

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Yehoshua Shapira, Rosh Yeshivat Ramat Gan; Translated by Moshe Goldberg

We can learn quite a bit about the prestige of the Tabernacle-and even more about the deep and inherent significance of each of its components-from the laws about taking the Tabernacle apart in preparation for a move in the desert. The Torah gives exact details about how every utensil should be covered, and in which sequence this is to be done. Two utensils are unique in that they are covered with something that is near them in the Tabernacle. As opposed to the Table, the Menorah, and the Golden Altar, which were first covered by a cloth of the color of techelet, the Ark of the Testimony is covered with the Parochet, the curtain dividing the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Tabernacle. This means that those who actually perform the labor of covering the Ark do not have to enter the holiest part of the Tabernacle, beyond the dividing curtain. Rather, they cover the Ark while they are outside the Holy of Holies. Both during the preparations and the travel itself they maintain the separation between the Holy of Holies and the people. This is the unique property of the Ark, which is always exceptional and rises above the level of the nation as a whole.

The Ark is not the only exception to the general way the utensils are covered. The external Altar of the Olah sacrifice is also an exception to the more general rule in that it is covered with an inner layer of purple. The reason is that "An eternal flame shall burn on the Altar, let it never be extinguished" [Vayikra 6:6] -- even while Bnei Yisrael are on the move in the desert. The purple covering is testimony of the eternal flame that burns on the Altar, as was written by the sages: "A flame that descended from heaven continually pranced under the cloth like a lion during the journeys and didn't burn the cloth, since it was covered by a copper vessel."

Both the Ark and the Altar continue to fulfill the same roles as when Bnei Yisrael were not on a journey. But their covers and their tasks are very different from each other. The curtain serves to hide what is underneath it, while the purple cloth serves to emphasize the flame that continues to burn within.

The Ark and the Altar represent two opposite categories of the work that was performed in the

Tabernacle. The Ark is the place where G-d is revealed, the source of the Divine speech that emanated from between the Keruvim, on the top of the Ark. At the position of the Ark, the holy light shines down from the top. No person except for the High Priest is allowed to look at the Ark, only one time during the year, as a momentary guest and not as a resident. The Altar, on the other hand, is our place. This is where we go to offer a sacrifice, rising up from down below to spiritual heights. "When a person will bring a sacrifice from among you" [Vayikra 1:2] -- a person who brings a sacrifice is considered as if he had sacrificed himself on an altar.

Thus, the cover of the Ark indicates the fact that it is far away and high above us, kept at a respectable distance. The Altar is different, in that even sinners approach it, an expression of the eternal internal flame which burns and infects us with our attachment to G-d even at a time of lowliness, when we are busy and on a journey. We do not approach the Ark at such a time. Even when the Tabernacle is at rest, we need many preparations and limitations before an exalted representative of the people can approach. However, the Altar represents our internal closeness to the Divine, which does not need any special preparations. Underneath the purple cover we will discover that not only do we come from below in order to become as nothing when bathed in the light of G-d-but that G-d descends from above to dwell among us in our own place and to burn as a flame within our hearts.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Parashas Bamidbar includes the arrangement in which the Children of Israel camped in the desert (Bamidbar 2:1-31). This formation consisted of four groups of three Tribes, with each group camping in one of the four directions around the Mishkan. The commentators discuss the reasons for makeup of each grouping ("degel"), with the Ramban (2:2) quoting the explanation provided by Bamidbar Rabbah (2:10). Included in this Midrash is that Shimon camped between (i.e. with, in the same degel as) Reuvain and Gad because Reuvain represented "teshuva" (repentance) and Gad represented strength ("gevurah"), whereby they could atone for Shimon. Why did Shimon need "atoning?" According to the Eitz Yosef, they needed atoning because of what happened with

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Zimri (the head of the Tribe of Shimon) and the Midyanite woman (Bamidbar 25:1-15). The obvious question is why they would need such atoning at this point, since the incident with Zimri happened in the 40th and final year in the desert, while the groupings were established towards the beginning of the 2nd year in the desert.

On one level, this is not that difficult, as the Midrash describes how the formation of the Children of Israel corresponded to the formation of the heavenly angels around G-d's throne. Since the time-span of the way the angels surrounded G-d was not limited to the time frame that the Tribes surrounded the Mishkan, the fact that the point in time that caused the angel "Michael" to be situated to the right of G-d's throne (corresponding to Reuvain/Shimon/Gad being to the south; to the right when facing east) occurred well after the groupings were set up is irrelevant.

Nevertheless, the Chasam Sofer asks this question, and says that Shimon couldn't have been placed between Reuvain and Gad based on what they would eventually do; instead, it was because of what they were more susceptible to. Shimon had stepped forward to defend the honor of his sister when she was taken by Shechem, showing that he was on a very high level when it came to fighting against immorality. Since the greater the person is, the greater his evil inclination is (Succah 52a), Shimon (and by extension his descendants) were in danger of succumbing in the very area that Shimon had excelled in. Therefore, in order to "protect" the Tribe of Shimon, they were grouped between Reuvain and Gad.

With all due respect, I find this approach a bit difficult to accept. For one thing, the term "atone" implies that a problem already exists, not protection against it developing (although it should be noted that the Maharzo does explain it to be protection, albeit protection against Yaakov's having cursed their anger). Additionally, Shimon was taken to task for reacting (or overreacting) the way that he did, making it difficult to attribute "greatness" in this area. Furthermore, the Tribe of Dun is described by the Midrash as belonging in the north (corresponding to "Uriel" being on G-d's left) because of the idol that Yeravam ben Nevat put in their territory, something that obviously happened well after the groupings in the desert were established. So not only are we left wondering why Dun was assigned the

northern flank based on something that didn't happen for generations, we still need to explain why Shimon needed atonement for something that wouldn't occur for decades.

However, Yeravam chose the Tribe of Dun precisely because of their long history of idol worship. The Midrash itself indicates that Yeravam had a hard time finding a place to put his golden calves, with Dun willingly accepting it. This long history of idol worship included carrying "pesel Micha," an idol served by the Tribe of Dan (described in Sefer Shoftim 18), with them as they crossed the Yam Suf (Sea of Reeds) during the nation's exodus from Egypt (Bamidbar Rabbah 16:26), an event that occurred over a year before the "degalim" were set up. When Amalek attacked those at the rear of the recently freed nation (also before the "degalim" were set up), the Midrash (Tanchuma Ki Saytzay 10/15) tells us that the protective clouds had expelled the Tribe of Dan because "they were all idol worshippers," and being unprotected made them susceptible to attack. We can therefore understand why Dan is described as idol-worshippers and needing atonement long before Yeravam took advantage of their weakness. And just as Dun's future sin is referenced with regards to the problems they had even before the degalim were established, it follows that the weakness referenced regarding Shimon's partnering with Reuvain and Gad was also present well before it manifested itself with Zimri and the Midyanite.

It wasn't only Zimri that got involved with non-Jewish women; it was much of his Tribe. Who was Zimri? He was the same Nasi (head of Tribe) mentioned in our Parasha, Shelumiel ben Tzurishadie, also known as Shaul ben haCanaanis, whose mother was Dina (Bamidbar Rabbah 21:3). The Yalkut Reuvaini (Bamidbar 1:21, quoting Asarah Ma'amaros) tells us that "the entire Eirev Rav (converts from multiple nations that joined the Children of Israel during the exodus) attached themselves to the Tribe of Shimon and gave birth from them - just as had occurred to Dina, whom the 'Chivi' (referring to Shechem, who was from the nation of Chivi, but also referring to the 'snake,' i.e. Satan) injected with (spiritual) poison, and she bore to him Zimri ben Salu, who is [one and the same as] Shaul ben haCanaanis; so too did these [members of the Tribe of Shimon] sin, and they gave birth to sons, who were the 22,000 that died in the plague (that was thwarted when Pinachas killed Zimri)." Similarly, in Parashas Pinachas (Bamidbar 25:14), the Yalkut Reuvaini quotes a Midrashic source that says the exact same thing, adding that the 22,000 that died in the plague corresponded to the amount of people that were killed in Shechem (22,000), "as Shimon was punished because [the people of Shechem] had entered the covenant (i.e. undergone circumcision), even if they did so for less than ideal purposes."

We now have two issues that Shimon (and his descendants) needed atonement for; the wiping out of

the city of Shechem after they had converted, and the Tribe's tendency to intermarry with others. Although the "intermarriage" that occurred shortly after the exodus was with converts, these unions could not be considered to be means towards spiritual growth, which is why atonement was needed. And the result of these unions were children who would also "intermarry." This time, though, it was not with less than perfect converts to monotheism, but with Moavite and Midyanite women who persuaded them to acknowledge pagan deities instead. What happened at the end of their stay in the desert shows us how improper what they had done at the beginning of the journey was, and why they needed atonement so many years earlier. © 2009 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

Hashem spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt saying: "Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers' household, by number of the names, every male according to their head count." (Bamidbar 1:1-2)

Because of G-d's love for the Jewish People he counts them frequently. (Rashi) According to their head count: They gave a half shekel and the coins were counted since it is forbidden to count them literally by head. (Rashi)

At a shiva call years back a psychiatrist abruptly asked me, "What's G-d doing right now!" I humbly admitted, "I don't know!" I then added, "We're not here to psychoanalyze G-d! The Almighty is not on the couch, we are!" I have wondered long afterward if I had answered him correctly. What is G-d doing right now?

According to what we learn at the beginning of this week's portion we have better than a good possibility of guessing what G-d is doing right now. He's counting His people. Yes! Now! Not just back then. Like a parent or grandparent that looks frequently at his or her collection of photos so are we being observed and counted admirably.

We might be misled however to conclude that it's numbers that count. How do we do it? You ask! Volume! Not so! Majority rules! No sir! Firstly, we are a relatively small nation. Why count us? Secondly, it's understood that that we are forbidden to count individuals by number. If the aggregate, the total is all that matters, then why should there be any limitation to the system of counting?

There were two brothers at opposite ends of the world in very different living conditions. One lived in a tiny apartment in Jerusalem with his wife and twelve children on a meager budget. The other was a wealthy man in a large American city but he and his wife after

many years of marriage had no children. The wealthy one proposed to his brother in Israel that they make a trade. He is willing to grant one million dollars in exchange for one- any one of their twelve children. It was too tempting. Under the weight of great financial strain they agreed.

The night came to consummate the deal by choosing the child to be sent away. The parents waited for the late hour to arrive. They circulated a few times in tears as they peered at their sleeping children. Then they made their decision and called the brother in America to tell him the news. "No deal!"

The other desperately countered, "You have twelve and I have none and you could certainly use the money!" Not yielding to the pressure this time the one in Israel tried to console his brother's disappointment. "The deal was based on a false premise that we have twelve children. When we looked carefully, my wife and I came to realize that it's not true. We have only one Shimon, one Rivka, one Aaron, etc." Reducing a person to a mere number serves to erase the unique quality, the special-ness of that individual.

There's a story about a young returnee to the ways of Judaism that had a large and unseemly tattoo etched on his arm. He avoided all situations where it might be seen. On the eve of Rosh Hashanah when so many are visiting the local Mikvah (ritual bath) he adopted the strategy to arrive early and keep the towel over his arm to avoid the rush and the risk of being discovered.

His worst fears were realized when while hurrying on the slippery tiles his feet flew out from underneath him. A deathly silence filled the room. The shameful symbol of his ill-spent youth became exposed to all. The embarrassment was so deep. Then an elderly man with numbers on his arm lifted the fellow from the floor. Pointing to his arm he told him, "This was my taste of hell and that was probably yours. Let us go into the water together!"

When Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch was asked why he left the largest rabbinic position in Europe to join nine struggling families in Frankfurt Germany he is reputed to have answered an answer that perhaps begs many more questions, "G-d doesn't count Jews. He weighs them!" © 2003 Rabbi L. Lam & torah.org

RABBI JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The sedra of Bemidbar-"In the wilderness"-it is usually (though not this year) read directly before the festival of Shavuot, "the time of the giving of the Torah", when we recall the revelation at Mount Sinai. Indeed the opening verse refers to Sinai: "And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai..." What is the connection between wilderness and revelation?

The Midrash makes a psychological spiritual point: "Anyone who does not make himself open to all

[hefker, literally ownerless] like a wilderness cannot acquire wisdom and Torah." (Bemidbar Rabbah 1:7)

The desert is neither public nor private space. It belongs to no one. It is completely exposed to the sun and the elements. So must we be—imply the sages—if we are to become the recipients of Torah. To hear its commanding voice we must listen with total openness, absolute humility. Torah speaks to the soul that has learnt the art of silence.

The Egyptian-French poet Edmond Jabès (1912-1991) noted the connection between d-b-r, 'word', and m-d-b-r, 'wilderness'. For him, the wilderness experience is an essential and continuing feature of what it is to be a Jew: With exemplary regularity the Jew chooses to set out for the desert, to go toward a renewed word that has become his origin... A wandering word is the word of G-d. It has for its echo the word of a wandering people. No oasis for it, no shadow, no peace. Only the immense, thirsty desert, only the book of this thirst... (From the Book to the Book, 166-67)

For Jabès, the Desert—with its unearthly silence and emptiness—is the condition in which the Word can be heard. There, between sand and sky, the unmediated encounter takes place between G-d and His people. There is something stark and austere about the wilderness, as there is about Judaism. In no other religion do G-d and humanity stand in such direct closeness, engaging in such frank and direct dialogue. Judaism is faith stripped of all accretions of myth—a faith that could only reach its full expression far from the diversions and distractions of urban or rural culture, in a landscape of lonely figures confronting the immensity of nature and hearing the Word from above and beyond. We are, Jabès implies, a desert people, never fully at home, never altogether satisfied, always thirsting for something that eludes us, never feeling that we have yet reached our destination. Judaism is the-word-as-wilderness and the-wilderness-as-word.

For the prophets, the desert signalled something else—privacy, intimacy, a place where Lover and beloved go to be alone with one another. Jeremiah delivers one of the most beautiful lines in the entire prophetic literature. In striking contrast to the impression we receive elsewhere in Tanakh, that the Israelites in the wilderness were quarrelsome and rebellious, Jeremiah speaks of the love and trust of the people, willing to leave all they knew and follow the divine call: "I remember the devotion of your youth, / Your love as a bride -- / How you followed Me in the wilderness, / In a land not sown." (Jeremiah 2:1)

In an earlier age, Hosea used the wilderness as a symbol of the betrothal between G-d and the Israelites. G-d had 'married' the people, but they had acted unfaithfully. G-d would punish them. They would suffer disasters. Yet he could not abandon them, so great was His love. So, in an act of reconciliation, he would bring them back and renew their marriage vows

in the wilderness, understood as a kind of second honeymoon: "Therefore I am now going to allure her; / I will lead her into the wilderness / and speak tenderly to her. / There I will give her back her vineyards, / and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. / There she will sing as in the days of her youth, / as in the day she came up out of Egypt." (Hosea 2: 16-17)

But there is a further, immensely significant dimension to the fact that the Torah was given in the wilderness. Israel, alone among the nations of world history, received its constitution even before it had entered its land. There is no analogy to this anywhere else. For every other nation, the land long preceded the laws. A people live in a certain territory. Gradually they begin to associate in ever larger groupings. They fight wars, build settlements, adopt leaders, develop a political structure, and then create a body of legislation to regulate their affairs. Nations develop organically like plants, with their roots in a soil, a landscape. In the history of Israel, and nowhere else, the nation received its laws in the wilderness, before it had even seen, let alone settled, the land. This is one of the great paradoxes of Judaism.

On the one hand, the Jewish story is about the land of Israel. It begins with Abraham's journey toward it. It continues with a second journey in the days of Moses, with the family now become a people. Judaism is a religion of place: the holy land, the physical location in which the people of the covenant are summoned to create a sacred society based on justice and compassion, human dignity and freedom. It was to be stand in the greatest possible contrast to the great empires with which it was surrounded—nations predicated on demographic strength and military power, tyrannical regimes and hierarchical societies with absolute rulers and populations measured in the mass, not the worth of the individual. Judaism has a home, a place where it belongs.

Yet most of Jewish history was spent outside that home. Abraham was forced, by famine, into exile. So was Jacob. Genesis ends with the patriarchal family in Egypt. Deuteronomy ends with Moses in sight of the promised land but not destined to enter it. Jewish history is a story of exiles—to Assyria, then Babylon, then the long series of dispersions from the Roman conquest to the birth of the modern State of Israel in 1948. As Isaiah Berlin noted: 'It was once said by the celebrated Russian revolutionary, Alexander Herzen, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, that the Slavs had no history, only geography. The position of the Jews is the reverse of this. They have enjoyed rather too much history and too little geography' (The Power of Ideas, p. 143).

This paradox is essential to Judaism and what makes it unique among the world's faiths. On the one hand, the G-d of Israel is utterly unlike the G-ds of the ancient world. He is not confined to this place, that nation: He is everywhere. Yet He is not remote, abstract. He has a home—or, to put it more precisely, He

lives among a people that has a home. That is why Judaism is attached to a holy land-but at the same time it remains G-d's people even when in exile from the land.

It is thus no accident that the Israelites received their greatest revelation- the moment that forged them into a nation-outside the land, Bemidbar, 'in the wilderness', the place that is not a place, just as Jacob received his two great revelations (the vision of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, and the wrestling match with a stranger) in the midst of journeys, in places that were between: neither starting point nor destination.

The giving of the Torah in the wilderness is an essential feature of Jewish history. Had the Israelites received the Torah in the land, it would be indissolubly associated with the land. Exile would mean the end of the covenant. It would make no more sense to keep Torah while in exile than to obey the laws of Russia while living in Spain. What made the G-d of Israel different was the fact that He was sovereign of the universe, not a local deity. That is why the Jewish people survived dispersion. Only the G-d of everywhere can be found and worshipped anywhere. © 2009 Rabbi J. Sacks & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“G-d will purify our dross... and Jerusalem shall be called the City of Righteousness” (Isaiah 1:22,23) We begin reading the fourth book of the Pentateuch, BaMidbar, during the week in which we celebrate the Six Day War's miraculous liberation of Jerusalem, the 28th day of the Hebrew month Iyar 1967, which falls out towards the end of the sefirah count of the days leading up to Shavuot. Does this joyous festival, which we mark with the recitation of the full Hallel psalms of praise, just happen to fall out when it does by happenstance, both with respect to our Biblical weekly portion as well as to its place in the count of the days between our Festival of Freedom (Pesach) and the Festival of the first fruits (Shavuot)? Or is the history-directing finger of G-d very much in evidence here, teaching us a lesson which we can only ignore at the peril of our souls and our future existence as a nation?

The Biblical book of Exodus dramatically details the events leading up to, and immediately following, our exodus from Egyptian slavery, our emergence as a nation and our birth into freedom. We are soon elevated with the gift of the Revelation at Sinai, pledging to uphold the "ten moral words" which G-d bequeathed-through us-to humanity, the ethical teachings which add responsibility (aharayut) to freedom (herut), protecting His creation from descending into wanton debauchery and licentiousness (hefkerut). And, with the Israelite encampment arranged in a way so that the twelve tribes

surround the Sanctuary of Sanctity in whose midst are sequestered the Sacred Ark with its precious tablets of stone, the nation is poised to enter the Promised Land and celebrate the Shavuot Feast of the First Fruits in the Temple to be established in Jerusalem. Indeed, the third book of Leviticus which we just completed reading, detailed the Sanctuary ritual and the Priestly Code, epicenter of what was scheduled to be a perfected world.

But alas, if it only took forty days for the Israelites to exit from Egypt, it would take forty years for Egypt to exit from the Israelites! Apparently freedom is a process, a journey, and the road from freedom promised (Festival of Matzot) to freedom achieved (Festival of the First Fruits) will not allow for any shortcuts. The book of BaMidbar documents this journey, serves as the bridge and segue between a Divine promise and its human realization, the Book of Leviticus establishing the vision with which to forge an enslaved nation into a sacred people, and the Book of Joshua a complete generation later, which documents Israel's actual entry into the sacred land itself where our destiny would become manifest. The midbar, with its difficult climate and alien environment, serves as an excellent testing ground for the Divine Word (davar) to take root, for leadership (dabar) to develop and for sanctity (dvir) to emerge. And until that happens, redemption will remain a far-off dream, and the vision of our covenant will not yet be realized.

The deeds of the ancestors etched in the Bible foreshadow the experience of the descendants throughout the ages (ma'asei avot siman labanim). Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israeli Independence Day, echoes the Biblical Passover, our emergence as an alt-neu people after almost 2000 years of exile and enslavement; Yom Yerushalayim is our mandatory dream of the elusive goal of a City of Peace, a City of Righteousness which will influence the whole world to accept the morality of the Ten Commandments. However, it is no wonder that the Temple Mount is not yet in our hands and the Third Temple is still a dream.

Now, just as in Biblical times, we apparently require a gestation period, a process of advance and retreat, a desert-like period of exorcizing the exile from the nation even after we have presumably returned home. And so, even while we take legitimate pride in our six decades plus of growth and accomplishment, economic development and high-tech expertise, an ingathering of millions of exiles who established a color continuum rather than a color divide, a network of unparalleled Torah Academies and Universities of Higher learning, an IDF which is our pride not only because of its Military power but also because of its moral sensitivity, its commitment to avoid collateral damage, I must admit that we also have reason to be ashamed.

I am ashamed of past political leaders in the highest offices who have clouds of indictment for moral

turpitude hovering over their heads; I am ashamed of a Chief Rabbinate judicial system which can summarily nullify the conversions of thousands of Israelis (even though they were performed by a Court of Torah Scholars), demonstrating crass indifference to the lives they are thereby destroying, utterly disregarding the manifold Biblical directives of how we are to love the stranger, the proselyte; I am ashamed of the Religious Court Judges who, in the name of the "purity" of Israel, are impervious to the cries of abused women who are forced captives to husbands who either refuse to grant their wives a divorce or hold up a high ransom for granting these 'enslaved' women their freedom; I am ashamed that our political and religious leaders answer to a Party rather than a constituency, that too many of our politicians are motivated by personal profit rather than the words of the prophets, and that so many religious Judges seek grace in the eyes of those to their religious right rather than in the eyes of the Almighty G-d Above who hears the cries of the strangers and the grass widows. Most of all, I am ashamed that these "leaders" are not ashamed.

So what then gives my heart a spring of optimistic faith for our future? Thank G-d I'm not a politician but an educator in constant contact with our magnificent and idealistic youth still ready to sacrifice their lives for a miracle country which stands up to terrorism as it reaches for the elusive dream of a holy and united Jerusalem celebrating the Festival of the First Fruits in total peace. On Yom Yerushalayim we have the privilege to be inspired by what uplifts us and not daunted by what shames us. And I believe in our prophets, specifically the prophet Isaiah, who railed against backsliding "ministers" who loved bribes and self-righteous judges who refused to take up the cause of the oppressed but who nevertheless promised that at the end of the process, on the other side of the desert, G-d will "return His hand upon us and purify our dross..., restore our judges as they were of old," and then Jerusalem shall be called City of the Righteousness, a Municipality of Faithfulness..." Zion shall be redeemed by justice and those who return to her by righteousness (Isaiah 1:22,23,26,27). And we must make that happen as soon as possible! © 2009 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

A Cut Amongst the Rest

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

The Hebrew words for count are either *s'oo*, which also means lift up, and *p'kod*, which can also

mean appoint. Thus, when the Torah commands, "*s'oo es rosh kol adas Yisrael*, count the heads all the assembly of Israel (Numbers 1:2), it is telling Moshe to uplift them as well. It was not merely a matter of numbers, explains Rebbe Rav Shmuel of Sochatchov: counting the nation was not only a means of enumerating them, but also of appointing a special dignity to each and every one who was counted. Every individual was important, there were no communal estimates, and the appointment actually lifted them.

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

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

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

Bundled in a coat and scarf, the Rabbi approached the banker's mansion and knocked on the door. The valet who answered the door was shocked to see the great Rabbi Meisels standing outside in the bitter cold. He immediately asked him to enter the home where he said there would be a hot tea waiting. Rabbi Meisels refused. "It is not necessary. Please tell Reb Isaac to see me by the door."

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

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

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

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

But the Rabbi did not budge. He began talking about the plight of some of the unfortunate members of the community as the banker's teeth chattered in response. "Please, Rebbe, just tell me what you need! I'll give anything you want, just come inside!"

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

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

The Chasam Sofer explains that because Levi was a special tribe of teachers and leaders it could be possible they would be aloof. Thus, though they were counted separately, they could not be above the crowd. Therefore, the Torah's command was stated in clear terms, "their heads you shall not lift (v'es rosham lo sisah) among the Children of Israel". Leadership may put you in a class by yourself, but remember, says the Torah, you must not feel that you are above the folk. You cannot bask in warmth while you are oblivious to those who suffer in the cold. Your head can not be "lifted" from among the children of Israel. © 2000 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A stronger birth rate and a stable home life, wise parenting and a commitment to marriage and family can contribute greatly to the development of this necessary "internal" growth. Individually, no one can instruct someone else how to live one's life. But setting a sense of national priorities and extolling it as the norm in a Jewish society will certainly help the Jewish people demographically and spiritually. © 2009 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

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah reveals Hashem's indescribable love for His people. The prophet Hosheia 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." Hosheia 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 Hosheia 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 soup lifting 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 strayed 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 rededicated 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. © 2001 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org