

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Bamidbar begins (1:2) with G-d's commandment to Moshe to take a census of the warrior-age men, including the commandment not to count the Tribe of Levi among them (1:49). He was then told that the Leviim were responsible for taking care of the Mishkan, including making sure that no one approached the Mishkan inappropriately (1:53). After these commandments were given, we are told that "the Children of Israel did everything that G-d commanded Moshe" (1:54). However, there doesn't seem to be any commandment that the rest of the nation needed to, or could, fulfill. Moshe was asked to take the census (with the help of the leaders), which he did, and the Leviim were asked to protect the sanctity of the Mishkan, which they did. But what exactly did "the Children of Israel" do? What were they being given credit for?

The Chizkuni provides two answers. The second is from the Ibn Ezra, who says that this refers to the fact that throughout all of the years in the desert they (the non-Leviim) never touched the Mishkan. Being that the Leviim wouldn't have let them, this hardly seems like much of an accomplishment. Nevertheless, it can be understood to be referring to allowing the Leviim to form that barrier, or, as the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 1:12) put it, "they distanced themselves from the Mishkan and gave room to the Leviim to camp around the Mishkan." Although much can be written about this approach to explaining what the Children of Israel "did," I would like to focus on the Chizkuni's first answer, which is pretty much a direct quote from the Midrash Rabbah (Vayikra Rabbah 33:4 and Bamidbar Rabbah 2:20).

"And where was Aharon? Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Nechemya said in the name of Rabbi Chiya that he went to verify their (the Children of Israel's) lineage. They said to him, 'before you try to verify our lineage, [first] verify the lineage of Pinechas the son of your son Elazar. Who was Elazar married to? Was it not to the daughter of Putiel (who came from Yisro)?' Since G-d saw that they were belittling him (Aharon), He came and verified his (Pinechas') lineage, [as it says,] 'Pinechas the son of Elazar the son of Aharon the priest' (Bamidbar 25:11), [i.e. Pinechas is] a priest the son of a priest, a zealot the son of a zealot." Huh? How does G-d sticking up for Aharon and Pinechas answer

the question of what the Children of Israel did that was considered following G-d's instructions? If anything, this Midrash is giving us an example of when they didn't do the right thing, not when they did!

Besides leaving us more confused (at first glance), there would seem to be a fundamental problem with the Chizkuni quoting this Midrash to explain our verse (1:54); this Midrash is explaining a totally different verse (2:34), answering questions that don't apply to ours. The commandment that they are being given credit for following there (2:34) was given to both Moshe and Aharon (2:1), yet when saying that the nation fulfilled the commandment (2:34), we are told that "they did everything that G-d commanded Moshe" without mentioning Aharon. The Midrash therefore asks where Aharon was, i.e. why was his name omitted (in 2:34). On the other hand, the commandments to take a census (1:1) and to exclude the Tribe of Levi from the census (1:48) were only given to Moshe (not Aharon); there would be no reason to include Aharon's name when telling us that these commandments were fulfilled. Why did the Chizkuni quote a Midrash that is explaining a completely different verse, with no relation to our verse, in an attempt to explain ours? And how does that Midrash address the issue raised by our verse (which is dealt with by the Chizkuni's own alternative answer)?

There were two commandments given that our verse could possibly be referring to; taking the census and having the Leviim guard the Mishkan. The Chizkuni's second answer assumes that it was the second commandment that was being fulfilled. I believe the Chizkuni's first answer is going under the assumption that it was the first commandment that they fulfilled. (The Torah could actually mean that the nation fulfilled both, with each answer explaining how the corresponding commandment was observed.) True, it was Moshe who was commanded to take the census, and he was commanded to have Aharon and the 12 Tribal Leaders help him. But the information (and proof) had to be provided by the people. They weren't just passive participants, and in fact could have protested against the census. Why would they protest against the census? There are several possible reasons. For one thing, this census was, in essence, a draft into the army (see Abarbanel); since at this point the sin of the spies had not yet occurred, the nation was preparing to go right into the Promised Land. They could have tried

**TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA
NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL AND THE
WORLD WIDE WEB AT [HTTP://AISHDAS.ORG](http://AISHDAS.ORG).
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZ@AISHDAS.ORG**

The material presented in this publication was collected from publicly available electronic mail, computer archives and the UseNet. It is being presented with the permission of the respective authors. Toras Aish is an independent publication, and does not necessarily reflect the views of any given synagogue.

**TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL
973-472-0180 OR EMAIL YITZ@AISHDAS.ORG**

delaying the war by delaying the census, or tried to avoid being drafted by not being counted. Additionally, by agreeing to this census, which didn't include the Leviim, they were also tacitly agreeing to allow the Tribe of Levi to be considered the priestly class, which was just what Korach and his followers would rebel against just a few months later. But they didn't try to delay or prevent the census, and the Torah is giving them credit for "doing all that G-d had commanded Moshe."

We don't know for sure why they might not have been thrilled with this census. What we do know, however, is that they weren't happy about it. How do we know? Because, as the Midrash tells us, when Aharon was initially part of the information-gathering contingent, they threw it back in his face, asking him to worry about his own family's lineage before prying into theirs. He therefore withdrew from the role, not even returning after the census was taken and all that was left was to arrange the Tribes into four groups of three. Had there been no thought of protesting against the census, there would be no reason for the nation to have reacted this way. Their attack on Aharon showed that they really did not like the idea of this census, for whatever reason.

Even though the Midrash is explaining a different verse, the Chizkuni quotes it here to show that the commandment was not only relevant to Moshe and the other leaders; there were reasons why the nation might not want to be a part of the census and would try postponing and/or stopping it. Nevertheless, since, in the end, they didn't try to prevent it from taking place, the Torah gives them credit for fulfilling G-d's commandment. © 2008 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd these are the names of the men that shall stand with you: of Reuven, Elizur the son of Shedeur. Of Shimon, Shelimuiel the son of Zurishaddai. Of Judah, Nachshon the son of Aminadav..." (Numbers 1:5-7).

For as long as I can remember, Orthodox Judaism has been perceived by much of the world—even the Orthodox world—as a conservative, sheltered, old-fashioned way of life unwilling to take risks in the

face of new challenges, preferring to retreat into its own shell like a turtle.

A Midrashic comment on this week's portion of Bamidbar makes the point that a conservative, risk-free existence is not a genuine Torah value. Certainly standing by on the sidelines is hardly a characteristic to be found in the person of Nachshon, prince of the tribe of Judah, who jumped into the Reed Sea in advance of the Egyptians. It was only after his demonstration of faith that the Almighty went the next step and split the Reed Sea.

The Midrash (also recorded in B.T. Bava Batra 91a) points out that this courageous Nachshon had four sons, including Elimelech, husband of Naomi, and Shalmon, father of Boaz; hence Nachshon was father and grandfather of two major personalities in the Scroll of Ruth, which we will be reading shortly on Shavuot.

In presenting such a genealogy, the Midrash stresses not only the characteristics of risk-taking by the descendants of Nachshon, but also what kind of risks are favored by the Torah and what kind are not.

The fact is that courage and risk-taking, or the lack of it, may be seen as an underlying theme of the whole book of Bamidbar. The fourth book of the Torah records the history of the Israelites' 40 years of wandering in the desert. When it opens we do not yet know that the people will be punished to wander for 40 years, but by the time the book closes it is clear that the Jewish people have failed their first major test. When the spies return with a frightening report about the Promised Land and the ability to conquer it (Numbers 13-14), the Israelites demonstrate a total lack of resolve, fortitude and faith. They wail, they tremble, they plead not to go on with the mission. They are not prepared to take the risk of war even for the conquest of the Promised Land.

Certainly the Bible would have wanted the Hebrews to have acted with courage, to have made the first heroic and even dangerous moves which come with independence and responsibility. Nachshon at the shore of the Reed Sea shines as the antithesis of a cowardly "desert generation." Because of his fearless daring, the people were saved. Indeed, the Gaon of Vilna points out that the Torah first describes the Israelites as having gone "into the midst of the sea on the dry land" (Ex. 14:22), and later "on dry land in the midst of the sea" (Ex. 14:29). The initial description refers to Nachshon and his followers who risked their lives by jumping into the raging waters. G-d made a miracle for them, the waters splitting into dry land and serving as a wall, homa, on the right and the left. The latter description refers to the rest of the Israelites who only entered after the dry land appeared; for them the waters also became a wall, but this time written with out the letter vuv, which forms the alternate reading of hema, or anger!

Nachshon's remarkable ability to take risks was transmitted to his son Elimelech and grand-son Boaz. Hence, the Scroll of Ruth closes with the names of ten generations from Peretz (son of Judah) to King David, and Nachshon appears right in the center, the pivotal figure between the age of the patriarchs and the generation of monarchy-messiah. But while Nachshon and Boaz are to be praised for their risk-taking, Elimelech can only be reviled for his. When a terrible famine descends upon Bethlehem, the home of Elimelech, he packs up his family and decides to start a new life in the land of Moab. Undoubtedly, this demonstrates courage on the part of Elimelech, the ability to risk the unknown in a strange environment. But his motivation was greed. He refused to share his bounty with his starving kinsmen, and he was willing to leave his homeland and his ancestral roots for the sake of his wealth.

Hence, tragedy strikes. Elimelech dies, and his sons, inevitably, marry Moabite women. His progeny die as well, causing Elimelech to have reaped as his harvest only oblivion - from a Jewish point of view.

In contrast, Boaz does not leave Bethlehem during the famine. And when the challenge arises to do an act of loving-kindness for Naomi and redeem Elimelech's land, as well as to marry the stranger-Ruth, a convert-Boaz assumes the financial obligation and the social risk involved in the marriage. The descendant from this union turns out to be none other than King David, from whom the messianic line emerges.

Elimelech's risk was based upon greed, and forsaking his tradition; it ends in his death and destruction. Boaz's risk was based upon loving-kindness, and results in redemption. The Elimelech-Boaz dialectic is a perennial theme in the Jewish world. Risk is positive, and even mandatory, from a Jewish perspective. The question we have to ask ourselves is the motivation-and that determines the result. © 2008 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

It is interesting to note that the count of the Jewish people in the desert that appears in this week's parsha is a count of each of the tribes of Israel individually - with the entire population of the Jewish people divided into four separate groupings, and the kohanim and Levites forming another separate grouping completely. Why all of this particularism? Why is the Torah not contented to give a single population figure for the entire Jewish nation?

I believe that the underlying message here is the reinforcement of the Torah's view of the Jewish people and in fact of all of humankind, as many different individuals and never as a monolithic whole. In fact, this is the origin of the Torah's opinion that one should never count people individually in a direct and

personal fashion. No two people are alike and no two people are bound to hold exactly like opinions.

There are groupings and tribes that make up the Jewish people today and throughout all of Jewish history. This realization should make for a more tolerant and less bitterly divisive Jewish society. The Torah is therefore determined to treat the count of the Jewish people as a count of individuals instead of as a count of a large group or whole nation. It wishes us to realize that the Jewish people really are made up of so many different components and differing individuals and personalities and the Torah demands of us a maturity to deal with this omnipresent situation of the human condition.

Another point that strikes me about this week's parsha is the relative smallness of today's Jewish population relative to the total count that appears in this week's parsha. The numbers that appear in the parsha indicate a total population of about three million people - old, young, men and women. Three millennia later the Jewish people worldwide appear to constitute approximately fifteen million people. Natural growth alone over such a long period of time should provide us with a much more numerous Jewish people. Yet the Torah itself predicted that the Jewish people would always be the smallest in numbers of all peoples.

Exile, pogroms, assimilation, conversions and the Holocaust have all taken a depressing toll on our numbers. Yet in spite of our lack of numbers we have never lost our influence and effect on world society and civilization. The Torah teaches us that numbers are necessary - there can be no Judaism without live Jews - but numbers are not everything. It is noted that the Torah already indicated in the desert that population growth is problematic with the Jewish people.

During the forty years in the desert the Jewish population did not increase. The count at the end of the forty years eerily remained similar to the count in this week's parsha. Individuals matter greatly. That is only one of the many contributions of the Jewish people to the human story. © 2008 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.*

RABBI ABBA WAGENSBERG

Between the Lines

This week's parsha is always read before Shavuot, the festival of receiving the Torah. What is the connection is between the two? How does Parshat Bamidbar prepare us for the festival of Shavuot?

The first verse in this week's portion tells us that G-d spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert (Numbers 1:1). The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 1:7) questions why it is necessary for the Torah to specify the location in

which G-d spoke to Moses. According to the Midrash, our Sages derive from this detail that three elements were present when the Torah was given: fire, water and desert.

We learn about fire from the verse, "All of Mount Sinai was smoking because G-d descended upon it in fire" (Exodus 19:18). Water is specified in the verse, "The heavens dripped with water" (Judges 5:4), which describes the giving of the Torah. Finally, we learn about the desert from the phrase "in the Sinai desert" in this week's portion. What message is the Torah trying to convey by listing the weather conditions at the time we received the Torah?!

There are three primary keys to success in Torah learning:

1. Hard work & intense involvement in study
2. Happiness and joy while studying
3. Humility coming from the knowledge that,

ultimately, our achievements in learning are not a result of our own efforts, but due to the kindness of G-d who gives us Torah.

We see a hint to these three attributes in the Talmudic opinions regarding the blessings one must recite before studying Torah (Brachot 11b). The Talmud lists three opinions:

1. Rav Yehuda, in the name of Shmuel, claims that one must recite the blessing, "...who has commanded us to be involved in the study of Torah."

2. Rebbe Yochanan claims that we should say instead, "May You make the words of Torah be sweet in our mouths."

3. Rav Ham'nuna claims that we should say, "Blessed are You, the One Who gives Torah."

The Talmud concludes that we should follow all of these opinions, and recite all three blessings before beginning Torah study.

Making a blessing over a mitzvah prepares us to fulfill the mitzvah. Thus, making a blessing before we begin to study Torah prepares us for the mitzvah of learning Torah. Once we understand this, we can see that these three blessings mentioned in the Talmud correlate exactly to the three keys for successful Torah learning that we listed initially:

1. The blessing, "to be involved in the study of Torah" corresponds to the hard work that is necessary to invest in studying.

2. The blessing, "make the words of Torah sweet in our mouths" corresponds to the happiness and joy we must feel when engaged in study.

3. The blessing, "the One Who gives Torah" corresponds to the humility that results when we realize that our achievements are not due to our own effort, but are actually a result of Divine benevolence.

Based on the Shem MiShmuel, we can now understand the deeper message of the Midrash in listing the three elements that were present at the giving of the Torah:

1. Fire symbolizes hard work. We see this explicitly in the Yiddish word "farbrent" (literally, "on fire"), which is used to describe intense effort in Torah learning. As we mentioned above, the idea of hard work corresponds to the blessing, "to be involved in the study of Torah."

2. Water symbolizes happiness. In the Land of Israel, rain is considered a blessing and a benefit. We should all be happy when it rains, since almost every aspect of our lives depends on water. This idea corresponds to the blessing, "make the words of Torah sweet in our mouths."

3. The desert represents humility. It is low and flat, and people walk all over it. This corresponds to the blessing, "the One Who gives Torah"- since, as we mentioned, it takes humility to recognize that our own efforts are not the ultimate cause of our success.

Now we can finally understand why Parshat Bamidbar is read right before Shavuot. On Shavuot, we do not simply commemorate the original acceptance of Torah, but we accept the Torah upon ourselves anew. In order to prepare ourselves to truly receive Torah on this day, Parshat Bamidbar gives us the keys that will enable our Torah learning to succeed.

May we all be triply blessed: to work hard in learning the Torah that was given at Mount Sinai in fire, with sweet happiness that feels as good as cool water, so that this Shavuot will be a humble, down-to-earth acceptance of G-d's extraordinary gift. © 2008 Rabbi A. Wagensberg and aish.com

RABBI BORUCH LEFF

Kol Yaakov

John and David were researching a Talmudic passage. "Come on, Dave", John urged. "The paper's due tomorrow and it's already 10:00 PM. Let's just move on. We don't need to ask a rabbi. We already know what it says-the Artscroll translation of the Talmud is known to be excellent."

Dave wasn't satisfied. "Sorry, John. I just think we need some guidance and perspective that only a rabbi can offer."

John reluctantly agreed. "Fine, have it your way. But you're staying up until 4:00 AM typing, not me!"

Who's right? Our Torah portion, Bamidbar will give us an answer. "These are the offspring of Ahron and Moshe... These are the names of Ahron's sons..." (Bamidbar 3:1-2).

Rashi (3:1) comments (loosely translated): "It only mentions Ahron's sons (and not Moshe's), yet it calls them the offspring of Moshe. This is because Moshe taught them Torah and whoever teaches Torah to another is considered as if he has fathered him."

Commentaries ask: we know that Moshe taught Torah to the entire Jewish people. There are numerous verses of the Bible and passages of Talmud that state

this. (See Eruvin 54b for starters.) Why then only regarding Ahron's sons is it said that Moshe is considered their father? Shouldn't Moshe be called the father of the entire nation of Israel?

One answer to this quandary is that Rashi's statement does not apply to any standard rabbi, or person that teaches Torah. It is true that we should deem any person that we learn even one thing from, "our rabbi," as King David did (see Pirkei Avot 6:3), but only a rabbi that personally guides me in my studies and instills within me a totality of style of learning and thought process can be regarded as one who "has fathered me."

This type of rabbi is known as my "Rav Muvhak," my "Distinct Rabbi" and has given me "most of my wisdom" and has "established me with truth and straightness" (see Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 242:30). One tears his garment upon hearing of the death of his Rav Muvhak, just as one does at a father's passing. This Rav Muvhak concept is the true meaning of Pirkei Avot 1:6, "Make a rabbi for yourself."

Moshe was a Rav Muvhak to Ahron's sons but not to the entire Jewish nation. Moshe indeed taught Torah to everyone but it was only a privileged few that were actually able to call Moshe their "Distinct Rav."

What is the status of "Rav Muvhak" nowadays when we have virtually everything in translation? Do we still need to have a rabbi? Sure, back then it was important to have a rabbi because most of Torah was oral. But now that all of the Oral law has been codified and written down, and even more so now that it's all translated, do we still need to seek out a rabbi?

A section in the Talmud Kiddushin 66a (paraphrased loosely) screams an emphatic "Yes!":

King Yanai (circa 100 BCE), originally a supporter of the Talmudic Sages, desired to be High Priest as well. The Sages considered him unfit due to questionable lineage. Yanai had invited the Sages to a grand feast to celebrate his military victories. An enemy of the Sages, Elazar ben Poera, wanted to cause a clash between Yanai and the Sages and advised Yanai to appear before the Sages wearing the golden headband of the High Priest. One of the Sages protested saying, "King Yanai, the crown of kingdom is enough for you! Leave the crown of priesthood to the true descendants of Ahron!"

Yanai became infuriated. Eventually Elazar ben Poera prevailed upon Yanai to kill all of the Sages. Yanai had one problem though. "What will be with the Torah? The Sages are needed in order to know the Torah. How will Torah survive?" Yanai worried.

"No problem," said Elazar, "The Sefer (Book) Torah is right there, wrapped in the corner. Anyone that wants to come and learn it can feel free to do so!"

Yanai accepted the plan. Right then, Yanai became a heretic because he denied the importance of

the Oral Law. (Looking into a Sefer Torah would only grant someone knowledge of the Written Law.)

It is quite clear from this passage that in order to study Torah properly, we need a rabbi, even if all of the Oral Torah were written down, and even when translation is available. When Yanai expresses concern over the loss of the Torah, he is told not to worry since it is written down. Yanai knew that Torah could not survive without an Oral Torah explaining the Written Torah. There are numerous phrases and verses that are impossible to understand without the oral tradition as to their meaning. So he must have had in mind that before the Sages would be killed, he would force them to write down the entire oral law.

Still, the Talmud says that such a suggestion to write down the Oral Torah and rely on a text without the input and perspective of live teachers and Rabbis was tantamount to heresy.

Without a living and dynamic learning process, from one generation to the next, the Torah would inevitably become distorted. A live, present, and available rabbi is vital to understanding any section of Torah properly. This was true in 0002 CE (before the Oral law was written down) and is true in 2002 CE.

A rabbi gives us insight into how to utilize the words of the text and/or translation. He tells us how to understand, analyze, make it practical, derive, associate, and differentiate. There are many examples in history of brilliant scholars who knew great amounts of Torah text but seriously distorted the Torah due to their lack of acceptance of a rabbi from whom to learn.

Perhaps more important than anything else, having a rabbi means gaining an entire worldview of wisdom and proper behavior. A rabbi looks at all aspects of life through the lens of the Torah and gives you a method of approaching all things and experiences. This is certainly true when you discuss issues with a rabbi, but it also applies even if you never had a chance to talk to him about a particular issue. The very fact that you are close to a rabbi changes the way you approach everything because you constantly think of what your rabbi might say in a given situation.

This is done consciously but at times may even occur unconsciously as your mind naturally adapts to trying to figure out what your rabbi would maintain. Ultimately the rabbi wants to produce students who don't need to ask him about every little issue because their mind has become attuned to what the Torah (through the outlook of the rabbi) desires from a person. In this sense, the student takes his rabbi with him/her wherever he/she goes.

Rav Yaakov Weinberg, of blessed memory, had a student of whom he felt was ready to leave the yeshiva in order to teach after many years of study. Rav Yaakov was trying to impress upon the student that he should leave and do outreach. Every few days he would call the student into his office to discuss it.

The student was not thrilled with Rav Yaakov's plans but found it difficult to express his reasons why.

Finally, Rav Yaakov pressed the student, "Don't you realize that you need to do it for the good of the Jewish People? We need Torah teachers to go out to small towns to help and inspire Jews!"

The student, with tears in his eyes, found the strength to finally say what he had wanted to say throughout these weeks. "Rav", he said, "I learn such an enormous amount from you each and every day that I can't bear to leave you!"

Rav Yaakov replied without batting an eyelash. "Don't you know that having a Rav doesn't mean staying close to the Rav your entire life? It means taking the Rav and his guidance and insight with you wherever you go. Your entire life will be lived with your Rav by your side. You will think of the wisdom he provided and utilize and apply it throughout your life. Having a Rav means taking him with you!"

Later, the student testified that a day never went by without his thinking of something he had learned from Rav Yaakov and applying it to his current situation.

We all must learn Torah well but we must also make sure we find a rabbi and take that rabbi with us at all times. After all, who doesn't want to walk around with a wise man in his back pocket? © 2008 Rabbi B. Leff and aish.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The Torah, in this week's portion, alludes to the redemption of the first born son. (Numbers 3:40-51) Originally, the eldest son in each family was designated to serve in the Temple. After the eldest in the family faltered by participating in the sin of the golden calf, the Temple work was transferred to the tribe of Levi, which was not involved in the sin. The Torah required the redeeming of each first born at that time for five coins. One wonders why, if the redemption already took place, it is repeated for every first born son to this day.

In Egypt, the first born functioned as priests. In this way, every Egyptian family was connected to the Egyptian religion. Appropriately, it was the Egyptian first born who was killed in Egypt as they were the religious visionaries and therefore most responsible for enslaving the Jews. Once they were killed, and the Jewish first born were saved, they, too, were designated to dedicate their lives to religious service. (Exodus 13:15) This was done, not only in recognition of having miraculously escaped the slaying of the Egyptian first born, but also as a means of binding each Jewish family to the Holy Temple.

From this perspective, it can be suggested that the ceremony that we have today of redeeming the first born (pidyon haben) is meant as an educational tool-to

remind families that there was a time when one of their own was connected directly to the Temple service. Such a reminder, it is hoped, would result in a commitment by the entire family, to a life of spirituality and religious commitment.

During the pidyon haben ceremony, the Kohen (Jewish Priest) asks the parents of the child if they prefer to keep the child or to pay for the redemption, with the assumption that the parents will pay for the redemption. As a Kohen, I always wondered what would occur if the father decided to keep the money rather than take his child. Interestingly, Jewish Law insists that regardless of the response, the child remains with his family. If the end result is the same, why is this question asked in the first place?

When the Kohen asks, "What do you prefer, the money or the child?" what he is really asking is, "what is your value system? Is it solely based on money, or does it have at its core, the essence, the soul of the child?" The Kohen has the responsibility to challenge the parent with such a question. With the response to this rhetorical question, the family reaffirms that spiritual values are the highest priority in raising a child.

Note that if one of the child's grandfathers is a Kohen or Levi, he is not redeemed. This is because, even in contemporary times, the pidyon haben reminder is not necessary for there are roles unique to his family's religious life which serve as an aid in remembering the priorities of a spiritual quest.

So, the next time we go to a pidyon haben, we should not rush through it. We should realize what is happening. We should recognize that through their words, a family is making a commitment to live the Torah and walk with G-d throughout their days. © 2008 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL SHLIT"A

Adapted by Shaul Barth

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Our portion begins, "G-d spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai" (Bamidbar 1:1), stressing that the Torah was given in the wilderness. The Maharal explains that this is meant to signify a place of desolation, a place with no water and no life, a place with no inhabitants. Yet it is specifically here that Benei Yisrael encamp, by their tribes and their banners, with the Tent of Meeting at the center of the camp, creating an ideal civilization in the midst of the wasteland.

If we were to think about where to establish a nation, we would probably think about somewhere

central, teeming with life. The Torah teaches us that true civilization is not to be found in such places: not in tall towers, not in all the fancy capitals of the world. This is not the sort of nation that G-d wants to establish. G-d establishes the ideal civilization in the wilderness; an empty page, as it were, neither committed nor connected to anything that has preceded it.

Here we must ask: what sort of nation (am) arises in this wilderness, disconnected from all that came before? The Torah tells us that at Mara, the first stop after crossing the Sea of Reeds, G-d "placed a statute and a law for them, and there He tested them" (Shemot 15:25). Our Sages (Sanhedrin 56b) explain that the first principles to which Am Yisrael commit themselves are the seven Noahide laws, the dinim (civil laws), and the law of the red heifer (Seder Olam Zuta 4). I have explained in the past that the red heifer symbolizes the laws with a reason and meaning that we do not understand, while the dinim are the laws that we do understand. Am Yisrael commit themselves to examples of both types, thereby demonstrating that they are ready to fulfill the commandments, whether they understand them or not. However, the main laws that they take upon themselves at that point are the seven Noahide laws, the simple principles that would appear to obligate every human being. When G-d establishes the nation, He first wants Am Yisra'el to commit themselves to being human, humane, good people; only after that foundation is laid can the rest of the commandments follow.

Thus, Am Yisrael are commanded, on the one hand, to fulfill the most elementary requirements which should be the basis of any proper, moral society. On the other hand, they are commanded this with no connection to anything that has come before; they start off on a clean page, in the empty wilderness. On the one hand, Am Yisrael, organized and arranged by G-d's direct command, is in constant conflict with the wilderness, representing absolute chaos; on the other hand, they are in constant conflict with the other nations of the world, who build their societies based on human priorities.

Indeed, anyone who has visited Jerusalem and ascended Mount Scopus knows that Jerusalem borders the desert on one side. Looking down the mountain, one sees a wasteland. Jerusalem is engaged in an ongoing battle with the desert and what it symbolizes. At the same time, it is the city of G-d, struggling against the messages that emanate towards it from the other cities of the world. Jerusalem, eternal capital of Am Yisra'el, is thus at the center of a struggle from two directions? the wilderness, on one side, and the nations of the world, on the other. We should all keep this symbolism in mind as we celebrate Yom Yerushalayim next week. (*This sicha was delivered on Leil Shabbat, Parashat Bamidbar 5765 [2005].*)

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah reveals Hashem's indescribable love for His people. The prophet Hoshea opens with warm words of blessing and says, "The Jewish people will be likened to the sand of the sea that cannot be measured or counted." Hoshea digresses then and says, "And in place of not being recognized as My nation, they will be regarded as 'the sons of Hashem.'" This passage indicates that, prior to this prophecy, they experienced serious rejection. In truth, the preceding chapter reveals that they temporarily forfeited their prominent status of Hashem's people. Scriptures state, "Declare them no longer My nation because they are not Mine and I am not theirs" (1:9) Yet, one passage later we find Hashem blessing His people in an unlimited capacity conveying upon them the elevated status of "sons of Hashem." We are amazed by this sudden, drastic change of attitude from total rejection to full acceptance in an unparalleled way. What brought about this change and what can we learn from it?

Chazal address these questions and answer with the following analogy. A king was enraged by his wife's atrocious behavior and immediately summoned a scribe to prepare her divorce document. He calmed down, shortly thereafter, and decided not to carry out his original plan. However, he faced a serious dilemma because he was unwilling to cancel the scribe and reveal his drastic change of heart. He finally resolved his problem and ordered the scribe to rewrite his marriage contract doubling its previous financial commitment. Chazal conclude that the same was true of Hashem. After instructing Hoshea to deliver sharp words of reprimand Hashem retracted them. However, instead of canceling the initial prophecy Hashem tempered it with warm words of blessing. These words were so uplifting that they reflected the Jewish people in a newly gained status of "sons of Hashem". (Sifrei, Parshas Balak)

We can attempt to uncover Chazal's hidden lesson in the following manner. When studying the analogy of the king and his wife we sense the king's deep affection for her. Although he was angered to the point of total rejection this anger was short-lived. He was appeased within moments and his true affection immediately surfaced. In order to compensate for his initial rash response, he strengthened his relationship with her by doubling his expression of affection. The queen undoubtedly understood her husband's compassionate response to her outrageous behavior. Instead of totally rejecting her he actually increased his commitment to her. She sensed this as his way of securing their relationship even after her previous conduct. This unbelievably kind response evoked

similar feelings from her and she reciprocated with her fullest expression of appreciation to him.

This analogy reveals Hashem's deep love and affection for His people. The Jewish people in Hosheia's times severely stayed from Hashem's will and engaged themselves in atrocious idolatrous practices. Hashem's was enraged by their behavior and summoned the prophet Hosheia to serve them their rejection papers. This severe response elicited Hashem's counter response of unlimited compassion for them and He immediately retracted His harsh decree. However, Hashem did not stop there but saw it appropriate to intensify His relationship with His cherished people. He therefore elevated them from their previous status of merely His people to the highly coveted status of His children.

We now understand Chazal's message to us. Hashem was sincerely angered by the Jewish people's conduct and sent Hosheia to reject them. Yet, even this angry response could not interfere with Hashem's boundless love for His people and He immediately retracted His harsh words. The Jewish people however, needed to understand the severity of their actions. Hashem therefore instructed Hosheia to reveal the entire story, their intended rejection and ultimate acceptance. Hosheia's prophecy served its purpose well and the Jewish people sensed Hashem's boundless love for them. Although their actions called for total rejection Hashem's compassion for them would not allow this. Instead of rejecting them Hashem actually increased His display of affection towards them. This undoubtedly evoked their reciprocal response which ultimately produced their side of their newly gained status of "sons of Hashem". They previously enjoyed the status of Hashem's people but after this they would be known as His cherished children.

We find a parallel to the above in this week's sedra which describes the Jewish nation's encampment. They were previously stationed at the foot of Mount Sinai for nearly a year. During that time they developed a special relationship with Hashem receiving His Torah and witnessed many revelations. This intimate bond, however, was interrupted by their inexcusable plunge into idolatry. Hashem was enraged by their atrocious behavior and immediately summoned Moshe Rabbeinu to deliver their rejection papers. Hashem informed His loyal prophet of His intention and Moshe Rabbeinu pleaded on their behalf. Moshe subsequently sensitized the people to their severe wrongdoing and they returned from their shameful inappropriate path. Hashem accepted their repentance and reclaimed His nation. But Hashem's compassion extended far beyond forgiveness and He therefore consented to dwell amongst them resting His Divine Presence in the Mishkan.

In our sedra we discover that even the Mishkan was insufficient expression of Hashem's love for His people. He therefore acquiesced in their request and permitted them to camp around the Holy Ark and encircle His Divine Presence. This special opportunity created an incredible feeling of affection, tantamount to embracing Hashem Himself. Indeed Shlomo Hamelech refers to this unbelievable experience of intimacy in the following terms, "And His flag was for me an expression of love". (Shir Hashirim 2:4) Although Hashem initially rejected His people this did not interfere with His boundless love for them. After rededicating themselves to Him they deserved all of His warmth and affection, even the sensation of embracement itself.

We learn from this the unbelievable love Hashem possesses for His people and that even during moments of rejection Hashem's true affection for us is never effected. © 2008 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

As this parashah opens, Hashem speaks to Moshe in the desert. Why in the desert—wasn't the entire Torah given to Moshe at Har Sinai? R' Zvi Hirsch Kalisher z"l (1795-1875) explains that it is partially from our verse that the midrash derives the lesson that the Torah is acquired through three things: fire, water, and the desert. What does this mean?

R' Kalisher writes: If one would be a scholar, it is not enough that he study Torah. Rather, a fire must burn within him that leads him to teach others and, if necessary, to zealously defend Hashem's honor. One cannot say that he loves Hashem if he does not devote himself to seeing that others live a Torah life as he does.

Sometimes, however, the fire must be doused with water. In order to influence others, one must often speak softly, as it is written (Melachim I 19:12), "After the earthquake came a fire; 'Hashem is not in the fire.' After the fire came a still, thin sound." One who fears G-d must pay careful attention to how His people should be led—sometimes with "fire" and sometimes with "water." This is the symbolism of the burning bush which was not consumed, i.e., that a Torah scholar must burn like a fire but must not destroy his students.

Finally, in his personal life, the would be Torah scholar must live in a desert, i.e., he must live a life which is not devoted to chasing physical pleasures. Also, just as the desert is open to all, so the Torah scholar must be selfless and available to all. (Sefer Ha'berit: Bemidbar 1:1) © 2008 Rabbi S. Katz and Project Genesis, Inc.

