

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Bamidbar takes up the story as we left it toward the end of Shemot. The people had journeyed from Egypt to Mount Sinai. There they received the Torah. There they made the Golden Calf. There they were forgiven after Moses' passionate plea, and there they made the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, inaugurated on the first of Nissan, almost a year after the exodus. Now, one month later, on the first day of the second month, they are ready to move on to the second part of the journey, from Sinai to the Promised Land.

Yet there is a curious delay in the narrative. Ten chapters pass until the Israelites actually begin to travel (Num. 10:33). First there is a census. Then there is an account of the arrangement of the tribes around the Ohel Moed, the Tent of Meeting. There is a long account of the Levites, their families and respective roles. Then there are laws about the purity of the camp, restitution, the sotah, the woman suspected of adultery, and the nazirite. A lengthy series of passages describe the final preparations for the journey. Only then do they set out. Why this long series of seeming digressions?

It is easy to think of the Torah as simply telling events as they occurred, interspersed with various commandments. On this view the Torah is history plus law. This is what happened, these are the rules we must obey, and there is a connection between them, sometimes clear (as in the case of laws accompanied by reminder that "you were slaves in Egypt"), sometimes less so.

But the Torah is not mere history as a sequence of events. The Torah is about the truths that emerge through time. That is one of the great differences between ancient Israel and ancient Greece. Ancient Greece sought truth by contemplating nature and reason. The first gave rise to science, the second to philosophy. Ancient Israel found truth in history, in events and what G-d told us to learn from them. Science is about nature, Judaism is about human nature, and there is a great difference between them. Nature knows nothing about freewill. Scientists often deny that it exists at all. But humanity is constituted by its freedom. We are what we choose to be. No planet chooses to be hospitable to life. No fish chooses to be a hero. No peacock chooses to be vain. Humans do choose. And in that fact is born the drama to which the

whole Torah is a commentary: how can freedom coexist with order? The drama is set on the stage of history, and it plays itself out through five acts, each with multiple scenes.

The basic shape of the narrative is roughly the same in all five cases. First G-d creates order. Then humanity creates chaos. Terrible consequences follow. Then G-d begins again, deeply grieved but never losing His faith in the one life-form on which He set His image and to which He gave the singular gift that made humanity godlike, namely freedom itself.

Act 1 is told in Genesis 1-11. G-d creates an ordered universe and fashions humanity from the dust of the earth into which He breathes His own breath. But humans sin: first Adam and Eve, then Cain, then the generation of the Flood. The earth is filled with violence. G-d brings a flood and begins again, making a covenant with Noah. Humanity sin again by making the Tower of Babel (the first act of imperialism, as I argued in an earlier study). So G-d begins again, seeking a role model who will show the world what it is to live in faithful response to the word of G-d. He finds it in Abraham and Sarah.

Act 2 is told in Genesis 12-50. The new order is based on family and fidelity, love and trust. But this too begins to unravel. There is tension between Esau and Jacob, between Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel, and between their children. Ten of Jacob's children sell the eleventh, Joseph, into slavery. This is an offence against freedom, and catastrophe follows -- not a Flood but a famine, as a result of which Jacob's family goes into exile in Egypt where the whole people become enslaved. G-d is about to begin again, not with a family this time but with a nation, which is what Abraham's children have now become.

Act 3 is the subject of the book of Shemot. G-d rescues the Israelites from Egypt as He once rescued Noah from the Flood. As with Noah (and Abraham), G-d makes a covenant, this time at Sinai, and it is far more extensive than its precursors. It is a blueprint for social order, for an entire society based on law and



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justice. Yet again, however, humans create chaos, by making a Golden Calf a mere forty days after the great revelation. G-d threatens catastrophe, destroying the whole nation and beginning again with Moses, as He had done with Noah and Abraham (Ex. 32:10). Only Moses' passionate plea prevents this from happening. G-d then institutes a new order.

Act 4 begins with an account of this order, which is unprecedentedly long, extending from Exodus 35, through the whole of the book of Vayikra and the first ten chapters of Bamidbar. The nature of this new order is that G-d becomes not merely the director of history and the giver of laws. He becomes a permanent Presence in the midst of the camp. Hence the building of the Mishkan, which takes up the last third of Shemot, and the laws of purity and holiness, as well as those of love and justice, that constitute virtually the whole of Vayikra. Purity and holiness are demanded by the fact that G-d has become suddenly close. In the Tabernacle, the Divine Presence has a home on earth, and whoever comes close to G-d must be holy and pure. Now the Israelites are ready to begin the next stage of the journey, but only after a long introduction.

That long introduction, at the beginning of Bamidbar, is all about creating a sense of order within the camp. Hence the census, and the detailed disposition of the tribes, and the lengthy account of the Levites, the tribe that mediated between the people and the Divine Presence. Hence also, in next week's parsha, the three laws -- restitution, the sotah and the nazir -- directed at the three forces that always endanger social order: theft, adultery and alcohol. It is as if G-d were saying to the Israelites, this is what order looks like. Each person has his or her place within the family, the tribe and the nation. Everyone has been counted and each person counts. Preserve and protect this order, for without it you cannot enter the land, fight its battles and create a just society.

Tragically, as Bamidbar unfolds, we see that the Israelites turn out to be their own worst enemy. They complain about the food. Miriam and Aaron complain about Moses. Then comes the catastrophe, the episode of the spies, in which the people, demoralised, show that they are not yet ready for freedom. Again, as in the case of the Golden Calf, there

is chaos in the camp. Again G-d threatens to destroy the nation and begin again with Moses (Num. 14:12). Again only Moses' powerful plea saves the day. G-d decides once more to begin again, this time with the next generation and a new leader. The book of Devarim is Moses' prelude to Act 5, which takes place in the days of his successor Joshua.

The Jewish story is a strange one. Time and again the Jewish people has split apart, in the days of the First Temple when the kingdom divided into two, in the late Second Temple period when it was driven into rival groups and sects, and in the modern age, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when it fragmented into religious and secular in Eastern Europe, orthodox and others in the West. Those divisions have still not healed.

And so the Jewish people keeps repeating the story told five times in the Torah. G-d creates order. Humans create chaos. Bad things happen, then G-d and Israel begin again. Will the story never end? One way or another it is no coincidence that Bamidbar usually precedes Shavuot, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah at Sinai. G-d never tires of reminding us that the central human challenge in every age is whether freedom can coexist with order. It can, when humans freely choose to follow G-d's laws, given in one way to humanity after the Flood and in another to Israel after the exodus.

The alternative, ancient and modern, is the rule of power, in which, as Thucydides said, the strong do as they will and the weak suffer as they must. That is not freedom as the Torah understands it, nor is it a recipe for love and justice. Each year as we prepare for Shavuot by reading parshat Bamidbar, we hear G-d's call: here in the Torah and its mitzvot is the way to create a freedom that honours order, and a social order that honours human freedom. There is no other way. *Covenant and Conversation 5777 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2017 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd G-d spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they left the Land of Egypt." [Num. 1:1] How can we transform a no man's land into a domain of sanctity? The Book of Numbers, which we begin reading this Sabbath, provides an answer to this question. In doing so, it addresses the uncertainties and complexities of transitions: from Egyptian servitude to desert freedom and from abject slavery to the possibility of redemption. Perhaps most importantly, this fourth book of the Bible offers a glimpse into the complexities assailing the greatest leader in world history, Moses, and the

challenges he faced in leading this transformation.

A fierce advocate for his people and passionate lover of G-d, Moshe Rabbeinu is a towering persona who reminded a nation about its mission in the world and inspired humanity with his clarion call about the human right to freedom. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding his stunningly remarkable achievements, Moses left the world frustrated and disappointed, having been denied his dream of joining his people in the Promised Land.

Fortunately, G-d's greatest prophet has been resoundingly vindicated by Jewish history. The Jewish People's dramatic and historic return to the Land of Israel continues to draw inspiration from his teachings and longings, as well as from his legacy. The book that bears his name, "Torat Moshe," is humanity's blueprint for redemption.

It is with this context in mind that we approach the book of "Bamidbar" ["In the Desert"], an apt name for a work that documents the Jewish People's 40-years of transition between Egypt and the Land of Canaan. Indeed, this desert period serves as the precursor of – as well as a most poignant metaphor for – the nearly two thousand years of homeless wandering that characterized much of Jewish history from the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

The Hebrew word for desert midbar contains meanings and allusions that in many ways have served as a beacon for our exile. An example of this is the word for leader, which, though most commonly referred to in Hebrew as manhig, our Sages also referred to as dabar, fully cognizant of its shared Hebrew letter root d-b-r with midbar. [Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 8a]

In the Bible, the paradigmatic position of leadership— as exemplified by Abraham, Moses, and David—is the shepherd. And the desert is, of course, the most natural place for a 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 the letter-root d-b-r means leader-shepherd because it also means "word" (dibur). Just as the shepherd directs the flock using sounds and words, the leader of people must also inspire and lead with the verbal message he communicates. Indeed, the Aseret Ha-Dibrot [literally "Ten Utterances," but better known as the "Ten Commandments"] were revealed in the Sinai desert [midbar], and they govern the Jewish People—as well as a good part of the whole world—to this very day.

Moreover, it is important to note that wherever the Jewish People wandered in the desert, they were always accompanied by the portable desert sanctuary [mishkan], which is derived from the word Shekhina

[Divine Presence]. However, G-d was not in the Sanctuary, for even the greatest expanse of the heavens cannot contain the Divine Presence, as King Solomon declared 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 Utterances [Aseret Ha-Dibrot] on the Tablets of Stone preserved in the Holy Ark, as well as the ongoing and continuing Word of G-d that He would speak from between the cherubs on above the Holy Ark [Ex. 25:16-22].

It was by means of these Divine words [dibrot] that even the desert [midbar]—a metaphor for an inhospitable and alien exile environment: boiling hot by day, freezing cold by night, and deficient in water, the elixir of life—can be transformed into sacred space, the place of the Divine word (dibur). Indeed, the words from the desert of Sinai succeeded in sanctifying the many Marrakeshes and Vilnas and New Yorks of our wanderings. The world is a desert [midbar] waiting to become a sanctuary [d'vir] by means of G-d's word [dibur], communicated by inspiring leaders [dabarim].

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Chumash of Bamidbar is devoted to the narrative of the experiences of the people of Israel during their forty-year sojourn in the desert of Sinai. However, the Torah's narrative of any event or historical happening is never restricted to dry facts alone. In its nuanced phrasing the Torah comes to reveal to us the human factors and the psychological and spiritual import of these events.

The Torah is not intended to be a history book and to view it as such will only raise problems of text and misunderstanding of message. It is rather the book of humankind, of its achievements and foibles, its grandeur and pettiness, its great capacity to do good and to be evil. Thus the entire narrative here in Bamidbar has to be seen in this light. The Torah is going to tell us the story of people and not just of events.

Therefore the book of Bamidbar is full of character sketches and descriptions of people who by their actions changed the course of Jewish history, not only in the desert of Sinai but for all times as well. Those who complained about the manna, the overriding ambition of Korach, the selfishness and timidity of the ten spies who were sent by Moshe and the contradistinction in attitude with their colleagues, Yehoshua and Calev, the love of the Land of Israel exhibited by the five daughters of Zlafachad, all of these -- the analyses of people and their attitudes and motivations -- are on display here in this book of Bamidbar. It is therefore no exaggeration to state that the book of Bamidbar ranks with the Chumash

Bereshith in describing and teaching us about human beings and their individual but somehow common natures.

I think that this insight into the Chumash Bamidbar explains the often discussed issue of why this Chumash should begin with names of people and of the count of the tribes and the general population of Israel. The Torah, so to speak, is preparing us for the analysis of people and human characteristics that make up the bulk of this book. People have names, are part of a larger society and are distinct individuals. Not to recognize this basic fact of human existence will prevent anyone from having any meaningful understanding of the narrative of Chumash Bamidbar.

The commentators to Chumash point out that some of the tragedies of Chumash Bamidbar were indirectly caused by Moshe's overoptimistic assessment of human beings and their behavior. The great men named in this week's parsha -- the beginning of the book of Bamidbar -- are in the main no longer there at the end of the book. Positions of power take their toll on their holders.

The names therefore are recorded for us as an example of the pitfalls of power and office. By expecting people to be people and not saints and angels, great errors of judgment and policy can be avoided or at least mitigated. The desert was a harsh learning place for the Jewish people. If its lessons were truly absorbed and translated into Jewish individual and public life, then the experience will have proven to be of eternal value. ©2017 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's portion contains a counting of the Jewish people. Nachmanides offers several ideas to explain the reason for such a census. Each reason has a deep message.

First, the census expresses G-d's mercy. When Yaakov (Jacob) came to Egypt he brought with him only seventy souls. Now, thanks to G-d's strong and compassionate hand in Egypt, the Jews were a stronger nation as they prepared to enter the land of Israel in large numbers.

The message: one should not take G-d's gifts for granted. Proper thanks is due the Almighty for the existence, growth and success of the people of Israel. The census was a way of saying "todah rabbah" to G-d.

Nachmanides also explains that each person received a special merit by virtue of being counted separately. Every single person, no matter their status in society, had to pass by the leaders, by Moshe (Moses) and Ahron (Aaron) and be counted. They set

their eyes upon each person as an individual.

The message: in most countries-like here in the US-when a census is taken, there is a great danger that the very people who the census is supposed to benefit, become mere numbers. As individuals, their names are secondary. In the Torah census, the accent is on every persona, showing us that each is created as unique and irreplaceable images of G-d.

Finally, since the Jews were preparing to enter the land of Israel, the count was necessary. It was important to find out how many soldiers were available for pending war. Invariably, before wartime the Bible almost always tells us that a census was taken.

The message: while G-d is always there to help, no individual or nation should rely on miracles. As humans, we must do what we can in order to help ourselves. In this case, proper preparation was necessary before entering Israel.

These three views actually interface. A comment made by S. Y. Agnon illustrates the point: Once a king reviewed his returning soldiers who had been victorious in battle. He was ecstatic and joyous upon their valiant return. But G-d is not like this type of king. G-d, the King of Kings, when reviewing the returnees, understands that they are not necessarily those who left with the same battalion. Individuals were killed in the war and they, unfortunately, would not be coming back.

Here we have the co-mingling of the three opinions offered by Nachmanides. When going to war, each soldier must be viewed as a person with endless value. Upon returning safely, all returnees ought give thanks to the Lord.

These are important ideas worth remembering especially when considering current events. Too often it is tragically the case that an Israeli soldier is struck down and, we in the Diaspora don't know, or having become so accustomed to these losses, fail to reflect on the tragedy. Those murdered become a mere number and we fail to feel the pain of the bereaved families and friends.

It should not be this way. The loss of a soldier killed defending the land and people of Israel is a deep loss not only for his family and friends, but for all Jewish people. Similarly, the loss of any of our sisters and brothers who are victims of terror.

May we be spared such losses. ©2017 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 KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah gives instructions on how the children of Israel shall encamp in the desert -- on which side of the Tent of Meeting shall each tribe camp and

which tribes shall encamp together. The Torah states, "The tribe of Issachar...; the tribe of Zevulun..." Usually the Hebrew letter "vov" (meaning "and") is added to the name of each tribe as it is listed. However, the "vov" is conspicuously missing between the names of the tribes Issachar and Zevulun. What is the Torah coming to teach us?

The Baal HaTurim (a fascinating commentary on the Torah) explains that the tribe of Zevulun worked to support itself as well as Issachar so that the tribe of Issachar could totally devote itself to Torah study. Thus they are considered as one tribe and the reward for the Issachar's Torah study is the same for both tribes in the Heavenly World.

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz commented on this that just as one has the merit of Torah study for those he supports, likewise if one influences another to study Torah, he shares in the merit of that person. Thus we should help the study of Torah both through our financial support and through encouraging others to learn! *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2017 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Geneology

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

In this week's portion of the Torah states: "They brought the documents of their pedigrees and witnesses of their birth claims, each and every one, to declare their pedigrees after their tribes " (Rashi Bamidbar 1:18).

No doubt there remained questions in certain instances such as a divorcee who realized she was pregnant yet married within the three month waiting period after her divorce or a widow who realized she was pregnant after the death of her husband (according to Jewish law one must wait at least three months to establish parenthood). In such cases there are various ways ascertain parenthood.

The Talmud in Tractate Yoma states that when the Manna (the special food G-d provided for the Jews when they were in the dessert for forty years) fell and was later gathered, if there was anyone in that family that should not be counted as a member, that portion of the Manna would spoil thus establishing the exact parenthood of any child. Though we have learned that we do not depend on signs from heaven, Tosafot explains that in essence the courts were able, using the halachic principals, to establish the exact parenthood, and the Manna only corroborated what they already established.

The author of the Sefer Chasidim described another interesting method to establish lineage. They placed a bone of the deceased and mixed it with the blood of the one in question. If the bone of the deceased absorbed the blood then it would indicate that the offspring is his. Of course as stated earlier this

was done only after the courts had already established by their findings who the father is and this method only corroborated their findings.

Today we are able to discern who the father is by simply taking the DNA of the father and the offspring and thereby establishing parentage. Though some Rabbis still believe that one can only rely on this once the findings of the courts have been established, there are nevertheless Rabbis who say that relying on DNA is so corroborating that even if witnesses came forth and stated the opposite of the DNA findings, we abide by the results of the DNA and the witnesses are not believed. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

VORT FROM THE RAV

Torah Musings

by Dr. Arnold Lustiger

"These are the descendants of Aaron and Moses." (Bamidbar 3:1) We are all acquainted with the Akeidah that Abraham performed, but we do not pay sufficient attention to an Akeidah that was carried out by Moses. Moses' Akeidah was perhaps more awesome and terrifying than Abraham's. After Abraham offered Isaac, the two of them returned from Mount Moriah with great happiness. Moses never experienced this satisfaction; in his case, the Ribbono shel Olam requested and received his sacrifice. The simple right to leave a last will and testament, to die in one's own bed surrounded by his children, was denied to Moses. Moses died alone on a mountain. Before he died he did not lay his hands on Gershom or Eliezer, his sons, but rather on Joshua the son of Nun. Moses' power was bestowed on Joshua and not on his own progeny.

More tragic still was the fact that Moses' children do not appear in the book of Jewish genealogy. Moses twice counted the Jews, and also counted the tribe of Levi. Initially, the Torah states: These are the descendants of Aaron and Moses on the day that the Lord spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai. The Torah should have listed the generations of Moses, his own children, along with the generations of Aaron. Yet the subsequent verses ignore Moses entirely and center around Aaron alone: These are the names of the sons of Aaron: Nadab the firstborn, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. Where are Moses' children? The Torah is silent. Where are the generations of Moses? The Torah does not tell us. Moses did not merit the normal satisfaction of flesh and blood-to be reborn through a child, to live again through the child, to feel the great joy that upon his own death his progeny will remain.

Moses had two children. Of course he loved them both, the same way that Abraham loved Isaac. The Creator asked both Abraham and Moses to give up their children, to sacrifice them on the altar. Unlike Abraham, no angel called to Moses: Do not stretch

forth your hand to the lad, nor do the slightest thing to him (Gen. 22:12). The knife mercilessly tore apart the relationship between Moses, Gershom and Eliezer. In the book of Judges (18:30), Moses' son Gershom was not designated as "ben Moshe" but "ben Menasheh" (Bava Basra 109b), because Moses' children no longer belonged to him. For the receiver of the Torah, for the teacher of Klal Yisrael, it is prohibited to have a connection to one's family. He is the father of Israel; every Jew has an equal share in him. It is prohibited for one individual to have a closer relationship than anyone else. Moses' Torah scroll must be inherited equitably by all. The Torah is analogized to a desert in the sense that it is free to all for the taking (see Rashi 21:18). The receiver of the Torah in this sense is also a desert, belonging to everyone.

At the burning bush, G-d told Moses: Take your shoes off your feet, because the place upon which you stand is holy soil (Ex. 3:5). Take your shoes off your feet-cast off any private matters, your human, personal needs. Because the place upon which you stand is holy soil-because your place in the history of Israel is filled with sanctity and purity, it is prohibited for you to involve yourself in private family life. (Beis Yosef Shaul, Vol. 4, pp. 92-94) ©2017 Dr. A. Lustiger

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This week we begin Sefer Bamidbar. "And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Midbar {wilderness} of Sinai. [1:1]" The Medrash [Rabbah 1:7] teaches: Why did the passuk {verse} stress that Hashem spoke to Moshe specifically in the midbar? Our Sages have learned that the Torah was given through water, fire and wilderness. Additionally, only one who makes himself like hefker {ownerless} will be able to acquire wisdom and Torah.

A number of explanations are given for this 'hefker': Some say that one needs to attach no importance to worldly things. They should be like hefker in his eyes.

Others say that one must be humble, willing to learn from and to teach anyone and everyone.

What is the significance of the Torah having been given in the Midbar {wilderness}?

Here again a number of explanations are given. The Ksav Sofer writes that the Torah was only given to those who eat the manna -- those who are willing to give up on the luxuries of life, being satisfied with the physical necessities, thereby focusing on the spiritual.

Others write that a midbar is a place where anyone who wants can enter. So too with Hashem and His Torah, all those who truly want to can connect to Him. (As I once heard from a friend: The only thing between you and Hashem is you.)

The personal events that have been taking place during the past few weeks have given me a

different understanding in this concept of the Torah being given in the midbar.

As some of you may know, the Ciner family has moved from Israel to the Monsey area. This has been an extremely difficult decision that we have been grappling with for many years and was implemented a little more than a week ago. (It was not related to the present security situation in Israel.)

When our lives are in their regular routine, it's easy to think that we are the ones who are in the driver's seat, controlling our destiny. When that routine is broken, when we enter a midbar of unforeseen challenges and surprises, we very quickly and clearly realize that so very little is really in our control.

In Israel I was trying fairly unsuccessfully to sell my van. To add insult to the injury, the call that I did receive about my van was on a Friday afternoon from a neighbor telling me that I had a flat tire. I rather grumpily took my car over to a nearby station to have it repaired. As I was complaining about the tire, Hashem must have been thinking: Ciner you idiot, do you want to sell the van or not! It was at that station that the buyer saw me and the deal was soon completed.

There are times that we see the good that comes out and there are times that we don't. On my prior trip, I had made many arrangements for housing, employment and schooling for the children. Some of these went according to plan but many didn't.

The Torah was given in the midbar -- a place where we were clearly not in control of what happened around us. That is a fundamental component of accepting Torah and living life accordingly. Internalizing the concept that all we can do is make the proper efforts. Once that's been done, the steering wheel is handed over to far more competent hands. At that point, all we can do is enjoy the ride. ©2017 Rabbi Y. Ciner & torah.org

RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

I have been thinking a lot recently about something I heard many years ago at an alumni dinner. It's a deeply profound and elegant explanation given by a friend from "Yeshiva days", who tragically passed away just this week. He was a young man, a father, a friend, a Tzadik. He briefly shared with me that night a statement, a one liner from Tractate Menachos, "Keshet Elyon D'Oraisa"- "The Top Knot is Torah".

Simply, it is talking about the top knot on the Tzitzis. That's the plain meaning of the Talmud. The top knot of the Tzitzis is the Torah obligation while the other windings and knots are not.

Avraham A explained "Keshet Elyon D'Oraisa" -- The top connection that two people can have is through studying Torah! The most profound relationships in life are with those with whom we have studied Torah. Also the highest and deepest

relationship with HASHEM is through the connection with Torah. "The top knot is D'Oraisa". Ain't it the truth!?

Going out for pizza with pals and bowling with buddies is nice. Those experiences, though, of playing ball and joking around with friends are never again as current as the moment they happened. They are quickly catalogued in the nostalgia file. Thirty years later it's hard to remember if it happened that way or if it merely was a childish fancy. Not so with Torah. Decades pass and those relationships are as alive today as then and more easily revived.

Similarly, I once heard a remarkable and stunning statement directly from the Lubavicher Rebbe ztl at a Yurtzeit gathering in commemoration of the anniversary of the departure of his beloved mother.

He said that one of the proofs of NESHAMA -- soul is that, in the usual course of life, the farther a person gets away from a material thing the more it fades from memory. Be it time, person, or place -- it's hard enough to recall what we ate for lunch last week and even more so last year. It becomes less and less important or impactful, meaningful or memorable as time marches forward.

That's how it is with all physical things. The flavor, the color, the entirety of the experience fades and is less influential with the passage of time. However, with spiritual matters, the memories are persistent and even more impressive, even as the present tense becomes the deep past. The Talmud tells us that a person does not completely understand what his Rebbe said until after 40 years have passed.

So it is with the loss of a loved one. The more distant one travels from their time of departure from this world the more their truest qualities are crystalized and the more clearly we are able to perceive their essence.

Perhaps because we are less distracted by the sound of their voice, the shape of their nose, we are able to gain a greater clarity of their quintessential being, their mission in life, their special message.

There was no greater spiritual event in the history of the world than Matan Torah -- "The Giving of the Torah". A lasting bond between all Jewish People for all generations was forged then by our common connection to Torah. Although it happened 3329 years ago, even still the persistent echo from that ancient encounter is current and relevant as ever centuries later becoming more clear year after year. ©2017 Rabbi L. Lam & torah.org

HARAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L

Bais Hamussar

In Parashas Netzavim, Moshe Rabbeinu tells Bnei Yisrael, "This mitzvah that I command you today is not hidden from you and it is not distant... The matter is very near to you -- it is in your mouth and in your heart to perform it" (Devarim 30:11-14).

Rashi explains that Moshe was referring to the

mitzvah of learning Torah. Yet, although the Torah is so close to one's heart, many fail to truly connect to what they learn.

Rav Wolbe (AleI Shur vol. II p. 81) cites a fascinating explanation offered by the Ramchal (Derech Eitz Chaim). The Torah is compared to fire as the pasuk in Yirmiyah (23:29) says, "Behold My word is like fire." The Ramchal explains the comparison as follows: When one beholds a coal, he does not see the fire contained within. Only after fanning the coal does it first start showing some of its true colors and only after continuous fanning does it erupt into a flame.

In a similar vein, sometimes the words of the Torah seem to be simplistic without any perceptible depth. However, after contemplating the words of the Torah and Chazal they begin to show their colors and one begins to understand their true meaning. If one incessantly ponders the words of the Torah, they will then erupt into a fire that sheds light on their true meaning and one can appreciate the profundity that was previously hidden within those very words.

One can study the words of the Torah and nevertheless fail to feel their closeness since the words simply don't talk to him. There is a recipe to enable a person to connect. Take a statement of Chazal and think about it for five minutes. Mull it over and ponder it and you will start to see the color and life in their words. The more you think about the words of the Torah -- the more you will appreciate them. The more you appreciate them -- the more you will connect not only to the Torah but to the Giver of the Torah Himself!

Chazal tell us (Brachos 22b) that just as the Torah was given on Har Sinai amid "trepidation, fear, trembling and sweat," so too, it should be studied with trepidation, fear, trembling and sweat (as per the girsa of the Gaon). The Vilna Gaon explains that 'trepidation' refers to the feeling a human being has when he contemplates Hashem's greatness. 'Fear' refers to the fear of Hashem's punishment. 'Trembling' comes as a result of one's embarrassment as he stands before his Creator aware that he is spiritually deficient. 'Sweat' is produced when a person exerts himself to perform the mitzvos of Hashem down to the last detail.

Rav Yeruchom Levovitz would say that according to this every page of Gemara encapsulates the momentous occasion of the Giving of the Torah. If someone would be able to develop a thermos that could keep a liquid warm for a year, it would be an incredible invention.

Indeed, Hashem gave us the Torah which acts as a thermos to keep Ma'amad Har Sinai warm for thousands of years. Learning Torah should bring one to experience the same trepidation and fear experienced by his forefathers many years earlier!

The question is what is all this trepidation and fear supposed to produce? Rav Wolbe (ibid. p. 105)

comments that it seems from the Vilna Gaon that the bottom line is the sweat of the actions. Torah learning accompanied by fear should produce actions, and one should exert himself to ensure that those actions be carried out as meticulously as possible.

Shavuot is a time to renew our commitment to Torah learning. Yet, our renewal cannot stop there and we must also renew our dedication to the mitzvos. While we might be able to get away with less, it behooves us to 'sweat' it out and make the effort to do it right -- down to the very last detail! ©2017 Rav S. Wolbe z"l and The AishDas Society

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Bamidbar begins with the third official count of the Jewish nation. The term used in the Torah is that we should "count the heads" (1:2) of all the households, but the Hebrew word "Se-u" could also mean "lift" the heads. Why would the Torah use such ambiguous language? Also, why were they to be counted according to their households, which had never been done in the past? Rashi informs us that prior to the census each Jew was required to produce a book of their lineage. The Midrash adds that producing this book was also required to be able to receive the Torah. Why is receiving the Torah dependent upon having this book of lineage?

Rabbi Zweig explains that surpassing the expectations that have been defined by one's social upbringing is what gives a person a sense of accomplishment. If a person is able to identify their lineage, they might learn that their ancestors were people who took responsibility for themselves and had honorable standards. For the rest of the world, the very act of taking responsibility is in itself an elevating sense of accomplishment. However, behaving responsibly is not considered an accomplishment for G-d's chosen nation. Jews are expected to behave differently than animals, to act responsibly, for our forefathers have set a standard that makes anything less unacceptable. This explains why households were important enough to be counted. The Ramban (Nachmanides) enforces the lesson of our Parsha by explaining the use of the Torah's language: The alternative meaning of "lifting" of the heads can also be a positive, but only if the body and its actions are lifted with it. Our heads and minds can lift us to greatness, so long as we have our actions to take us there. ©2017 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

This coming week, we observe Shavuot, the time of the Giving of the Torah. Regarding that event, the Midrash Rabbah comments on the verse (Mishlei 4:2), "For I have given you a good teaching; do not forsake My Torah," as follows: Is an item's seller usually

sold with the item? Hashem says to Yisrael, "I sold you the Torah, and I, so-to-speak, was sold with it." The situation may be compared to that of a king who married off his only daughter to the king of a distant land. When the groom wanted to go back to his kingdom, his father-in-law said, "I cannot part from my only daughter, nor I can I tell you not to take her to your home, for she is your wife. Therefore, do me this favor: build me an apartment so that I can live near you." Similarly, Hashem says, "I cannot separate from the Torah, nor can I tell you not to take it. Therefore, build Me a place where I can dwell amongst you." [Until here from the Midrash]

R' Shmuel Shmelke Gntzler z"l (1834-1911; rabbi of Oyber Visheve, Hungary) explains: We read (Devarim 30:12), "It [the Torah] is not in heaven." Hashem gave us the Torah to interpret and to apply to the Halachic questions that arise in our lives. Whatever rulings we make become the Torah, provided that they are consistent with tradition and with the rules of interpretation handed down from Sinai. Like the king who cannot prevent the groom from taking his bride to his home, Hashem "cannot" keep the Torah after He has given it to us. At the same time, the king is not willing to part entirely from his daughter. Similarly, Hashem demands that we make a "home" for Him where we study Torah. (Meishiv Nefesh)

"The Levi'im shall camp around the Mishkan..." (1:53)

R' Amram Zvi Gruenwald z"l (dayan / rabbinical court judge in Oyber Visheve; later rabbi in the Fernwald Displaced Persons camp; died in Brooklyn, N.Y. in 1951) writes: The center of the camp, where the Levi'im camped, represents the heart within the human body. Although a person has 248 organs, he can live without many of them. But, one cannot live without a heart. Thus, in a case where a young girl was cutting up a chicken and did not find a heart, the Chacham Zvi (R' Zvi Ashkenazi z"l; 1656-1718) ruled that the chicken was kosher; it was not considered to be missing a major organ, because it is impossible that it did not have a heart.

R' Gruenwald continues: The name Levi comes from the root meaning "to accompany" or "to attach." Thus, the fact that the Levi'im camped in the "heart" of



the camp is a reminder of the importance of attaching one's heart to Hashem and the Torah [-- the Luchot were in the center of the Levi'im's encampment --] at all times.

Notably, the picture on the flag of the tribe of Levi was the Urim Ve'tumim, which sat over Aharon's heart. (Zichron Amram Zvi)

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