

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he books of Shemot and Bamidbar have some striking similarities. They are both about journeys. They both portray the Israelites as quarrelsome and ungrateful. Both contain stories about the people complaining about food and water. In both the Israelites commit a major sin: in Shemot, the golden calf, in Bamidbar, the episode of the spies. In both, God threatens to destroy them and begin again with Moses. Both times, Moses' passionate appeal persuades God to forgive the people. It is easy when reading Bamidbar, to feel a sense of déjà vu. We have been here before.

But there is a difference. Shemot is about a journey from. Bamidbar is about a journey to. Shemot is the story of an escape from slavery. Exodus, the English name of the book, means just that: departure, withdrawal, leaving. By contrast, in Bamidbar the people have already left Egypt far behind. They have spent a prolonged period in the Sinai desert. They have received the Torah and built the Sanctuary. Now they are ready to move on. This time they are looking forward, not back. They are thinking not of the danger they are fleeing from but of the destination they are travelling toward, the Promised Land.

If we had never read the Torah before, we might have assumed that the second half of the journey would be more relaxed, the people more optimistic, the mood more hopeful. After all, the great dangers had passed. After prolonged refusal, finally Pharaoh had let the people go. Miraculously they had been saved at the Red Sea. They had fought and defeated the Amalekites. What else did they have to worry about? They knew that when God was with them, no force could prevail against them.

In fact, though, the opposite is the case. The mood of Bamidbar is palpably darker than it is in Shemot. The rebellions are more serious. Moses' leadership is more hesitant. We see him giving way, at times, to anger and despair. The Torah, with great realism, is telling us something counterintuitive and of great significance.

The journey from is always easier than the journey to.

So it is in politics. It may take a revolution to depose a tyrant, but it is easier to do that than to create a genuinely free society with the rule of law and

respect for human rights. The Arab Spring, with its high hopes and its legacy of failing states, civil war and terror, is a compelling example. So is the history of post-Tito Yugoslavia or present-day Russia.

Likewise in the life of individuals. There have been endless stories in the modern world of Jews who were determined to break free of "the ghetto" and what they saw as Jewish provincialism and backwardness. They became great successes in one field after another, only to find themselves -- like the marranos of fifteenth century Spain -- deeply conflicted and doubly alienated, having lost a home in the old world and failed to find full acceptance in the new.

There is a biological reason why this is so. We are genetically predisposed to react strongly to danger. Our deepest instincts are aroused. We move into the fight-or-flight mode, with our senses alert, our attention focussed, and our adrenalin levels high. When it comes to fleeing-from, we often find ourselves accessing strengths we did not know we had.

But fleeing-to is something else entirely. It means making a home in place where, literally or metaphorically, we have not been before. We become "strangers in a strange land." We need to learn new skills, shoulder new responsibilities, acquire new strengths. That calls for imagination and willpower. It involves the most unique of all human abilities: envisaging a future that has not yet been and acting to bring it about. Fleeing-to is a journey into the unknown.

That was the difference between Abraham and his father Terach. The Torah tells us that "Terach took his son Abram... and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there" (Gen. 11:31). Terach had sufficient willpower for the journey-from (Ur Kasdim) but not for the journey-to (Canaan). It was left to Abraham to reach the destination.

To be a Jew is to know that, in some sense, life is a journey. So it was for Abraham. So it was for Moses. So it is for us, collectively and individually. Hence the importance of knowing at the outset where we are travelling to, and never forgetting, never giving up. Leaving is easy, arriving is hard.

Which is why, when students ask me for advice about their careers, I tell them that the most important thing is to dream. Dream about what you would like to do, to be, to achieve. Dream about the chapter you would like to write in the story of our people. Dream

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about what difference you would like to make to the world. "In dreams," said W. B. Yeats, "begin responsibilities." I'm not entirely sure what he meant by that, but this I know: in dreams begin destinations. They are where we start thinking about the future. They signal the direction of our journey.

I am amazed by how many people never really dream a future for themselves. They can spend months planning a holiday, but not even a day planning a life. They take it as it comes. They wait, like Charles Dickens' Mr Micawber, for "something to turn up." This is not the best recipe for a life. "Wherever you find the word Vayechi, 'and it came to pass,'" said the sages, "it is always the prelude to pain." (Megillah 10b) Letting things happen is passive, not active. It means that you are letting outside factors determine the course of your life. Of course, they will always affect it. However sure we are of what we want to achieve, we are always subject to unexpected occurrences, wrong turns, bad decisions, setbacks and failures. But if we know where we want to be, eventually we will get back on track.

Timothy Ferris, compiler of the book *Tribe of Mentors*, asked me an interesting question: "When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused, what do you do?" I told him that just before I became Chief Rabbi, in 1991, I realised that the sheer pressure of unexpected happenings, especially when you are in public life, can blow anyone off course. When someone asked British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan what he most feared, he replied, "Events, dear boy, events." So it became clear to me that I had to set out my objectives in advance, in such a way as to ensure I would never forget or be distracted from them.

In 1991 we did not yet have smartphones or computerised diaries. I used a pocket notebook called a Filofax. So on the first page of my Filofax I wrote my life goals. This meant that I saw them every time I looked in my diary. I was reminded of them several times daily. I still have them, and they have not changed in all the intervening years. How far I was successful, I do not know. But this I know: that I never forgot where I was travelling to. I never lost sight of the destination.

Travelling-from is easy. I knew I had to overcome my ignorance, Jewish and secular. I knew I had bad habits I had to cure -- I am still working on

them. But the real challenge is to know where Hashem wants us to travel to. What task were we put in the world, in this time and place, with these gifts, to do? The answer to that constitutes the destination we key in to our satellite navigation system for the journey called life.

The Israelites, in their journey, made a series of mistakes. They focussed too much on the present (the food, the water) and too little on the future. When they faced difficulties, they had too much fear and too little faith. They kept looking back to how things were instead of looking forward to how they might be. The result was that almost an entire generation suffered the fate of Abraham's father. They knew how to leave but not how to arrive. They experienced exodus but not entry.

So, in answer to Tim Ferris's question, "What do you do when you feel overwhelmed or unfocused?" I replied with this life-changing idea: Remember your destination. This will help you make the single most important distinction on life, which is to distinguish between an opportunity to be seized and a temptation to be resisted. *Covenant and Conversation 5778 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l © 2018 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"Count the heads of the entire witness-congregation of Israel" (Numbers 1:2). The Book of Numbers opens with a most optimistic picture of a nation poised for redemption. The Israelites have been freed from Egypt with great miracles and wonders. They have received the Revelation at Sinai which provides them with a moral and ethical constitution for a soon – to – be established sovereign state along with a faith commitment which establishes their mission to the world. The nation is now structured into twelve uniquely endowed and individually directed tribes who are united around the Sanctuary. Physical and spiritual defenses are organized with a standing army for military might, and the tribe of Levi dedicated to teaching Torah and arranging the sacrificial service. Everything seems ready for the conquest and settlement of the Promised Land of Israel!

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

desert may live in the Promised Land. What happened and why? How can a nation so committed to becoming a “kingdom of priest-teachers and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6) lose their idealistic sense of purpose and “gang up” against the very person who was their great liberator and law-giver?

This fourth Book of the Bible is called “Numbers,” or “Pikudim” in Hebrew, after the two censuses, or population counts, which are taken between its covers. Indeed, our Book opens with a command to count the Israelites, stipulating as follows:

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

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

Twenty-five chapters later, however, after the scouts’ refusal to conquer Israel, after the various rebellions against Moses culminating in Prince Zimri ben Sadon’s shameful public adultery with the Midianite in the presence of Moses himself, a second census is ordered. But you will notice that the identification of each Israelite for the purpose of this census is radically different from the way it was in the previous one: “Count the heads of the entire witness-congregation of the children of Israel, from twenty years of age and above, with their household parents, everyone eligible for army conscription...” (Numbers 26: 2).

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

These significant omissions may help to explain the degeneration of the Israelites which is why the Midrash names this the Book of the Censuses – Sefer Pikudim. In first census, taken during the hey-day of the generation of the exodus, each individual Israelite felt connected to his tribal parent, to his Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs; but, by the time of the second census, that connection was woefully gone. Each individual only related to their immediate biological parents.

The Book of Exodus, our birth as a nation, is built upon the foundations set out in Book of Genesis; our origins as a very special family. The patriarchs and matriarchs were originally chosen by G-d because of their commitment to “compassionate righteousness and moral justice,” traits and ideals which they were to

“command their children and their households after them” (Gen.18:19). This unique Hebraic culture was to be nurtured, and expressed in the Land of Israel, which is the very “body”, the physical matrix, of our eternal covenant with G-d. The towering personalities of the Book of Genesis develop, falter, repair, sacrifice, persevere and ultimately prevail on these twin altars of commitment to land and law, to righteousness and Israel. They set the foundations for the continuity of an eternal nation through whom the entire world will eventually be blessed at the time of ultimate redemption.

“Yichus,” lineage or pedigree, has little to do with privilege and special rights, but it has everything to do with responsibility and ancestral empowerment. Grandfather Jacob-Israel blesses his grandchildren, the sons of Joseph, that “they shall be called by his name and the name of his ancestors, Abraham and Isaac” (Gen. 48:16). This does not only mean naming them Abe, Ike and Jackie, but, much more importantly it means linking them to the ideals, values, and commitments of their patriarchs and matriarchs. It also means endowing and empowering them with the eternal promise they received from G-d that their seed would inherit the Land of Israel and would eventually succeed in conveying to the world the message and blessing of Divine morality and peace.

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

By disconnecting from their past, they lost their future. They did not even merit individual names, names which could only be counted if they were linked with the proud names of the founders of Jewish eternity. Are we in Israel not struck with a similar disconnect today? ©2018 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

I realize that I am making a very bad pun, but I must state that numbers really do count. The Torah takes us through the counting of the Jewish people many times and in detail. Though it may be difficult for us to understand why this should be so, the basic lesson that

it teaches us is an important one for national survival. Simply put, we are being instructed that for Judaism and Jewishness to survive there must be a significant Jewish population.

The Jewish people have always been a small people, numerically speaking, and since they suffered great persecution and attempts at extermination, maintaining significant numbers has always been a challenge and a necessity for Jewish survival. The interesting thing is that Jewish demographics are hard to measure in our time. Much of it depends on our defining who is Jewish and, perhaps even as important, who is likely to remain Jewish and have Jewish children and grandchildren.

Estimates on the size of the Jewish community in the United States for instance ranges from 5 million souls to as many years 15 million people. Seventy years ago, the estimates for the American Jewish community stood at 5 million people. Under a normal rate of population growth and in the blessed absence of pogroms and plagues, there should be about 20 million Jews now living in the United States. Sadly, that is certainly not so and stands as mute testimony to the ravages of intermarriage and assimilation that so undermines the future of the Jewish community in the United States.

Here in Israel the Bureau of Statistics records that as of 2017 there were 6.58 million Jews living in the country. This is perhaps the greatest number of Jews living in the land of Israel in our history. It is an astounding amount when we recall that 70 years ago, when the state was founded, only 600,000 Jews were present in the country. Much has happened in these 70 years that accounts for this dramatic increase.

The process of the ingathering of the exiles from the Arab countries and the Soviet Union as well as the immigration of the survivors in Europe after World War II, plus the continuing small but steady immigration of Jews from the West has provided for this astonishing growth in the Jewish population in the land of Israel. Population matters.

One of the most hopeful statistics here in Israel is the continuing strength of the fertility rate amongst all segments of the Jewish population here in the country. Having children is the ultimate vote of confidence in the permanence and success of the Jewish people in creating a state in our ancient homeland. The pessimists amongst us have long threatened that the demographics of the area are against us. It seems that they were unduly pessimistic about our future. The necessity to rebuild the Jewish people physically and spiritually remains the ultimate task that lies before us in our generation. ©2018 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**T**he portion of Bamidbar is always read before Shavuot. Rabbi Isaiah Halevy Horowitz, author of the *Shnei Luhot Habrit*, suggests that this Torah reading teaches us important lessons about the holiday.

Parshat Bamidbar presents the names and leaders of each of the tribes of Israel. It can be suggested that the delineation of the leaders of each tribe is linked to Shavuot as it promotes the idea that the heads of the community should be paragons or teachers of Torah.

The parsha also describes the way that the Jews encamped around the Tabernacle. Rav Umberto Cassuto echoes the similarity to Shavuot as he calls the Tabernacle a “mini-Sinai.” We simulated Sinai as we wandered through the desert, constantly reliving the experience of revelation.

Bamidbar begins by telling us that God spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert. Rabbi Nachman Cohen in ‘A Time for All Things,’ maintains that the confluence of Bamidbar and Shavuot is “to underscore the great significance of the Torah having been given in the desert--no man’s land.” Rabbi Cohen points out that the location of the vast expanse of the wilderness is significant for it teaches us that the Torah is not “the exclusive property of given individuals.” Living a desert existence makes us feel vulnerable. Giving the Torah in the desert also teaches that “Torah can only be acquired if a person humbles himself.”

My colleague Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky inspired a final idea. Perhaps the key relationship between Bamidbar and Shavuot is “counting.” Not only does our portion deal with the census--the counting--of the Jewish people, but the Torah, when mentioning Shavuot, stresses the counting of days between the holidays of Passover and Shavuot. In the words of the Torah, “seven weeks shall you count.” (Leviticus, 23:15) This teaches that as important as the holiday of Shavuot may be, equally important is the count toward the holiday.

An important lesson emerges. Whenever we are engaged in a particular project, whether we are working toward a professional goal or striving to achieve in our personal lives, it is important to reflect and to evaluate how much time has already been spent on the endeavor and what is the time required to achieve its realization.

Evaluating forces us to consider the gift of every moment we have. Rabbi Joseph Lookstein points out that we must not only realize what the years have done to us, but what we have done with our years.

Hence the confluence of Bamidbar and Shavuot. In the words of the Psalmist, “Teach us to

number our days.” (Psalms, 90:12) Bamidbar teaches the significance of each person and Shavuot teaches the importance of every moment for the individual. ©2018 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 DAVID S. LEVIN**

## From Each to All

**A**fter the dedication of the Mishkan, the Temple in the desert was now to be at the center of the camps of the B'nei Yisrael. There were three camps in the desert: (1) the Mishkan itself and the court which surrounded it, (2) the Levite camp containing the three families of the Levi'im and the Kohanim (with Aharon and Moshe) each Levitic family on one side of the camp of the Mishkan and the Kohanim on the fourth side, and (3) the Israelite camp which contained the other eleven tribes with the tribe of Yosef divided by his two sons, Ephraim and Menashe, thus making twelve. The arrangement of the tribes around the Mishkan fills the major part of Parashat Bamidbar.

The Ramban explains in detail the reason for each tribe being in its particular place around the Mishkan. The Eastern camp was the camp of leadership, of holiness, of guidance, and of Torah. This Eastern camp was centered on the degel, the banner, of Yehuda, the paradigm of leadership. The Kings of Israel were to come from the tribe of Yehuda. Together with Yehuda are the tribes of Yissachar and Zevulun. Yissachar was the leader in Torah study and Zevulun was the leader in wealth and commerce and financial support for Torah study. These three tribes were grouped together as a sign of light to the other tribes (Torah Ora). For the leadership of Israel to succeed, Torah and the support of Torah would need to be a part of that leadership. For that reason, this was the grouping to the East from where the light begins.

On the South was the degel of R'uven, the b'chor (firstborn) and the symbol of Teshuva, repentance. R'uven publicly did teshuva when he admitted his sin with Bilhah. Together with R'uven were the tribes of Shim'on and Gad. Gad was the b'chor of Leah's handmaiden, so he was given the honor of being included with Leah's b'chor. More importantly, Gad was the epitome of gevurah, strength and heroism. If one is to do teshuva one must have the heroism and the internal fortitude to change. Shimon is included here in this grouping because he was in need of kapara (an atonement) for the distress that he caused his father when he killed the men of Shechem out of anger. These tribes were to the South because that is the direction from which Hashem blesses the world with tal (dew) and geshem (rain). Hashem has rachamim, pity, on those who do teshuva and blesses them with gishmei bracha, the rains of blessing.

To the West was the degel of Ephraim. Together with Ephraim were the tribes of Menashe and Binyamin. All three were symbols of Gevura because all three were students of war. From the West would come the extreme conditions of the weather, sheleg (snow), barad (hail), kor (cold), and chom (heat). It was the responsibility of these tribes to protect the others from these and other difficult conditions. Gevura naturally followed from Torah and Teshuva because Torah and Teshuva both give a person the strength and the courage to face any trial. These were the children and grandchildren of Rachel who died when they were still young which also gave them the strength to cope with adversity.

The last of the groupings was on the North. The North was the source of Choshech, darkness, for destruction would come from this direction. Here were the children of the sh'fachot, the handmaidens (except for Gad). Dan's degel represented this darkness because the tribe of Dan brought idol worship into the Land of Israel. Yet together with Dan was the tribe of Asher who brought light onto the darkness. Joining them was Naphtali who was a symbol of b'racha, blessing. Asher and Naphtali combined to make this last group strong against the darkness much as R'uven and Gad strengthened Shim'on for the tribes on the South. This group traveled last because avoda zara, idol worship, causes one to fall further and further behind as it draws one away from serving Hashem.

The Levi'im were divided into four groups, much as the B'nei Yisrael were divided. To the East on the same side as Yehuda were the Kohanim, with Moshe and Aharon. To the South on the same side as R'uven were the descendants of K'has. To the West on the same side as Ephraim were the sons of Gershon, and to the North on the same side as Dan were the children of M'rari. Each of these descendants of the three sons of Levi had a different task, a different responsibility for the parts of the Mishkan. Each task was a reflection of the characteristic of the side of the Mishkan where each sub-tribe lived. M'rari carried the wood that made up the walls of the Mishkan, the posts of the courtyard, and the posts of the dividers of each section of the Mishkan. These were a sign to stand firm against the darkness of the North. Gershon, on the West, carried the curtains and the animal-skin coverings of the Mishkan. These were the curtains which separated each section of the Mishkan and protected the people from entering a section which was forbidden to them. The coverings also protected all of the Holy objects that were inside the Holy and the Holy of Holies. This was the same protection from the elements of the weather that Ephraim protected against. K'has, to the South, was responsible for the holy objects that were inside the Mishkan or in the Courtyard. Each of these holy objects was a means by which the people could atone for their sins and

corresponded to degel R'even. The altar and the Aron Kodesh were K'has's responsibility. The final camp of the Levi'im were the descendants of Aharon (the Kohanim), Aharon, and Moshe. We have learned that it was Aharon's responsibility to bring light into the Mishkan by lighting the Menora and Moshe brought Torah into the world which gave us all light. This corresponds to Yehuda on the East.

It is not by chance that these parallels can be made. The Torah enables us to see and comprehend Hashem's message to the world. Every person is depicted by one of these characteristics and our weaknesses are balanced by the strength of others. We must work together to serve Hashem, for it is our unity which will enable us to serve Hashem to the fullest. Together we can encourage each other to fulfill our role in Hashem's world. ©2018 Rabbi D.S. Levin

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

### **Weekly Dvar**

**P**arshat Bamidbar, among many other things, subtly contrasts the effects of a good neighbor vs a bad one. In describing the camp arrangements, the Kehat family (Korach and his gang) camped "southward" (3:29), as did Reuven (2:10), to which Rash comments that "woe to an evil person, woe to his neighbors." Similarly, Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun got to live next door to Moshe and Aaron (3:39) and benefited, to which Rashi points out that "happy is a righteous person, happy is his neighbor." As Elisha Greenbaum points out (Chabad.org), however, there is a difference between the two...

With Moses and Aaron living nearby, three entire tribes benefited and their positive influence lasted throughout history. Contrast this with the pernicious effect of living next to Korach; only a tiny fraction of the one tribe living closest was negatively influenced. Even when the negative influence is right next door, you have the ability to resist their blandishments by connecting to Gd and his Torah. You'll also notice that both of Rashi's comments focus on the person, and our effect on our neighbors. We have the power to affect our neighbors positively or negatively, so long as we resist the negative influences around us, and choose to be propelled by the positive ones. ©2018 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

#### **ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT**

### **Geneology**

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**I**n this week's portion 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

#### **RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

### **The Little Things Count**

**B**amidbar is known as the Book of Numbers. Though the Hebrew word Bamidbar means in the desert, I assume that the name Numbers was derived from the fact that the first parsha begins with a count. Moshe is told to count the entire populace males that is from twenty and up. One tribe, however, was not counted together with the general population. Shevet Levi was counted separately and differently. Though the all the other tribe's males were counted only from age twenty and older, even the babies of the tribe of Levi were counted. Even infants from age thirty days and above were counted!

All the other tribes were counted in relation to military age -- twenty-years old. What made the tribe of Levi different? Why were the infants counted? In fact, even a day old baby would have been counted if not for

the fact that until one-month of age the infant was of questionable viability. Why is Shevet Levi's count intrinsically different?

A number of years ago a dear friend of mine, I'll call him Dovy, received a knock on the door of his home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. A distinguished looking man stood at Dovy's door. The stranger had a beard and looked at least ten years older than Dovy. He appeared to be either a Rabbi in a Yeshiva or a leader of a congregation. Dovy went for his checkbook.

"I just came to your home to say thank you," he said gratefully. "Thank you?" asked my friend in astonishment. "I don't even know who you are! In fact I don't even think I ever saw you in my life!" "Let me explain," said the visitor in a clear and reassuring tone. "About fifteen or twenty years ago, you must have been no more than ten, I visited Pittsburgh. At that time, I was totally non-observant. I was facing many paths in my life. I lacked vision and direction. I explored returning to my roots, but I was not moved. Then I met you."

Dovy looked at him incredulously. "Me?" He thought. "What do I have to do with this rabbi? And besides I was only about ten years old at the time."

The Rabbi continued as if he read Dovy's mind. "You were about ten years old and returning from a ball game. Your tzitzis were flying in every direction and beads of sweat were still on your face. And you were running.

"I stopped you to ask where you were going. You told me about Mincha, we spoke about what you were learning in your school. To you it was just the way of life, normal routine, but to me I saw something else. I saw a pure enthusiasm for everything Jewish from prayer to Talmud. All from a ten-year-old-kid. I asked for and made a note of your name.

"I left college to study in Israel. I did well. I am now a teacher in an Israel yeshiva. All these years I made sure to remember to thank the little kid whose little acts made the biggest impact on my life. You taught me something that no teacher had taught me until that time!"

Each tribe had a role for the Jewish nation. But the tribe of Levi's role was unique. Their members were the teachers and mentors of the Jewish people and they were counted in that vein. And being that their role was different, they were counted in a totally different manner -- separately and beginning at a much younger age.

The Torah teaches us that when counting the tribe of teachers, one need not start appreciating only those who are ordained as official rabbis. One need not focus his appreciation for those who are over twenty, or even over Bar-Mitzvah. He can learn from a child who is one-month-old as well. Even the child whose tzitzis are flying as he runs home from playing in the yard, has something to teach. If he is immersed in the world of

the Levite -- the world of teaching Torah, then he is part of the teacher tribe -- and he counts! And if he counts, you can count him as well! ©2014 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

### RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

## Be'eros

"**H**ashem 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.

**RAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L**

## Bais Hamussar

**E**ach morning in the bircas haTorah we ask Hashem, "Please make the words of Torah sweet in our mouths." One would think that it would be more accurate to petition Hashem to give us the ability

to understand the Torah or to gain greater clarity into the profoundness of the Torah. Why is it that the emphasis is placed on the pleasure that we wish to experience when learning Torah?

Rav Wolbe (Da'as Shlomo Geulah p. 207) explains that the word "v'haarev (make sweet)" shares the same root as the word l'areiv which means "to mix." When a person partakes of something pleasurable, it blends into his very essence thereby becoming part of his physical or spiritual makeup. We daven to Hashem that we should find the study of Torah sweet and pleasurable so that all Torah learned should mix into the very fiber of our bodies and souls.

One who experiences the pleasure of Torah will undoubtedly achieve the levels mentioned at the end of this bracha, "May we... know Your Name and study Torah for its sake." Since he feels the pleasure involved with learning Torah he will seek to study its words without any ulterior motives, simply for the sake of learning Torah and getting to know He Who gave us the Torah. Additionally, the enjoyment will in turn endow us with a large dose of love for Hashem Who gave us this most pleasurable present.

It has been said that human beings are pleasure seekers from day one. Even the movements of a little baby can be attributed to the desire to feel pleasure. Not only that, but the actions of adults, even those which are performed with a heavy heart and amid much difficulty, can also be traced back to some sort of pleasure that they seek to attain. The question is only where a person looks for pleasure: Does he search for it in our materialistic world, or does he turn to spirituality to fulfill this desire?

We are all looking for happiness, and feelings of contentment and satisfaction. Physical and material pleasures might make us feel good, but they generally do not bring lasting happiness and satisfaction. If we are looking to live a truly pleasurable life, then we should set our focus on the Torah. One's daily daf yomi or learning session should not merely be a way of assuaging his conscience which tells him to learn something each day. If given proper priority it can be the most enjoyable part of the day and a way of literally fusing your body with the Torah.

Shavuot is the day that we receive the Torah anew each year. It is worthwhile to put in a heartfelt prayer that the Torah we learn should be sweet and pleasurable. This is an endeavor which has the ability to change us and every single day of our lives for the better! ©2016 Rav S. Wolbe z"l and AishDas Foundation

