

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Bamidbar begins with a census of the Israelites. That is why this book is known in English as 'Numbers'. What is the significance of this act of counting? And why here at the beginning of the book? Besides which, there have already been two previous censuses of the people and this is the third within the space of a single year. Surely one would have been sufficient. And does counting have anything to do with leadership?

The place to begin, is to note what appears to be a contradiction. On the one hand, Rashi says that the acts of counting in the Torah are gestures of love on the part of God: "Because they (the children of Israel) are dear to Him, God counts them often. He counted them when they were about to leave Egypt. He counted them after the Golden Calf to establish how many were left. And now that He was about to cause His presence to rest on them (with the inauguration of the sanctuary), He counted them again." (Rashi to Bamidbar 1:1)

So we learn that when God initiates a census of the Israelites, it is to show that He loves them.

In contradiction to this, centuries later King David counted the people, but there was Divine anger and 70,000 people died. How can this be, if counting is an expression of love?

The Torah is explicit in saying that taking a census of the nation is fraught with risk: "Then God said to Moses, 'When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each must give to God a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them.'" (Ex. 30:11-12)

The answer to this apparent contradiction lies in the phrase the Torah uses to describe the act of counting: *se'u et rosh*, literally, "lift the head." This is a strange, circumlocutory expression. Biblical Hebrew contains many verbs meaning "to count": *limnot*, *lifkod*, *lispur*, *lachshov*. Why does the Torah not use these simple words, choosing instead the roundabout expression, "lift the heads" of the people?

The short answer is this: In any census, count or roll-call there is a tendency to focus on the total: the crowd, the multitude, the mass. Here is a nation of 60 million people, or a company with 100,000 employees or a sports crowd of 60,000. Any total tends to value

the group or nation as a whole. The larger the total, the stronger is the army, the more popular the team, and the more successful the company.

Counting devalues the individual, and tends to make him or her replaceable. If one soldier dies in battle, another will take his place. If one person leaves the organisation, someone else can be hired to do his or her job.

Notoriously, too, crowds have the effect of tending to make the individual lose his or her independent judgment and follow what others are doing. We call this "herd behaviour," and it sometimes leads to collective madness. In 1841 Charles Mackay published his classic study, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions And The Madness Of Crowds*, which tells of the South Sea Bubble that cost thousands their money in the 1720s, and the tulip mania in Holland when fortunes were spent on single tulip bulbs. The Great Crashes of 1929 and 2008 had the same crowd psychology.

Another great work, Gustav Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895) showed how crowds exercise a "magnetic influence" that transmutes the behaviour of individuals into a collective "group mind." As he put it, "An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will." People in a crowd become anonymous. Their conscience is silenced. They lose a sense of personal responsibility. Crowds are peculiarly prone to regressive behaviour, primitive reactions and instinctual behaviour. They are easily led by figures who are demagogues, playing on people's fears and sense of victimhood. Such leaders, he said, are "especially recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous excitable half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness", a remarkable anticipation of Hitler. It is no accident that Le Bon's work was published in France at a time of rising antisemitism and the Dreyfus trial.

Hence the significance of one remarkable feature of Judaism: its principled insistence -- like no other civilisation before -- on the dignity and integrity of the individual. We believe that every human being is in the image and likeness of God. The Sages said that every life is like an entire universe. Maimonides says that each of us should see ourselves as if our next act could change the fate of the world. Every dissenting view is carefully recorded in the Mishnah, even if the law is otherwise. Every verse of the Torah is capable,

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said the Sages, of seventy interpretations. No voice, no view, is silenced. Judaism never allows us to lose our individuality in the mass.

There is a wonderful blessing mentioned in the Talmud to be said on seeing 600,000 Israelites together in one place. It is: "Blessed are You, Lord... who discerns secrets." The Talmud explains that every person is different. We each have different attributes. We all think our own thoughts. Only God can enter the minds of each of us and know what we are thinking, and this is what the blessing refers to. In other words, even in a massive crowd where, to human eyes, faces blur into a mass, God still relates to us as individuals, not as members of a crowd.

That is the meaning of the phrase, "lift the head," used in the context of a census. God tells Moses that there is a danger, when counting a nation, that each individual will feel insignificant. "What am I? What difference can I make? I am only one of millions, a mere wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the seashore, dust on the surface of infinity."

Against that, God tells Moses to lift people's heads by showing that they each count; they matter as individuals. Indeed in Jewish law a *davar she-be-minyan*, something that is counted, sold individually rather than by weight, is never nullified even in a mixture of a thousand or a million others. In Judaism taking a census must always be done in such a way as to signal that we are valued as individuals. We each have unique gifts. There is a contribution only I can bring. To lift someone's head means to show them favour, to recognise them. It is a gesture of love.

There is, however, all the difference in the world between individuality and individualism. Individuality means that I am a unique and valued member of a team. Individualism means that I am not a team player at all. I am interested in myself alone, not the group. Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam gave this a famous name, noting that more people than ever in the United States are going ten-pin bowling but fewer than ever are joining teams. He called it "Bowling alone." MIT professor Sherry Turkle calls our age of Twitter, Facebook, and online (rather than face-to-face) friendships, "Alone together." Judaism values individuality, not individualism. As Hillel said, "If I am

only for myself, what am I?"

All this has implications for Jewish leadership. We are not in the business of counting numbers. The Jewish people always was small and yet achieved great things. Judaism has a profound mistrust of demagogic leaders who manipulate the emotions of crowds. Moses at the burning bush spoke of his inability to be eloquent. "I am not a man of words." He thought this was a failing in a leader. In fact it was the opposite. Moses did not sway people by his oratory. Rather, he lifted them by his teaching.

A Jewish leader has to respect individuals. He or she must "lift their heads." However large the group you lead, you must always communicate the value you place on everyone. You must never attempt to sway a crowd by appealing to the primitive emotions of fear or hate. You must never ride roughshod over the opinions of others.

It is hard to lead a nation of individuals, but this is the most challenging, empowering, inspiring leadership of all. *Covenant and Conversation 5779 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* © 2019 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**B**y their families, by their parents' houses." (Numbers 1:2) Early in the book of Numbers the Torah records the first census in the history of the Jewish people: "Count the heads of the entire witness community of the children of Israel, by their families, by their parents' houses" (Numbers 1:2). Certainly a census is a momentous event – not only as a profile of a nation's most important natural resource – its people – but also as a means of enhancing each national with a sense of pride in his newly acquired significance as a member of an important nation.

At the end of the day, when all the counts of the various tribes were added up, the total number of those twenty years and above was 603,550 (Numbers 1:46). The census tells us – in more ways than one – that each person counts. Again and again we encounter the phrase in connection with the census: "by their families [lemishpehotam], by their parents' houses [leveit avotam]."

This particular term is repeated with each of the tribes and families, except for two instances wherein the phrase is inverted – in the case of the Levites, as well as the sons of Gershon. In these two instances, instead of the order of being "by their families" and "by their parents' houses" we find "by their parents house and by their families" (Numbers 3:15).

In contrast, Levi's other sons, Kehat (Numbers 4:2) and Merari (Numbers 4:27) are presented in the book of Numbers in a manner similar to the presentation of the rest of the tribes – first by their

“families” and only afterwards by their “fathers’ houses.” Why should there be such a reversal in phraseology in the case of Levi and the children of Gershon?

In our last commentary, we rendered the phrase “lemishpehotam” to mean “by the family of their tribal forebears,” and “leveit avotam” to mean “by their immediate parental names,” in accordance with the interpretation of Rashi (1040–1105). However, the earlier Aramaic translation of these phrases, Targum Onkelos, which is generally placed alongside of the biblical text as a demonstration of its authoritative position, render “lemishpehotam” as “lezarayaton” – “by their seed, by their children.”

Thus the usual formulation, found no less than seventeen times in our passage, is rendered to mean that each individual is numbered by their children and by their parents’ house. The message of the Targum is clear: an individual is to be counted first by whom he or she has produced – by his or her children – and only afterwards and secondarily do we pay attention to his or her forebears, to the yihus which comes from one’s parents and the parental forebears; perhaps Targum would include the tribal background as well in “leveit avotam.”

From the perspective of this definition, we can also readily understand the reversal of the phrase regarding the tribe of Levi. Ordinarily individuals are defined first by whom and what they have produced – their children first. However, a kohen (priest) or Levite serves in the Temple and performs special ritual duties not by virtue of merit but only by virtue of ancestry: I am a kohen only because my father was a kohen. Hence in accordance with this reality, the Bible insists that their census is “by their parents’ house and by their children” – the parents coming first!

And in addition to special ritual functions, the care and maintenance of the Sanctuary (during the years of wandering in the desert) was divided among the three scions of the house of Levi. The duty of Gershon, as described in the previous portion, focused on the curtains, the hangings, the various coverings inside the Tabernacle. According to the midrash, this was the easiest job in the Sanctuary. It is therefore assumed that the children of Gershon were satisfied to rest on their laurels; they remained in essence Levites, dependent on their “parent’s house” for their status and function.

In contrast, the children of Kehat were in charge of the much heavier items, such as the Menora and the Ark. In Bamidbar Rabba (5:1), we read the following description: “When the Jews were traveling, two sparks of flame came out from the two poles of the Ark of the Tablets of Law.” The Kehatites volunteered to put their lives on the line and risk the fire in order to bear the Holy Ark. And their brothers the Merarites learned from their example, volunteering to transport the heaviest wood and metals. These children of Levi

were anxious to be their own people, to establish their own yihus. As a result, the Torah counts them in accord with “their children and their parents’ house” – themselves and their children coming first!

What we’ve gathered from the overview is that a seemingly slight difference in word order may reveal a world of attitude and psychology. When each of us is counted and assessed when the Almighty conducts His census, the most important criterion in our judgment will not be who our parents were, but who and what we and our children have developed into. All too often, the descendant has descended too far down! And when we ponder the question of “Who is a Jew?” as we so often do within the context of necessity for conversion and the “right of return,” it is important to note that at least from a sociological (rather than a halakhic) perspective, a Jew is defined more by his children than by his parents; indeed, I would argue that sociologically speaking, a Jew is he or she who has Jewish grandchildren!

Postscript: The Maggid of Mezritch (eighteenth century, Ukraine) was a great disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov, and heir to his leadership of the Hasidic movement. It is told that when the Maggid was still a child, a fire broke out in his family home. Although the family was rescued from the flames, his mother was weeping hysterically. When he asked her why she was so upset at the loss of mere physical objects, the mother explained that she was crying for the loss – not of the home or its furniture – but of the record of their family pedigree, which had been destroyed in the flames. This record had traced back their familial roots to King David himself! “You don’t have to cry over that,” said the young Maggid, comforting his mother. “I will begin a new record of our family pedigree; from me will begin a new yihus. Subsequent generations will trace their lineage back to me.” ©2019 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Population numbers have always meant a great deal in human history. We do not find tribes or influential societies that were composed only of a very small number of people. All the great tribes in the ancient and modern world were built on large populations that would be able to fuel the economy of the Empire and provide sufficient numbers of soldiers for its armies.

Naturally the exception to all of this has been the story of the Jewish people. The Torah itself warned Israel in advance that they never would be numerous, relatively speaking. The Torah did not mean this as a curse or as a completely negative fact. Rather, it was a simple declaration as to the price, so to speak, of persecution, poverty and powerlessness. Yet the very same verse in the Torah guaranteed the survival of the

Jewish people and the eventual triumph over all would-be adversaries.

In light of this it seems surprising that in this fourth book of the Bible, a count of the Jewish people is taken a number of times, and that count is detailed to the ultimate degree. If numbers do not matter when it comes to Jewish society and the story of the Jewish people, then why did the Torah put such an emphasis upon numbers and detail for us regarding the exact population of the Jewish people at the time of Moses?

I think that perhaps the answer to this lies in the statistics and numbers that the Torah details for us in this week's Torah reading. The number of the Jewish people at the time of Moses constituted over 600,000 males between the ages of 20 and 60. By adding into this some female population, those over 60 and those under 20, we arrive at a population figure of perhaps 3 million people. If there were 3 million Jews that existed 3300 years ago, simply by natural increase and according to trends of population, there should be hundreds of millions of Jews existing in today's world. Yet the actual count of Jews in our world, at its most optimistic level, is about 15 million people.

This fact, when seen in the background of the account of the Jewish people when they were in the desert of Sinai, and the fact that numerically speaking we have been at pretty much of a standstill over all of these long centuries, is itself the confirmation of the words of the Torah that we will be a small people in terms of population.

Certainly, there are many rational, practical and correct reasons that are advanced for the lack of growth in Jewish population -- persecution, conversions, forced and otherwise, disease, poverty, and the continual erosion of the Jewish population by assimilation and a low birthrate. But no matter what reasons we accept to account for this historical anomaly, it is clear that Heaven, in its usual hidden way, somehow accounts for this as well. ©2019 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

It was during the time of Shavuot that the Jews at Sinai declared to God, "na'aseh ve-nishma, we will do and we will listen (to the commandments)." (Exodus 24:7) This order is perplexing as one usually does the opposite, and listens before deciding to act.

In his Mikhtav M'Eliyahu, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler offers an understanding of love that may explain why doing can come before listening. Rabbi Dessler insists that the cornerstone of love is the capacity to give to the loved one. And, he adds, it's not necessarily the case that one first loves and from the loving comes the

giving. The reverse is equally true and often even more powerful. One gives, and from the giving, love grows. The more one gives, the more one loves.

Years ago, there was an extraordinarily successful program known as Marriage Encounter. One of its basic teachings was that love is not only a feeling – "it's a decision." After all, feelings change. One morning I may wake up feeling like loving my spouse, child, parent, sibling or friend, and the next morning I may not. But if I've decided to love you – that is, if love is a decision – from the decision, from the action, the feeling will come. In fact, the real test of love is not simply what I feel toward you, but what I am prepared to do for you.

The idea that love is predicated on action is crucial to a primary expression of our love for God – ritual. Consider prayer: If prayer is an expression of love, why should we be mandated to pray? Why not pray only when we feel like it? It can be argued, however, that we may not feel like praying for long periods of time. But if we're obligated to pray—if, indeed, we make a decision to pray—from placing ourselves in a prayerful mode, feelings of prayer may surface.

This, in fact, is the basic idea of all religious observance. Perform the ritual and from the act, the feeling may come. Hence, Jews at Sinai first proclaimed "we will do." Only afterward did they say, "we will listen."

A favorite personal story reinforces this idea. My mother and father, of blessed memory, made aliyah (emigrated to Israel) years ago. Whenever my parents flew to New York, it was my responsibility, as their only child living there, to meet them at the airport.

One time my father called me to inform me that at the last moment, their arrival was moved up by twenty-four hours. Professing my deep love for my parents, I insisted that I couldn't change my schedule on such short notice.

"You've become a hotshot Rabbi," my father responded, "and don't have time for your parents?" "I love you deeply," I protested, "but it's difficult to alter plans at the last minute."

I'll never forget my father's response. "Don't love me so much, just pick me up at the airport."

My Abba's comments echoed the very essence of "we will do and we will listen" – actions are primary, they are the indicator, the inspiration for true love.

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RABBI DAVID LEVINE

The Special Tribe of Levi

Sefer Bamidbar is called Numbers because it begins with a census. All males were counted

from the age of twenty until sixty, the ages that would be part of the army. Women, children, and elderly were not counted since they were not fighting forces. The Torah tells us, "as Hashem had commanded Moshe, he counted them in the Wilderness of Sinai." The term used for counting implies a particular purpose. That purpose was the army as we find, "all who will go out to the army". For that very reason we find that at the end of the count the Torah states, "and the Levites according to their fathers' tribe were not counted among them."

The Ramban explains that Moshe understood that the Leviim would be counted separately because there was to be no Nasi, head or prince, appointed for this tribe. The command to count the tribes began with the name of a prince for that tribe. "Take a census of the entire assembly of the B'nei Yisrael according to their families, according to their fathers' house by number of the names every male according to their head count." Since no tribe was counted without first appointing a Nasi, and Moshe was not given a name for Levi, he understood that Levi was not to be counted among the other tribes. The Ramban also stated that the Nasi would assist in the count for his tribe, yet Moshe was told that he would count the Leviim without the assistance of a Nasi.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that there are other reasons for not counting the Leviim with the rest of the tribes. Moshe already knew at the time of the inauguration of the Kohanim that the tribe of Levi was not included with the rest of the B'nei Yisrael when it came to having a Nasi. We see in Parashat Naso that the Princes brought gifts to the Mishkan on the last day of the dedication of the Temple. Each Nasi brought a gift from his tribe but there was neither a gift nor a Nasi from Levi. It was already clear to Moshe that he was not to count the tribe of Levi together with the others. HaRav Sorotzkin also explains that the Leviim were not to be counted with the other tribes because they were neither to be a part of the army nor receive an inheritance of land. They were to live in the cities of refuge that were spread among all the tribes. Since they would focus their attention to the Beit HaMikdash, the other tribes were required to support them with food from the special portion of each produce designated as a required gift to the Leviim and Kohanim.

The Torah speaks of the different census of the Leviim, "and you shall appoint the Levites over the Mishkan (Temple) of the Testimony over all of its utensils and over everything that belongs to it and they shall carry the Mishkan and all its utensils and they shall minister to it, and they shall encamp around the Mishkan. And when the Mishkan travels the Levites shall take it down and when the Mishkan encamps the Levites shall erect it and any non-Levite who approaches it shall be put to death." Here we see that the tasks of the Leviim were completely taken up by

their responsibilities to the Mishkan. Rashi uses this description to explain that they were not to be counted together with the other tribes because "the King's legion is worthy of be counted by itself."

HaRav Shmshon Rafael Hirsch discusses the death penalty for a non-Levite who involved himself in the Mishkan. "Only as a result of direct appointment by Moshe though Hashem's command were even the Leviim to approach the Mishkan HaEidut with the duties they were to discharge. Everybody who was not bound to do so was considered to be unauthorized to do so, to be a stranger, so much so that even a Levite was only authorized to perform the particular task allotted to him, and it was forbidden for a Levite to transfer himself from one function to another..." We find that each of the sub-tribes of Levi (Kahat, Gershon, and Merari) was given different parts of the Mishkan as his responsibilities. Hirsch was saying that a Levi from Gershon could not perform a task that was assigned to Kahat even though he was a fellow Levite. Each group of the Leviim had its own tasks to perform and was not permitted to perform the task assigned to any other member of Levi. This separation of purpose made clear to all of the other tribes that the assignment of tasks came from Hashem.

The Leviim had one additional level of responsibility. "The Levites shall encamp around the Tabernacle of the Testimony and there shall be no wrath upon the assembly of the B'nei Yisrael and the Levites shall safeguard the watch of the Tabernacle of the Testimony." The Levites acted as a buffer between the holiness of the Temple and the commonness of the B'nei Yisrael. They were a physical and a spiritual separation that reminded the people that only those who had purified themselves and were ritually clean could enter the inner camp of the Temple. Hirsch stresses that the establishment of the camps into the inner, middle, and outer camps was to emphasize the Divine nature of the Torah. The Torah was to be a unifying force among the people and the visible symbol of this unity was the concrete evidence of the Revelation, the two Tablets of the Law. Just as at Har Sinai when the Law was given there was a border around the Mountain which separated the people from the Holy ground, so too here in the desert there was to be a separation between the people and the Holy Temple. This holiness is the "lofty inviolable ideal which every individual...is to use all power and energy to attain, but which we can never approach, however united we may be, to lay mastering hands on it." The B'nei Yisrael are kept at a distance: the Torah was to remain "forever something given from outside, something that ever draws us to it but is never absorbed into us, is always our master which directs and keeps us in the paths indicated by it."

Twice the general population of the B'nei Yisrael sinned a sin punishable by death. When the

Jews worshipped the Golden Calf, Hashem had already decided their punishment yet He held it in abeyance and would have rescinded it had they not proven disloyal by believing the bad report from the Spies. Rashi informs us that the Leviim neither sinned at the Golden Calf nor with the Spies. We are told that their loyalty was rewarded by not counting them together with the B'nei Yisrael. It is true that all of the men were eligible for the army, but their being over the age of twenty meant that they would perish in the desert. The B'nei Levi were not counted among them and they were not part of the decree of punishment from Hashem either.

It is appropriate that this parasha is read at this time of year as we approach the holiday of Shavuot. The Torah is our central focus at this time of the receiving of the Torah on Har Sinai. May we all strive to protect the Torah and guard it as did the tribe of Levi. May we, like the tribe of Levi, be worthy to be close to the Torah, serve it, and protect it. ©2019 Rabbi D. Levine

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Geneology

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

In 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 KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The first portion of Bamidbar is generally read before the Shavuot festival, which commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. Inasmuch as there are no coincidences, we may assume that this portion is a prerequisite for receiving the Torah.

In relating the episode at Mt. Sinai, the Torah states: "Israelites camped near the mountain" (Exodus 19:2). However, the Torah uses the singular *vayichan*, "he camped" rather than *vayachanu*, "they camped." Rashi explains that the singular indicated that all the Israelites were united as one person. It is this unity that made them worthy of receiving the Torah.

There is nothing so dear to God as unity among His children. So much so, that the Talmud states that when Jews are united, God forgives even their greatest sins (Kallah 8).

The message of Bamidbar is the message of unity: "The Children of Israel shall encamp, each person by his banner" (Numbers 2:2). Each person knew his place and was not envious of others. This is why the Torah reading of Bamidbar precedes Shavuot. Unity is the prerequisite for acceptance of the Torah. *Dvar Torah from Twerski on Chumash by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D. ©2019 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

"God spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert..." (Bamidbar 1:1) The Jewish People became a nation in Egypt, primarily during intense slavery. Pharaoh tried to reduce our ranks through life-draining servitude, but we grew in great numbers instead. Then we spent 40 years in a desert wasteland, and completed the process of nationhood there.

That's not the way it is supposed to happen. Nations die in servitude. They certainly don't survive the scorching desert sun of the Sinai Desert with their elderly and children. We not only survived, we THRIVED.

Not on our own, of course. Had God not protected us and provided for our every need, we would have died out there, either in Egypt or in the desert. No

wonder it was so easy to be convinced by the spies to remain in the desert, and not to go up to Eretz Yisroel. They weren't leaving the desert for paradise, they thought. To THEM it looked as if they were leaving paradise for a "desert."

It's a choice that most of us would have made also, and would have felt justified doing so. The Generation of the Spies did not abandon God. How could they? He was right there, hovering above them, and part of everything they were, and all that they ate and drank. It was a completely miraculous existence, obvious to anyone who was a part of it (which the Erev Rav wasn't).

They certainly weren't rejecting Torah. On the contrary, it was one of the reasons why they chose the desert. They were already in "Kollel," and making aliyah meant going to war against the Canaanite nations. Even with spectacular miracles, it was still a hassle, and it would be a long time before they could return to an idyllic Torah lifestyle again -- if at all.

So what WERE they rejecting? The answer was in last week's parsha, except we may not have noticed it.

In Parashas Bechukosai, the Torah informed us of the trouble in store for us if we do not keep Torah. Sounds pretty drastic. Sounds like enough of a "putch" to put ANY reasonable person back on their spiritual track.

Apparently it wasn't. The Torah continues and says that if we deal with God's "nudging" back to the right path thoughtlessly -- b'keri -- then He too will act b'keri to us. He will ACT as if He doesn't see what we're going through, and leave us to our troubles. We've seen where THAT can lead on many occasions.

Who is the Torah talking to? Secular Jews who question the existence of God and validity of Torah? No, the Torah is warning Torah-abiding Jews, Jews who believe in God, live by Torah, and who, by all outward appearances, seem like committed Jews.

If that is the case, then how can THEY ever act b'keri? They learn Gemora, review halachah, and probably even learn mussar. Shouldn't that guarantee that a person would NEVER ignore God on any level?

Also apparently not. We're just coming off the mourning period of Rebi Akiva's 24,000 students. They died during the Omer Period, all because they were not accustomed to showing the proper respect to one another. They believed in God, excelled at Torah, and died prematurely all because they could not muster sufficient respect for one another? Sounds rather harsh, no?

Yes. That is why there has to have been something else more profound that they did wrong. The lack of respect they showed for one another was a symptom, not a cause. It revealed another more fundamental problem, and it was for THAT they were struck down early in life by God.

I witnessed a little of this on a recent Shabbos. I was a guest at a shul where they usually have someone local give a short halachah shiur before Ma'ariv on Friday night. It is always a talmid chacham talking to talmidei chachamim.

Within moments of starting, the speaker said something that one person jumped all over, and then another. He explained himself, but they argued more. I could see the speaker was taken aback a bit, but handled himself well. But it happened at least two or three times, and once it appeared that he had lost control of the discussion as others debated among themselves. I myself was feeling uncomfortable.

"Milchemes Hashem," I have been told when I have questioned such cut-throatness, which I witnessed a number of times in a number of shuls. "These are the battles of Hashem," they explained to me, "and therefore it is perfectly normal and okay."

But I can't help think about Rebi Akiva's students who died because they too fought such "wars of God," but apparently without sufficient respect for one another. They probably thought they weren't doing anything wrong, which is why they didn't bother to change themselves. Had they not died, we wouldn't have known otherwise either.

So I asked myself, "Could the same points have been made without humiliating the speaker?" Yes.

"Could the seriousness of the questions be conveyed without the cost of another talmid chacham's honor?" Yes, again.

Because it turns out that there are two "wars of God" that we fight, the one on the outside and the one on the inside. What I have witnessed in the past has been mostly the external wars. When they are fought with a sensitivity to truth but not with a sensitivity to another person, then the war is being lost on the inside, and therefore, on the outside as well.

Changing that is a matter of feeling more for others than we do for ourselves. Humility is the key to everything, but especially to remaining true to the truth on the inside as well as on the outside. A zealot for God is only a zealot for God when he avenges God, and not himself in any way.

So we wandered the desert for 40 years. The Talmud speaks about the midbar, and how it is such a good representative of the trait of humility. It neutralizes all the selfishness of a person, and allows them to be selfless, the prerequisite for receiving and properly living by Torah.

Without it, we can doven, but as if at "Express Checkout." Without humility, we can learn Torah and become arrogant and insensitive to others. Without it, we can witness signs from God, and think little of them. Without humility, we seal our fate for disaster, as we have so many times before.

We can see this from the spies as well. After they arrogantly rejected Eretz Yisroel, God decreed

their deaths in the desert. It was a humbling experience, so-much-so that the next day they ran like children to undo their wrong, even at GREATER cost to their lives. If only they had had that kind of humility BEFORE they spied the land.

Before anyone complains about how insensitive God has been to their problems, they should realize that the insensitivity begins with us. If it ends with us, then we can bring God back into our lives, and enjoy far more miraculous Hashgochah Pratis. ©2019 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

RABBI YAAKOV BERNSTEIN

Haaros

The best family lineage stems from Dovid Hamelech. Yet, surprisingly, Dovid comes from Rus -- the Moabite convert. Moav was prohibited from marrying into Klal Yisrael! (Devorim 23:3)

In Sefer Rus, it was promulgated for the first time that only Moabite males were prohibited, but females were permitted.

To most, the distinction in halacha between Moabite males and females was a completely novel -- and questionable -- concept. For many years, Dovid was ostracized due to concern that his lineage was not acceptable. For this reason, Shmuel Hanavi composed Sefer Rus -- to affirm the legitimacy of Dovid's ancestry. (Zos Nechamasi).

The last parshiyos of Vayikra remind us that we have to look out for one another, not only ourselves: Remember the poor man, redeem the field that he was forced to sell. If we don't keep the mitzvos, we will be exiled; we will suffer immensely. Yet, Hashem will not forsake us. As a result of all our troubles, we will return to Him -- and He will return to us. These lessons are powerfully demonstrated during the Yom Tov of Shavuos the yahrzeit of Dovid Hamelech -- when we learn the story of Rus.

Sefer Rus presents us with the story of Elimelech, a wealthy leader of the Jewish People. When severe famine reaches Eretz Yisrael, he's in a dilemma. The demands of the people are extreme and he feels overwhelmed. In such a desperate situation, Elimelech is afraid that thieves would attack him in the night. He takes his family and leaves Eretz Yisrael, taking refuge in Moav.

Actually, these are serious errors; when people's demands are great, one must not forsake them. Nonetheless, his wife Naomi faithfully follows her husband, and their two sons honor their father's wishes. As long as he lives, Elimelech prevents his sons from intermingling with the Moabite population. (Zos Nechamasi)

Hashem's wrath is kindled. Elimelech dies; Naomi is unable to restrain her younger son, who marries a local princess, Orpah. The older son then follows, taking Rus as wife (also a princess). Both sons

die without offspring, leaving Naomi bereft of husband and children, devoid of income and assets.

Forlorn, Naomi realizes that she could have protested her husband's behavior; perhaps she could have prevented the tragedies which unfolded. She hears that the famine in Eretz Yisrael is over, and sets out -- on foot. Orpah is easily persuaded to return to her family's palace, but Rus says that she will remain with Naomi and her people forever. Although Naomi's family had forsaken their people, Rus will not!

Rus and Naomi arrive, penniless, in Eretz Yisrael. The verses tell us that Naomi had property which she needed to sell. Rus approached Boaz, that he should be the Go'el -- "redeemer." This expression has several connotations. First, the Go'el helps his impoverished relative by re-acquiring the inheritance which the poor man sold. Indeed, through a series of transactions, Boaz does redeem Naomi's property.

The classic commentaries query. How does Naomi have property to sell? The verses tell us that it was part of Elimelech's inheritance, needing to be redeemed. How could Naomi sell it? According to the Torah, the wife doesn't inherit the husband. Besides, an inherited field must not be redeemed within the first two years of the sale, and very little time had passed, certainly not two years.

The Bach, in Meishiv Nefesh, shows that the field had been promised to Naomi in the K'suva. The K'suva is an agreement made before the marriage, guaranteeing the wife assets in the event of divorce or the husband's death. Now that her husband has died, the assets belong to Naomi, and she can sell them for sustenance.

Why is Boaz called the Go'el -- "redeemer"? What does this have to do with re-acquiring an inheritance? The Bach shows that Naomi does actually inherit fields, not as a wife, but as a descendant: Rashi tells us that Naomi was descended from her husband's father. When Elimelech dies, the properties went to her sons. They, too, die without offspring. The fields now revert to the father's family. Naomi is one of the inheritors.

So Boaz is the redeemer of the field which Naomi sold. He is returning the property of inheritance. On the other hand, Naomi didn't sell the field as inherited property (she didn't have any control of the inheritance yet) but as her K'suva. Therefore, it could be restored within the two year period.

There is much to be learned from the story of Rus. It is a story of error, return and forgiveness. It is a story of pain and deprivation, encouragement and success. It teaches about stinginess and generosity, loss and redemption.

It tells us of Geula. Boaz redeemed the field, and he redeemed Rus, marrying her and engendering the lineage of Dovid, Melech Yisrael. ©2019 Rabbi Y. Bernstein & torah.org