

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

One of the most amusing scenes in Anglo-Jewish history occurred on 14 October 1663. A mere seven years had passed since Oliver Cromwell had found no legal bar to Jews living in England (hence the so-called "return" of 1656). A small synagogue was opened in Creechurch Lane in the City of London, forerunner of Bevis Marks (1701), the oldest still-extant place of Jewish worship in Britain.

The famous diarist Samuel Pepys decided to pay a visit to this new curiosity, to see how Jews conducted themselves at prayer. What he saw amazed and scandalised him. As chance or Providence had it, the day of his visit turned out to be Simchat Torah. This is how he described what he saw:

"And anon their Laws that they take out of the press [i.e. the Ark] are carried by several men, four or five several burthens in all, and they do relieve one another; and whether it is that every one desires to have the carrying of it, I cannot tell, thus they carried it round about the room while such a service is singing... But, Lord! to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true G-d, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this." (The Diary of Samuel Pepys, 14 October 1663)

This was not the kind of behaviour he was used to in a house of worship.

There is something unique about the relationship of Jews to the Torah, the way we stand in its presence as if it were a king, dance with it as if it were a bride, listen to it telling our story and study it, as we say in our prayers, as "our life and the length of our days." There are few more poignant lines of prayer than the one contained in a poem said at Neilah, at the end of Yom Kippur: Ein shiyur rak ha-Torah ha-zot: "Nothing remains," after the destruction of the Temple and the loss of the land, "but this Torah." A book, a scroll, was all that stood between Jews and despair.

What non-Jews (and sometimes Jews) fail to appreciate is how, in Judaism, Torah represents law as love, and love as law. Torah is not just "revealed legislation" as Moses Mendelssohn described it in the

eighteenth century. (In his book *Jerusalem*, 1783.) It represents G-d's faith in our ancestors that He entrusted them with the creation of a society that would become a home for His presence and an example to the world.

One of the keys as to how this worked is contained in the parsha of Bemidbar, always read before Shavuot, the commemoration of the giving of the Torah. This reminds us how central is the idea of wilderness -- the desert, no man's land -- is to Judaism. It is midbar, wilderness, that gives our parsha and the book as a whole its name. It was in the desert that the Israelites made a covenant with G-d and received the Torah, their constitution as a nation under the sovereignty of G-d. It is the desert that provides the setting for four of the five books of the Torah, and it was there that the Israelites experienced their most intimate contact with G-d, who sent them water from a rock, manna from heaven and surrounded them with clouds of glory.

What story is being told here? The Torah is telling us three things fundamental to Jewish identity. First is the unique phenomenon that in Judaism the law preceded the land. For every other nation in history the reverse was the case. First came the land, then human settlements, first in small groups, then in villages, towns and cities. Then came forms of order and governance and a legal system: first the land, then the law.

The fact that in Judaism the Torah was given bemidbar, in the desert, before they had even entered the land, meant that uniquely Jews and Judaism were able to survive, their identity intact, even in exile. Because the law came before the land, even when Jews lost the land they still had the law. This meant that even in exile, Jews were still a nation. G-d remained their sovereign. The covenant was still in place. Even without a geography, they had an ongoing history. Even before they entered the land, Jews had been given the ability to survive outside the land.

Second, there is a tantalising connection between midbar, 'wilderness,' and davar, 'word.' Where other nations found the gods in nature -- the rain, the earth, fertility and the seasons of the agricultural year -- Jews discovered G-d in transcendence, beyond nature, a G-d who could not be seen but rather heard. In the desert, there is no nature. Instead there is emptiness and silence, a silence in which one can hear the unearthly voice of the One-beyond-the-world. As

Edmond Jabs put it: "The word cannot dwell except in the silence of other words. To speak is, accordingly, to lean on a metaphor of the desert." (*Du Desert au Libre*, Paris, Pierre Belford, 1980)

The historian Eric Voegelin saw this as fundamental to the completely new form of spirituality born in the experience of the Israelites:

"When we undertake the exodus and wander into the world, in order to found a new society elsewhere, we discover the world as the Desert. The flight leads nowhere, until we stop in order to find our bearings beyond the world. When the world has become Desert, man is at last in the solitude in which he can hear thunderingly the voice of the spirit that with its urgent whispering has already driven and rescued him from Sheol [the domain of death]. In the Desert G-d spoke to the leader and his tribes; in the desert, by listening to the voice, by accepting its offer, and by submitting to its command, they had at last reached life and became the people chosen by G-d." (*Israel and Revelation*, Louisiana State University Press, 1956, 153)

In the silence of the desert Israel became the people for whom the primary religious experience was not seeing but listening and hearing: *Shema Yisrael*. The G-d of Israel revealed Himself in speech. Judaism is a religion of holy words, in which the most sacred object is a book, a scroll, a text.

Third, and most remarkable, is the interpretation the prophets gave to those formative years in which the Israelites, having left Egypt and not yet entered the land, were alone with G-d. Hosea, predicting a second exodus, says in G-d's name:

"... I will lead her into the wilderness [says G-d about the Israelites] / and speak tenderly to her... / There she will respond as in the days of her youth, / As in the day she came out of Egypt."

Jeremiah says in G-d's name: "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown." *Shir ha-Shirim*, The Song of Songs, contains the line, "Who is this coming up from the wilderness leaning on her beloved?" (8:5).

Common to each of these texts is the idea of the desert as a honeymoon in which G-d and the people, imagined as bridegroom and bride, were alone together, consummating their union in love. To be sure, in the Torah itself we see the Israelites as a recalcitrant, obstinate people complaining and rebelling against the G-d. Yet the prophets in retrospect saw things differently. The wilderness was a kind of *yichud*, an alone-togetherness, in which the people and G-d bonded in love.

Most instructive in this context is the work of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep who focused attention on the importance of rites of passage. (*The Rites of Passage*. [Chicago]: University of Chicago,

1960) Societies develop rituals to mark the transition from one state to the next -- from childhood to adulthood, for example, or from being single to being married -- and they involve three stages. The first is separation, a symbolic break with the past. The last is incorporation, re-entering society with a new identity. Between the two comes the crucial stage of transition when, having cast off one identity but not yet donned another, you are remade, reborn, refashioned.

Van Gennep used the term *liminal*, from the Latin word for "threshold," to describe this transitional state when you are in a kind of no-man's-land between the old and the new. That is what the wilderness signifies for Israel: liminal space between slavery and freedom, past and future, exile and return, Egypt and the Promised Land. The desert was the space that made transition and transformation possible. There, in no-man's-land, the Israelites, alone with G-d and with one another, could cast off one identity and assume another. There they could be reborn, no longer slaves to Pharaoh, instead servants of G-d, summoned to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Seeing the wilderness as the space-between helps us to see the connection between the Israelites in the days of Moses and the ancestor whose name they bore. For it was Jacob among the patriarchs who had his most intense experiences of G-d in liminal space, between the place he was leaving and the one he was travelling to, alone and at night.

It was there, fleeing from his brother Esau but not yet arrived at the house of Laban, that he saw a vision of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending, and there on his return that he fought with a stranger from night until dawn and was given the name Israel. These episodes can now be seen to be prefigurations of what would later happen to his descendants (*maaseh avot siman le-banim*, "the acts of the fathers are a sign of what would later happen to the children"). (See Ramban, Commentary to Gen. 12:6.)

The desert thus became the birthplace of a wholly new relationship between G-d and humankind, a relationship built on covenant, speech and love as concretized in the Torah. Distant from the great centres of civilization, a people found themselves alone with G-d and there consummated a bond that neither exile nor tragedy could break. That is the moral truth at the beating heart of our faith: that it is not power or politics that link us to G-d, but love.

Joy in the celebration of that love led King David to "leap and dance" when the ark was brought into Jerusalem, earning the disapproval of King Saul's daughter Michal (2 Sam. 6:16), and many centuries later led the Anglo-Jews of Creech Lane to dance on *Simchat Torah* to the disapproval of Samuel Pepys. When love defeats dignity, faith is alive and well. ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

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NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd G-d spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they came out of the Land of Egypt" (Numbers 1:1)

Bamidbar, or "In the desert," is the name by which this fourth of the Five Books of Moses is most popularly known- an apt description of the 40 years of the Israelite desert wanderings which the book records. Indeed, this desert period serves as the precursor of-as well as a most appropriate metaphor for-the almost 2,000 years of homeless wandering from place to place which characterized much of Jewish history before the emergence of our Jewish State in 1948.

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

Moreover, wherever the Israelites wandered in the desert, they were always accompanied by the portable desert Mishkan, or Sanctuary, a word which is derived from Shechina, Divine Presence. However, G-d was not in the Sanctuary; even the greatest expanse of the heavens cannot contain the Divine Presence, declared King Solomon when he dedicated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem (I Kings 8:27). It was rather G-d's

word, dibur, which was in the Sanctuary, in the form of the "Ten Words" on the Tablets of Stone preserved in the Holy Ark, as well as the ongoing and continuing word of G-d which He would speak (vedibarti, Ex. 25:22) from between the cherubs on the ends of the Kapporet above the Holy Ark. It was by means of these divine words that even the desert, the midbar - a metaphor for an inhospitable and even alien exile environment which is boiling hot by day, freezing cold by night, and deficient in water that is the very elixir of life-can become transformed into sacred space, the place of the divine word (dibur). And indeed those words from the desert of Mount Sinai (diburim) succeeded in sanctifying the many Marrakeshes and Vilnas and New Yorks of our wanderings! G-d's word can transform a desert-any place and every place-into a veritable sanctuary; indeed the world is a midbar waiting to become a dvir (sanctuary) by means of G-d's dibur, communicated by inspired leaders, dabarim.

I believe that this understanding will serve to answer another question which is asked by our sages, the answer to which is especially relevant on the week of BaMidbar leading into Shavuot. The Mechilta to Parshat Yitro queries why G-d's Revelation was given in a par'osia - a desert, a no-man's-land, an open space - rather than at Mount Moriah, the place of Abraham's sacrifice later to become the Temple Mount. Is it not strange that the most important message - a kerygma, to use the Greek - given to Israel emanated from a mountaintop in a desert outside Israel rather than from the sacred land which G-d Himself bequeathed to His chosen people? The response given by the Mechilta has many ramifications for us today. The midrash maintains that had the Torah been given on the Temple Mount, the Israelites would have assumed that it was only for them. G-d specifically chose a par'osia in order to demonstrate that the Torah was ultimately meant for the entire world; in the very words of the Mechilta, "Let any human being who wishes to accept the Torah take it upon himself."

This will help us understand the midrash in the beginning of V'zot habrachta which pictures G-d as first offering the Torah to the Edomites of Mount Seir and then to the Ishmaelites of Mount Paran (BT Avoda Zara 2b, see also Rashi to Deut. 33:2). Unfortunately, they were not ready to accept it at that time; only Israel was willing to say, "We shall perform [the commandments] and we shall internalize them." It then became our task as a "Kingdom of Priest-Teachers and a Holy Nation" to expose and eventually teach the Torah as "a light unto the nations of the world." And eventually there will be a second revelation in which "G-d will inform us a second time before the eyes of every living being that He is to be their G-d," a prayer which we repeat every Sabbath in the Kedusha of the Musaf Amida prayer. The desert then becomes a symbol of a no-man's-land which is

also an every-man's-land.

If the word can sanctify even a desert it can certainly sanctify every other place on our planet.
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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Shavuot is a celebration of that moment when we, the Jewish people, were wed to G-d. Note the parallel between that moment and the wedding of bride and groom.

At Sinai, G-d and the people of Israel stood at the base of the mountain, "be-tahtit ha-har." (Exodus 19:17) Commenting on the word be-tahtit, the Midrash concludes that we, the Jewish people, were literally standing beneath the mountain - much like bride and groom stand under the huppah, the bridal canopy during the wedding ceremony.

At Sinai, G-d pronounces the words "ve-atem tihiyu li...goy kadosh, and you will be to Me a holy nation." (Exodus 19:6) This formula is very similar to what the groom says to the bride when he places a ring on her finger - harei at mekudeshet li, behold you are betrothed to me.

At Sinai, G-d and the people of Israel signed a contract in the form of the ten declarations, aseret hadibrot. Bride and groom do the same - they enter into the marital agreement through the signing of a ketubah - a marital contract.

There are other traditions and rituals that point to a parallel between Sinai and a wedding ceremony. The Jews encircled Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:12) just as the bride circles the groom. There was lightning at Sinai. (Exodus 19:16) This is mirrored in the wedding ceremony as some have a tradition to carry lit candles to the huppah. In the end, the tablets were broken at Sinai. (Exodus 32:19) Similarly, a glass is shattered at the end of the nuptials. The Jewish people ate and drank at Sinai. (Exodus 24:11) In the same way, we also partake of a festive meal at a wedding celebration.

Thus, the Torah states, that "Moshe (Moses) brought the people forth from the camp toward G-d." (Exodus 19:17) Commenting on this sentence, the Midrash compares this moment to a groom and bride coming toward each other.

There are emotional considerations that point to a connection between divine and human love. For example, feeling the presence of G-d means, no matter how lonely one is, G-d is near. Love, in the human realm, is also a response to loneliness. Moreover, when we connect to G-d, we connect to eternity, as G-d, of course, lives forever. Eternity is also a central component of marriage as we attempt to transcend our own lives by having children. Finally, loving G-d and loving a fellow human being can both give one a sense of deep fulfillment and meaning in life.

I believe that only through the experience of

blissful marital love can one understand love of G-d. While each partner in the relationship maintains her or his own individuality, love is the uniting of two souls. This gives one a sense of the absolute oneness of G-d. Human love is also an emotion that is infinite in its scope, giving one a sense of the infinity of G-d. No wonder the Torah calls cleaving to one's spouse vedavak (Genesis 2:24), just as cleaving to G-d is called deveikut.

In one word: love of G-d and love of spouse and family interface. On this Shavuot, may each one show us the way to the other. ©2013 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

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The main message that is contained in this week's Torah reading, as well as in much of the content of the chumash of Bamidbar, is that one does not only count numbers but that numbers really count in Jewish life. The Torah emphasizes for us the fact that without Jews there is no Judaism. Judaism is not an idea or a philosophy. It is meant to be a living organism and that requires human participation and numbers.

We often think that individuals are not that important in the grand scheme of things. The Torah however teaches us otherwise and that is why it continually counts the people of Israel. The Talmud teaches us an halachic and philosophic principle here. Something that is counted acquires a status that does not allow it to be nullified by greater numbers or amounts.

Being counted gives one status. Sometimes that status is extremely negative, as it is with the numbers given to incarcerated prisoners in jails. Sometimes it is pretty much neutral as the numbers given to us on our social security cards and personal identification papers. And sometimes being counted and numbered can be a positive experience, such as being the tenth man to constitute a minyan (prayer quorum.)

But all of us are aware that we are somehow being counted somewhere, somehow. And, that this fact should be taken into account when we make decisions about our speech, behavior and outlook on life. We count and we are to be counted. The Torah reading of Bamidbar comes to reinforce that truism within our psyches and personalities.

On the High Holy Days we recite the famous liturgical poem regarding the shepherd having his flock pass before him individually, to be marked for holy purpose. The poem is naturally based on the imagery of the Mishnah as it appears in tractate Rosh Hashanah. Each of the billions of people who populate

our world is an individual and is so counted by the great shepherd of us all.

No matter how fervently we wish to melt into the mass of humanity, each of us is singled out for particular tasks, challenges and inexplicable events. Part of the uniqueness of the Jewish people is that we have always been relatively small in number. The Torah itself informed us that we would be of limited numbers and that G-d did not choose us to fulfill our mission in human civilization because we would be many. Our limited numbers contribute to our sense of uniqueness and mission.

To be a Jew is to be special, but only those who truly cherish and appreciate their Jewishness, their traditions and value system can achieve that inner sense of uniqueness, self-confidence and self-worth. And those who unfortunately opted out of Jewish life, who assimilated, intermarried, and never built families etc., eventually counted themselves out of participating in the great drama of the Jewish story. So we should not wonder why the Torah counts us so often and so carefully. It teaches us a great deal about ourselves and our future. © 2015 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 DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Torah is even greater than the Priesthood and than the Kingship, for the Kingship is acquired with 30 advantageous things, the Priesthood with 24, and the Torah is acquired with 48 things" (Avos 6:5/6). The simple equation seems to be that since it takes more "things" to acquire Torah, it must be greater than the other two. And this is how most understand it. However, the 30 things associated with the Kingship -- which most explain to be referring to what Sh'muel warned the nation they were taking upon themselves by asking for a king (Sh'muel I 8:11-17), such as his being able to confiscate their property and draft their sons for his needs, as well as the 24 things associated with Priesthood -- which most explain to be referring to the "Mat'nos K'hunah," the "gifts" given to Kohanim for performing the Priestly service (such as certain cuts of meat from some offerings), are not prerequisites for getting those positions, but automatically come along with it. The "48 things the Torah is acquired with," on the other hand, must have already been accomplished before the Torah can be acquired. How can it be said that the Torah being greater than the Priesthood and than the Kingship is evident from how many things it takes to acquire each of them if the "advantages" of the Priesthood and the Kingship come with the position, while the Torah is not acquired until after these 48 things have already been accomplished?

Tiferes Yisroel, who alludes to this question when discussing the change in wording from "advantages" to "things," explains the comparison to be between the advantages one who has acquired any of these things has over those who haven't acquired it, not between how these things are acquired. It is therefore irrelevant that for the Priesthood and the Kingship these advantages automatically come with the position whereas for the Torah they are a prerequisite for acquiring it, as the bottom line is that one who has acquired Torah has more advantages than the other two. However, the wording of "is acquired with" is used for both the Kingship and the Torah (and, by extension, the Priesthood, even if those words aren't repeated there, at least not in our editions), indicating that that the focal point is the process of the acquisition, not just the status after it has been acquired. [It should be noted, though, that R' Moshe Almosnino (Pirkay Moshe) says the most correct version of this teaching does not have the word "acquired with" (when referring to the Kingship or the Priesthood). Nevertheless, Tiferes Yisroel does not reference any other version, so is likely explaining the words as they appear in our editions.]

It can be suggested that the words "is acquired with" do not have to refer to the process of acquisition; it could refer to what is required for the position to be "acquired." Since a king cannot really be a king if he can't fully rule over his people, these "advantages" are necessary for a king to "acquire" the position. Although it would be a bit more difficult to fit this in with the "K'hunah" if the 24 "advantages" are the "Mat'nos K'hunah" (see below for another possibility), if being supported by the rest of the nation (so that they can focus on their spiritual growth), and/or the interaction with the nation that giving the "gifts" brings about, and/or the necessity to be on a higher spiritual plane in order to partake of the "gifts" are required for the position to have meaning, it can also be said that these "advantages" are comparable to those needed to "acquire" the position of being king and becoming a "Ben Torah." (This suggestion came about through an email conversation with Rabbi Micha Berger, and is based on what I initially thought he was trying to say.)

Bais Avos (written by the Vilna Gaon's son, R' Sh'lomo Zalman) and L'zeicher L'Yisroel (R' Yechiel Michel of Minsk) suggest that the difference between automatically being part of the position or having to be accomplished in order for the status to be attained (implied by calling what applies to the Kingship and the Priesthood "advantages" and what applies to the Torah "things") makes the case for the Torah being greater even stronger. After all, the need to have to accomplish something before being worthy of a title make that title more prominent than one that is attained without having to accomplish anything first. [Bais Avos compares it to having to pay someone to marry a daughter versus

receiving a dowry to agree to allow someone to marry her; if we have to work hard in order to acquire Torah, it must be that much more valuable than something that has to have benefits included before anyone would accept such a position.] Although conceptually this is true, it makes the number of "advantages" each has secondary, if not irrelevant. After all, according to this line of thinking, having more benefits come along with a position indicates that the position is (otherwise) less desirable! Instead of highlighting the numbers, what should have been highlighted was which has prerequisites and which has incentives!

Several commentators (e.g. Rivash and Ra'avan) have a different list of the "advantages" of the Priesthood. Some have to do with behavior and character (such as being "holy" and "pure"), some have to do with having additional requirements (such as taking a haircut at least once a month and whom they can marry), and others are things unique to their position (such as wearing the Priestly Garments). Even though whether or not one is a Kohain is dependent on paternal lineage, being a Kohain who qualifies for the Priestly Service requires maintaining the code of conduct (etc.) mandated by the Torah. It would be difficult to say that every "Kohain" has all the advantages of being a Kohain, as there is a higher standard necessary to be a Kohain in good standing. This is true of the "Mat'nos K'hunah" as well, since we can choose which Kohain to give some of the gifts to (such as T'rumah) and which, of those whose turn it is to serve in the Temple, we give our offerings to be brought. Therefore, to a certain extent, a Kohain must "earn" his advantages as well. It's not enough to have a father who is/was a Kohain; by living up to the higher standards of the Priesthood, individual Kohanim can enjoy the benefits of being one, as after gaining the respect of non-Kohanim, the "Mat'nos K'hunah" will be given to them rather than to other Kohanim. In this respect, the "advantages" of Priesthood can be compared to the "advantages" of one who has acquired Torah, as after earning their status they benefit from the "advantages."

"The heart of a king is in G-d's hand" (Mishlay 21:1) because the "decisions" a king makes affect so many people. In order to prevent so many from being improperly impacted, G-d often gets involved by influencing the king's decision. Who becomes king, which has a greater impact than any single decision made by a king, is also "in G-d's hand." [In ancient times, rulers made themselves out to be "divine" based on G-d (or whichever deity they worshipped and attributed things to) having chosen them to be king.] While one of the factors as to who becomes king, especially over G-d's chosen people, is certainly based on how it will impact others, because of the extreme personal advantages of being the king, whomever will benefit from those advantages must be worthy of

getting them. This is true for two reasons. For one thing, a person who will abuse the position and take advantage of others will not be given such a position (unless those others do not deserve to be protected from such abuse). Secondly, unless the prospective king is deserving of the benefits of royalty, G-d would not let him receive them. Therefore, every benefit a king gets must be deserved by the individual who is to become king.

If an individual must deserve the benefit he will get when he becomes king before attaining such a position, it can be said that he "acquires" the position through his (previous) behavior. And if each of the 30 "advantages" of being king has a corresponding positive trait or action that caused him to deserve that particular "advantage," then there were 30 "advantageous things," referring to the 30 corresponding causes, through with the Kingship was acquired. From this perspective, the number of "advantageous things" needed to acquire Kingship (and Priesthood) can be contrasted with the number needed to acquire Torah. And since the Torah needs 48, not just 24 or 30, it must be greater than those other two.

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RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

"**A**nd you should know it today and return it to your heart that HASHEM is G-d in the heavens above and on the earth below and the there is no other." (Devarim 4:39) The Rambam states that "the foundation of foundations and the pillar of all wisdom is to know that there is a prime source of reality -- namely G-d". It is not a matter of belief or speculation but rather of knowledge. He continues, "The knowledge of this matter is a positive commandment, as it says, "I am HASHEM your G-d Who took you out of the land of Egypt..." The Kuzari asks, "Why such a small claim?" "I am HASHEM Who created heaven and earth" would be more grandiose.

The answer is that we were not there when the world was created but we did experience the Exodus from Egypt and the pronouncements on Mt. Sinai. This was a historical revelation and not a hysterical revolution. We, as a nation, were there and we witnessed it. That's how we know, but how do we "know today?!"

It was a glorious Sunday morning 25 years ago. My wife and I had just spent a beautiful Shabbos in Boston. We had two little boys in tow. We decided to travel north to visit Newburyport Mass. where my great grandfather lived most of his adult life and where I remember visiting him. Entering the city we found only strip malls. I was sure they had already "paved paradise and put up a parking lot".

Then like out of a time warp, there it was; the cobble stone street, the lake, the old court house, and a

civil war cannon. As we stood there surveying the area a gentleman approached us and asked, "Are you people-Chassidim?" I told him, "No! We're just ordinary folk." He persisted, "Is there a convention going on?" I thought to myself, "Four Jews is a convention. Five would be an incursion, and six would already be an occupation."

I told him, "No! My great grandfather lived here after coming from Russia. He built that Synagogue down the block and his house is there across the street. I'm here to show my children where their great-great grandfather lived, worked, and prayed." The man stood at attention. Real tears streamed down his cheeks and with a quivering voice he declared, "When I see how you people keep your traditions from generation to generation you are truly G-d's chosen people." He backed up respectfully into the day and disappeared. My wife and I were stunned. What was that all about? We reasoned that this fellow just came out from one of those Sunday services where they were reading the Bible which is all about the Jews. However, when they look at the news they are surprised to find out how often those who seem to be the descendants of the ones mentioned in "the book" represent causes that countermand the values of "the book". Something's wrong with this picture! A doubt is aroused about the veracity of "The Book". Behold, onto the Mall in Newburyport, Mass. strides a family looking hauntingly authentic, with Yarmulkas, and Tsitsis, and other overt signs.

I'm not saying that I am the paragon of virtue but something must have struck him. The "People of the Book" suddenly appear with loyalty to "the book" and all is confirmed true. We just walked out of the Bible -- stepped down from Mt. Sinai, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, witnesses to the giving of the Torah. "A matter is established by two witnesses", and here testify; the book and the people of the book. So it is written, "You are my witnesses, says HASHEM" (Isaiah 3:10). It was a glorious Sunday morning!

Our direct contact with Mount Sinai occurred 3327 years ago and here we are still animated by Torah and Mitzvos with its millions of minutiae resonating 3327 years later! ©2015 Rabbi L. Lam & torah.org

RABBI HERSCHEL SCHACHTER

TorahWeb

The gemara (Shabbos 105a) points out several places in the Torah where we find roshei teivos (an acronym). Rav Yochanan says that one such place is the opening word of the aseres hadibros -- "anochi", which is an acronym for "ana nafshi kesovis yehovis -- I have given you my soul by writing down, and giving you, the Torah". Our tradition has it that the Torah is not merely a collection of mitzvos, but by means of a moshol (parable) is a description of Hashem's essence.

Maamad Har Sinai consisted of a gilui shechinah not only in the sense that there was a heavenly light shining at the time (see Moreh Nevuchim vol. 1 chapter 64), but also because Hakadosh Baruch Hu "revealed Himself" to us (gilui shechinah) by giving us the laws of His Torah, a description of Elokus -- His soul.

Rashi (Parshas Mishpatim, 21:13) quotes the midrash interpreting the phrase (Shmuel 1, 24:13), "hamashal hakadmoni" as referring to the Torah. The entire Torah is a moshol of Hakadosh Baruch Hu, who is "The Ancient One", since He was around before the world was brought into existence. This is the rationale behind the principle of faith, articulated by the Rambam, that the laws of the Torah are immutable. The navi Malachi (3:7) tells us that although everything that was created is always changing, the essence of Hashem never changes. Therefore it follows that since the Torah is a description of the essence of Hashem, the mitzvos of the Torah can also never change. This is also the reason why the opening pesukim in krias shema tell us that the way to develop a love for Hashem is to learn His Torah. When we get to understand His soul better, we can develop a greater love for Him; to the extent that one gets to know Him, he can come to love Him.

Every morning when we recite the special berachos before learning Torah we ask Hakadosh Baruch Hu that by learning His Torah we should all get to know "His name", since the entire Torah is a description of Him, which is the same as "His name". The reason why the chachmei hamasorah included this concept into the text of birchas haTorah is because the entire institution of birchas haTorah is derived (Berachos 21a) from the passuk (Devarim 32:3), "when I mention the name of Hashem, everyone give praise to our elokim", and the chachomim knew that "the name of Hashem" is a reference to the entire Torah [see introduction to sefer Ginas Egoz.] ©2015 Rabbi H. Schachter & The TorahWeb Foundation, Inc.

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Be'eros

"Hashem spoke to Moshe in Midbar Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting." Be'er Mayim Chaim: Were Bamidbar the first chumash, this opening would be entirely appropriate. But it isn't. There is no gap between the three chumashim that precede it, other than a bit of space in the Torah scroll. The Bnei Yisrael arrived in the Sinai wilderness some weeks after leaving Egypt; they've been there ever since. There was no place to go between the end of Vayikra and the beginning of our chumash. So why begin Bamidbar with a place marker that we don't need? Come to think of it, mentioning the Tent of Meeting/ohel moed strikes us as equally unnecessary. We have long become used to finding Hashem's Word emanating from that place to the exclusion of all others.

The Torah alludes here to an important reality about our comprehension of and relationship with Hashem. A beautiful mashal (Bamidbar Rabbah 1:2) conveys the thought. It tells of a king who travels to a part of the realm that he did not usually frequent. When the inhabitants of a city along the planned route of royal travel got wind of the monarch's impending visit, they were seized with fear. Not wanting to see how the king would exercise his considerable power, they fled. Arriving in the city, the royal entourage found no one home. Literally.

The next city along the route was not different. Word of the royal visit had gotten out. Having heard much about the king, the subjects were not eager to learn of his purpose, his wishes, or see the consequences of his displeasure. So they left as well. The king arrived at a ghost town.

The king's itinerary next took him a bit off the main road, passing through a desolate and mostly forsaken area. Here, too, the residents of a small village found out about the imminent arrival of the king, but reacted differently. They knew little about matters of the court. None had ever travelled to the capital of the realm, there to learn about the king's exploits, and his power. They felt genuine delight and privilege. They were eager to host such a guest -- something they had never imagined would happen. Their joy and happiness was met with a similar reaction by the king, who finally found subjects who were willing to engage him.

The mashal tells us about the encounter between HKBH and Man. We all remember pesukim that speak of the sea, mountains, angels -- all of them shaken to the core by Hashem's presence, shrinking from His approach, and fleeing His immediacy. How is it that the Bnei Yisrael were able to stand their ground and listen to His voice, especially after the frightful show of lights and sounds that introduced Matan Torah?

Ironically, perhaps, it was their simplicity that enabled them to stand at Sinai, rather than their sophistication. They were so distant from the ethereal heavens that they could react with joy, rather than become frozen with fear. (To be sure, even they balked after the first moments of revelation, fearing that their souls would explode from overload. But had they understood more about Hashem going into the experience, they would never have gotten as far before pulling the emergency cord.)

We understand now why the Torah makes a point of localizing the dvar Hashem in the midbar/wilderness. We would have been unable to listen to His words were it not for something resembling the uncomplicated, unsophisticated nature of the midbar. We could not have functioned without some innocence and cluelessness. We came to matan Torah with the characteristic of the midbar.

Lacking deeper awareness, we walked into

something far larger than we could have imagined -- and gained the benefits of the encounter. Having stood literally where angels feared to tread, we quickly learned that we were infinitely more removed from Hashem's essence than we understood previously. This greatly humbled us. In other words, we found ourselves at the small, unassuming mountain of Sinai that symbolizes according to Chazal understatement and humility. We benefited from both midbar and Sinai.

And so it must always be. Our first encounters with HKBH may take place with child-like innocence. They allow us to come close enough that we can learn more deeply and clearly how distant we are, how much awe and reverence we need to inject into our avodah.

It might make it easier for us if we realized that, kevayachol, HKBH had to do the same. Had He not limited the manifestation of His presence, nothing else could coexist. Certainly no thinking, sentient being could function through such a display. So He limited Himself, as it were. He spoke not from the heavens, or His "place," but contained His presence and voice in the small space of the Tent of Meeting, the ohel moed.

This, too, is alluded to in the first pasuk of Bamidbar, setting the stage for more to come, until the aveiros of Bnei Yisroel would upset this relationship, and cause some withdrawal of the Shechinah. (Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Bamidbar 1:1) ©2015 Rabbi H. Schachter & The TorahWeb Foundation, Inc.

