at the beginning of our weekly portion, when the Israelites are still imbued with a sense of mission and "manifest destiny," and when they still expect to wage a war for the liberation of the Land of Israel.

Twenty-five chapters later, however, after the scouts' refusal to conquer Israel, after the various rebellions against Moses culminating in Prince Zimri ben Sadon's shameful public adultery with the Midianite in the presence of Moses himself, a second census is ordered. But you will notice that the identification of each Israelite for the purpose of this census is radically different from the way it was in the previous one:

"Count the heads of the entire witness-congregation of the children of Israel, from twenty years of age and above, with their household parents, everyone eligible for army conscription..." (Numbers 26: 2).

The first count included "the families (providing everyone's tribal affiliation harking back to Jacob, Isaac and Abraham), the household parents, and the individual personal names". The second time, the tribal affiliation and the personal names of each were excluded, providing only the names of the household parents of each individual!

These significant omissions may help to explain the degeneration of the Israelites, and why the Midrash called it The Book of the Censuses. In the first census, taken during the heyday of the generation of the exodus, each individual Israelite felt connected to his tribal parent, to his Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs. But by the time of the second census, that connection was woefully gone. Each individual related only to their immediate biological parents.

The Book of Exodus, our birth as a nation, is built upon the foundations set out in the Book of Genesis; our origins as a very special family. The patriarchs and matriarchs were originally chosen by God because of their commitment to "compassionate righteousness and moral justice," traits and ideals which they were to "command their children and their households after them" (Genesis 18:19). This unique Hebraic culture was to be nurtured, and expressed in the Land of Israel, which is the very "body", the physical matrix, of our eternal covenant with God. The towering personalities of the Book of Genesis develop, falter, repair, sacrifice, persevere and ultimately prevail on these twin altars of commitment to land and law, to righteousness and Israel. They set the foundations for the continuity of an eternal nation through whom the entire world will eventually be blessed at the time of ultimate redemption.

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

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

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

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

Shabbat Shalom

The Numbers Game

Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: Pie r Squared

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

Question #2: Puzzled by the Pasuk

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

Question #3: Performing Mitzvos Accurately

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

Introduction:

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

(1) Why would Chazal calculate using inaccurate approximations?

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

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

The Slide Rule versus the Calculator

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

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

How Irrational Are You?

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

Pi

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

The Diagonal of a Square

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

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

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

Chazal or Tanach?

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

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

Gemara Eruvin

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

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

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

A Different Question

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

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

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

Another Rosh

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

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

Curiosity about the Tosafos Harosh

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

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

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

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

Mathematical Accuracy

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

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

is less than a tefach wide? The answer is that this is a halachah that we derive from the verse."

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

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

How Straight Are My Tefillin?

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

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

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

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

An Alternate Approach

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

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

Conclusion:

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

Weekly Biblical Thoughts

Rabbi Ben-Tzion Spitz

Commentary based on the Bat Ayin

The Trap of Sustenance (Bamidbar)

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

At the opening of the Book of Numbers, we have a noteworthy confluence of space and time. The Torah describes how God spoke to Moses. It tells us that it was in the desert of Sinai, in the Tabernacle, starting from the

more general geographic description (desert) and then giving us the very specific location (Tabernacle). The verse continues to tell us that it was on the first day of the second month of the second year of the Exodus, namely the very specific day of the month, followed by the more general month of the year and the even more general year.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

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

Yom Yerushalayim: “Jerusalem” does not appear in the Torah – why?

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Why does the name of Jerusalem not appear in the Torah? On 21 separate occasions in the book of Devarim we are told about, “bamakom asher yivchar Hashem,” – “the place which God shall choose,” and we all know that it’s Jerusalem.

Similarly in the book of Bereishit, Malkitzedek who came out to welcome Abraham is described as the king of ‘Shalem’, which was Jerusalem. Abraham sought to sacrifice his son Yitzchak at the akaidah on ‘Har Hamoriah’ (Mount Moriah) which is Jerusalem. It seems as if the Torah’s going out of its way not to mention Jerusalem by name!

The Rambam in his Moreh Nevuchim, his Guide to the Perplexed, gives three reasons for this, and the third, which he states is the most powerful, is in order to preserve the unity of the Jewish people.

As the nation came, under the leadership of Joshua, into the Promised Land to possess it, says the Rambam, had they known exactly where Jerusalem was, there was a danger that there could be civil war – each tribe could fight against the others in an attempt to gain control over that city, and ultimately rule the whole people. Therefore, Jerusalem was hidden from them. The Rambam further says that it was only once a king would be appointed and anointed to rule over the entire people that Jerusalem would be established as the eternal capital of the Jewish nation.

It is clear that King David was aware of the way in which Jerusalem would serve to unify the people. That is why, when he bought the city from Arana the Jebusite, he raised 50 shekels from each of the 12 tribes towards the 600 shekel cost: he wanted them all to have a ‘chelek’, a portion in it, so that it would belong to all.

In addition, through all the ‘mishmarot’, the procedures of the Temple service, there were always representatives of all tribes to guarantee that the temple service ran collectively. We had the half shekel contribution which came from every individual to ensure that Jerusalem and its Temple service would always belong to the entire nation.

No wonder therefore that in Psalm 122 we are told, “Yerushalayim habenuyah k’ir shechubra la yachdav.” – “Jerusalem is built as a city which is joined up by all of its parts.”

The hilltops, the mountains, the valleys, they all join up in order to produce one single city representing the unity of the entire people of Israel.

As we now focus our attention on Jerusalem in anticipation of Yom Yerushalayim, the glorious festival of Jerusalem

Day, let us also focus our attention on Jewish unity so that we should be ‘chubra la yachdav’ – totally connected as one entity always. I wish you all chag sameach.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Bamidbar

Love Child

This week, Moshe is commanded to count each tribe and tally the numbers — thus the name of the Sefer BaMidbar is appropriately translated as The Book of Numbers. In a separate counting, the tribe of Levi is also enumerated. However, before the Torah counts the members of the tribe of Levi it reckons a subdivision of that tribe, the four children of Ahron who were designated as Kohanim (priests).

The Torah mentions those children by name, Numbers 3: 1-3: “These are the offspring of Ahron and Moshe on the day that Hashem spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai. These are the names of Ahron’s children: Nadav, Avihu, Elozor and Isamar. These are the names of the children of Ahron who were Kohanim (priests), who were anointed to serve and minister.”

An obvious question arises: the four children are also identified as sons of Moshe. They were not. In fact, Moshe’s offspring are not mentioned in this section at all.

Moshe’s mention as a forebearer of Ahron’s children is in the context of a phrase that is seemingly out of place. “These are the offspring of Ahron and Moshe on the day that Hashem spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai.” What does speaking to Moshe at Sinai have to do with Moshe’s relationship to his nephews?

The Talmud in Sanhedrin 19b derives from this verse that if one teaches someone else’s children Torah it is as if he bore them. Thus, it is understandable that the Torah considers the children of Ahron, Moshe’s offspring, “on the day that Hashem spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai.”

Yet it is troubling. Why is Moshe considered a parent because he taught Torah to his nephews? Is that the greatest reason for the adulation that is due Moshe? He led the Jews, his nephews included from, Egypt. He orchestrated the splitting of the sea, and he saved them from heavenly retribution time and time again. Why is he considered as a parent only in the role of an educator? Why can’t Moshe be considered as a savior or a patron, “as if he bore them?”

Rav Lazer Gordon, the Telshe Rosh Yeshiva, had a man visit his Yeshiva to find a suitable match for his daughter. The man pointed to a boy who seemed very steeped in his studies and inquired about him. “Oh,” said Reb Laizer. “He is my Yankele. He is one of the most brilliant students in Telshe.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Good Shabbos!

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

Advocacy Instead of Coercion

May 12, 2023

Revivim

RABBI ELIEZER MELAMED

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

The Clash of Values

As part of the debate surrounding the need for a deep overhaul of the legal system, concerns arise from the opponents of the reform, namely, that those who support the reform which will simultaneously strengthen the Jewish identity of the state, strive to dictate religious laws by force and coercion while suppressing liberal values, primarily, freedom of the individual. The concern stems from the perception that there is a fundamental conflict between traditional Jewish values and liberal values that are

considered secular. However, the truth is that the value of freedom, which is the foundation of liberalism, is one of the most basic values in Judaism. So the real question is: how can we give room in the State of Israel to the entirety of Jewish values – on the one hand, the traditional values recognized as sacred, such as Talmud Torah, family, Shabbat and kashrut, and on the other hand, the value of freedom and human rights, which are also sacred Jewish values?

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

Traditional Jewish Values Require Coercion

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

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

The Sacred Value of Freedom Greatly Restricts Coercion

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

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

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

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

Public Responsibility Requires Advocacy and Protest, Not Coercion

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

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

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

Enrichment and Reconciliation between Obligation and Freedom

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

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

More on the Value of Freedom

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

A Canaanite Slave

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

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

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

The Right of Slaves to Observe Mitzvot and Immigrate to Israel

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

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

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

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

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

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Bamidbar

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Similarly, he says, the reason that when they left Mitzrayim they couldn't be divided into groups with flags is because they did not yet have such a central unifying entity to rally around. That was all true until they built the Mishkan. Once they built the Mishkan, which traveled in the midst of the camp, the Mishkan became the glue that held everyone

together. "Yes, you have your job and I have my job but at the end of the day, we need to cooperate." There is a higher purpose over here that unifies everyone who travels around the Mishkan.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Good Shabbos and Good Yom Tov.

Who Owns Judaism?

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

Rabbi YY Jacobson

The Desert

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

[1]

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

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

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

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

Absolute Sublimity

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

But Torah cannot be put into a particular cultural or artistic perspective. Torah is not culture, literature, art, history, law, or fiction. Torah embodies the eternal truths about existence, life, and destiny that speak in every language, in every culture, in every age, and to every soul. The Torah cannot be reduced to a particular time frame or reference point. It benefits all the arts but never competes with them. Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel (himself a scion of the great Chasidic masters) put it thus: [4] "Why does the Bible surpass everything created by man? Why is there no work worthy of comparison with it? Why is there no substitute for the Bible, no parallel to the history it has engendered? Why must all who seek the living G-d turn to its pages?"

"Set the Bible beside any of the truly great books produced by the genius of man and see how they are diminished in stature. The Bible shows no concern with literary form, with verbal beauty, yet its absolute sublimity rings through all its pages. Its lines are so monumental and at the same time so simple that whoever tries to compete with them produces either a commentary or a caricature. It is a work we do not know how to assess. Other books you can estimate, you can measure, compare; the Bible you can only extol. Its insights surpass our standards. There is nothing greater. In three thousand years it has not aged a day. It is a book that cannot die. Oblivion shuns its pages." "Absolute sublimity." Such a work must be taught and transmitted in a desert. A desert is not associated with any particular culture or form of living. A desert is barren, raw, and plain. A desert is not sophisticated; it is real and simple. [5]

Ownerless

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

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

Life in the Fast Lane

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

But that is not Torah.

Torah does not tell us that life is easy and that faith is bliss. On the contrary, we were placed in a personal and global

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[6] Yalkut Shemoni to Yesro Remez 275

[7] Sefer Hamaamarim 5655 p. 188

[8] See Tanya chapters 27; 36

Parshas Bamidbar

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An example of this is buying something that you intend to use but with the knowledge that after using it you will return it to the place of purchase for a full refund. Or amassing many tens of credit cards (sometimes hundreds) in order to receive all the incentives offered by each credit card issuer without ever intending to use the cards. In fact,

in many ways this is more devastating to a child's moral development than growing up with parents who steal outright. Eventually, a child might learn that stealing is wrong, but he will almost certainly never learn that breaking the spirit of the law is wrong.

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

Misplaced Giving

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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For the week ending 20 May 2023 / 29 Iyar 5783

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Parshat Bamidbar

You Are Not Everybody Else

"In the desert" (1:1)

It is the late 1800's.

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

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

He goes to the central train station to buy a ticket. The lady behind the ticket counter asks him what type of ticket he wants: first, second or third class. She sees he's not too

sure, so she says, "Third class tickets get you a place on the train but nothing more. You may also have to stand for the entire trip. Second class guarantees a seat, but it costs more." Giving him a quick once over, she figures that there's no point in describing first class.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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לע"נ

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
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