

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Bamidbar is usually read on the Shabbat before Shavuot. So the sages connected the two. Shavuot is the time of the giving of the Torah. Bamidbar means, "In the desert." What then is the connection between the desert and the Torah, the wilderness and God's word?

The sages gave several interpretations. According to the Mekhilta the Torah was given publicly, openly and in a place no one owns because had it been given in the land of Israel, Jews would have said to the nations of the world, "You have no share in it." Instead, whoever wants to come and accept it, let them come and accept it.¹

Another explanation: Had the Torah been given in Israel the nations of the world would have had an excuse for not accepting it. This follows the rabbinic tradition that before God gave the Torah to the Israelites he offered it to all the other nations and each found a reason to decline.²

Yet another: Just as the wilderness is free – it costs nothing to enter – so the Torah is free. It is God's gift to us.³

But there is another, more spiritual reason. The desert is a place of silence. There is nothing visually to distract you, and there is no ambient noise to muffle sound. To be sure, when the Israelites received the Torah, there was thunder and lightening and the sound of a shofar. The earth felt as if it were shaking at its foundations. But in a later age, when the prophet Elijah stood at the same mountain after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal, he encountered God not in the whirlwind or the fire or the earthquake but in the kol demamah dakah, the still, small voice, literally "the sound of a slender silence."⁴ I define this as the sound you can only hear if you are listening. In the silence of the midbar, the desert, you can hear the Medaber, the Speaker, and the medubar, that which is spoken. To hear the voice of God you need a listening silence in the soul.

Many years ago British television produced a

documentary series, *The Long Search*, on the world's great religions.⁵ When it came to Judaism, the presenter Ronald Eyre seemed surprised by its blooming, buzzing confusion, especially the loud, argumentative voices in the Bet Midrash, the house of study. Remarking on this to Elie Wiesel, he asked, "Is there such a thing as a silence in Judaism?" Wiesel replied: "Judaism is full of silences ... but we don't talk about them."

Judaism is a very verbal culture, a religion of holy words. Through words, God created the universe: "And God said, Let there be ... and there was." According to the Targum, it is our ability to speak that makes us human. It translates the phrase, "and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7) as "and man became a speaking soul." Words create. Words communicate. Our relationships are shaped, for good or bad, by language. Much of Judaism is about the power of words to make or break worlds.

So silence in Tanakh often has a negative connotation. "Aaron was silent," says the Torah, after the death of his two sons Nadav and Avihu (Lev. 10:3). "The dead do not praise you," says Psalm 115, "nor do those who go down to the silence [of the grave]." When Job's friends came to comfort him after the loss of his children and other afflictions, "Then they sat down with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, yet no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great." (Job 2:13).

But not all silence is sad. Psalms tells us that "to You, silence is praise" (Ps. 65:2). If we are truly in awe at the greatness of God, the vastness of the universe and the almost infinite extent of time, our deepest emotions will indeed lie too deep for words. We will experience silent communion.

The sages valued silence. They called it "a fence to wisdom."⁶ If words are worth a coin, silence is worth two.⁷ R. Shimon ben Gamliel said, "All my days I have grown up among the wise, and I have found nothing better than silence."⁸

The service of the priests in the Temple was accompanied by silence. The Levites sang in the courtyard, but the priests – unlike their counterparts in other ancient religions — neither sang nor spoke while

¹ Mekhilta, Yitro, Bachodesh, 1.

² Ibid., 5.

³ Ibid.

⁴ 1 Kings 19:9-12.

⁵ BBC television, first shown 1977.

⁶ Avot 3:13.

⁷ Megillah 18a.

⁸ Avot 1:17.

offering the sacrifices. One scholar⁹ has accordingly spoken of “the silence of the sanctuary.” The Zohar (2a) speaks of silence as the medium in which both the Sanctuary above and the Sanctuary below are made.

There were Jews who cultivated silence as a spiritual discipline. Bratslav Hassidim meditate in the fields. There are Jews who practise taanit dibbur, a “fast of words.” Our most profound prayer, the private saying of the Amidah, is called tefillah be-lachash, the “silent prayer.” It is based on the precedent of Hannah, praying for a child. “She spoke in her heart. Her lips moved but her voice was not heard” (1 Sam. 1:13).

God hears our silent cry. In the agonising tale of how Sarah told Abraham to send Hagar and her son away, the Torah tells us that when their water ran out and the young Ishmael was at the point of dying, Hagar cried, yet God heard “the voice of the child” (Gen. 21:16-17). Earlier when the angels came to visit Abraham and told him that Sarah would have a child, Sarah laughed inwardly, that is, silently, yet she was heard by God (Gen. 18:12-13). God hears our thoughts even when they are not expressed in speech.

The silence that counts, in Judaism, is thus a listening silence – and listening is the supreme religious art. Listening means making space for others to speak and be heard. As I point out in my commentary to the Siddur, there is no English word that remotely equals the Hebrew verb sh-m-a in its wide range of senses: to listen, to hear, to pay attention, to understand, to internalise and to respond in deed.

This was one of the key elements in the Sinai covenant, when the Israelites, having already said twice, “All that God says, we will do,” then said, “All that God says, we will do and we will hear [ve-nishma]” (Ex. 24:7). It is the nishma – listening, hearing, heeding, responding – that is the key religious act.

Thus Judaism is not only a religion of doing-and-speaking; it is also a religion of listening. Faith is the ability to hear the music beneath the noise. There is the silent music of the spheres, about which Psalm 19 speaks:

The heavens declare the glory of God
The skies proclaim the work of His hands.
Day to day they pour forth speech,
Night to night they communicate knowledge.
There is no speech, there are no words,
Their voice is not heard.
Yet their music carries throughout the earth.

There is the voice of history that was heard by the prophets. And there is the commanding voice of Sinai, that continues to speak to us across the abyss of time. I sometimes think that people in the modern age have found the concept of “Torah from heaven” problematic, not because of some new archaeological discovery but because we have lost the habit of listening to the sound of transcendence, a voice beyond the

merely human.

It is fascinating that despite his often fractured relationship with Judaism, Sigmund Freud created in psychoanalysis a deeply Jewish form of healing. He himself called it the “speaking cure”, but it is in fact a listening cure. Almost all effective forms of psychotherapy involve deep listening.

Is there enough listening in the Jewish world today? Do we, in marriage, really listen to our spouses? Do we as parents truly listen to our children? Do we, as leaders, hear the unspoken fears of those we seek to lead? Do we internalise the sense of hurt of the people who feel excluded from the community? Can we really claim to be listening to the voice of God if we fail to listen to the voices of our fellow humans?

In his poem, ‘In memory of W B Yeats,’ W H Auden wrote:

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start.

From time to time we need to step back from the noise and hubbub of the social world and create in our hearts the stillness of the desert where, within the silence, we can hear the kol demamah dakah, the still, small voice of God, telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced by God’s everlasting arms, we are not alone. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt”l* ©2017 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z”l 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 12 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

⁹ Israel Knohl.

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 "Sefer Pikudim," – The Book of the Censuses – referring to the two 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 20 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 we 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, and why the Midrash called it The Book of the Censuses. In the first census, taken during the heyday 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 related only to their immediate biological parents.

The Book of Exodus, our birth as a nation, is built upon the foundations set out in the Book of Genesis; our

origins as a very special family. The patriarchs and matriarchs were originally chosen by God 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" (Genesis 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 God. 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" (Genesis 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 God 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 God of the patriarchs as well, from the promise and the covenant of that God, 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. ©2023 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

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Going Up the Mountain

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

When the Jewish people received the first set of Tablets, they were warned: "Beware of ascending the mountain or touching its border" (*Shemot* 19:12). Similarly, before G-d gave the second

set of Tablets, He instructed Moshe: "No one else shall come up with you, and no one else shall be seen anywhere on the mountain; neither shall the flocks and the herds graze at the foot of this mountain" (*Shemot* 34:3). This second warning was even more sweeping than the first. This time, the people were warned away from the entire mountain, even its base (where they had stood the first time). Furthermore, even cattle were prohibited from grazing. Finally, the first time the elders ascended part-way with Moshe, while the second time no one else joined him.

The first warning about the mountain continued: "No hand shall touch it" (*Shemot* 19:13). The *Mechilta* offers a homiletic reading: "No hand shall touch it" – this applies to the mountain only, but not to the Tabernacle and the Temple. Thus, according to this view a person is allowed to touch the stones of the *Kotel*, which is the remnant of the retaining wall around the Temple. Even though it is possible that it is forbidden to enter the area behind the *Kotel* as we are all impure, touching is still allowed. Some, though, are so strict about not entering that they avoid getting too close to the *Kotel*. This is because then they might end up putting their fingers between the stones of the wall, which might count as forbidden entering.

It should be noted that some interpret the *Mechilta* as saying that the admonition "No hand shall touch it" comes to include the Tabernacle and the Temple in the prohibition of touching. However, the straightforward reading of the *Mechilta* is as we explained above, that these are excluded from the prohibition. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The book of Bamidbar is perhaps one of the saddest, so to speak, of all of the Holy Scriptures. Whereas the book of Shemot, which records for us the sin of the Golden Calf also gives us pause, it concludes with the final construction of the Mishkan and God's Presence, so to speak, resting within the encampment of Israel. But the book of Bamidbar, which begins on a high note of numerical accomplishment and the seemingly imminent entry of the Jewish people into the Land of Israel, ends on a very sour note. It records the destruction of the entire generation including its leadership without their entrance into the Promised Land.

The narrative of the book of Bamidbar tells us of rebellion and constant carping, military defeats and victories, false blessings, human prejudices, and personal bias. But the Torah warned us in its very first chapters that "this is the book of human beings." And, the weaknesses exhibited by Israel in the desert of Sinai, as recorded for us in the book of Bamidbar, are definitely part of the usual human story and nature.

Over the decades that I have taught this book of Bamidbar to students and congregants of mine, invariably many of them have then asked me incredulously: "How could the Jewish people have behaved in such a manner?" I cannot speak for that generation of Jews as described in the book of Bamidbar, but I wonder to myself "How can so many Jews in our generation relate to the existence of the State of Israel in our time so cavalierly?"

How do we tolerate the cruelties that our one-size-fits-all school system inflicts on the 'different' child? How do we subject our daughters to the indignities of the current matchmaking process? How, indeed!?" And my answer to myself always is that for the great many of us, human nature trumps common sense, logic, and true Torah values. I imagine that this may have been true of the generation of the book of Bamidbar as well.

One of the wonders of the book of Bamidbar is that the count of the Jewish people at the end of the forty years of living in the desert was almost exactly the same as it was at the beginning of their sojourn there. Though the following is certainly not being proposed by me as an answer or explanation to this unusual fact, I have always thought that this is a subtle reminder to us that no matter how great the experiences, no matter how magnificent the miracles, no matter how great the leaders, human nature, with all its strengths and weaknesses, basically remains the same.

It is not only that the numbers don't change much, the people and the generations didn't and don't change much either. Human nature remains constant. But our task is to recognize that and channel our human nature into productive and holy actions and behavior – to bend to a nobility of will and loyalty. Only by recognizing the propensity of our nature will we be able to accomplish this necessary and noble goal. ©2023 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

As sports coaches are known to say, there is no "I" in team. An analysis of the tribal encampments around the Tabernacle underscores the importance of being ready to step away from the "I," making space for the other (Numbers 2).

To the east were the tribes of Judah, Yissachar, and Zevulun. They had their distinct roles: Judah was the military leader, Yissachar the student of Torah, Zevulun a successful businessman. Each made mighty contributions while dwelling together as a team, complementing one another.

To the south were Reuben, Simon, and Gad. Reuben and Simon, whose mother was Leah, fully accepted Gad as a neighbor. They did so even though

Gad's mother was Zilpah, Leah's handmaid. It would seem, therefore, that Zilpah was accepted as a full wife of Jacob, no less valued than Leah (see Midrash Lekach Tov, Genesis 30:9).

To the west were Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin, all descendants of Rachel. The leader was Ephraim, the youngest. His uncle Benjamin and his older brother Manasseh embraced his leadership.

To the north were Dan, Asher, and Naftali. Dan was the me'asef (rear guard), who helped the stragglers and the weak who lagged behind, gathering and restoring possessions lost by the other tribes (Jerusalem Talmud, Eruvin 5:1). Notwithstanding this humblest of tasks, Dan is received as the leader of the threesome.

As the tribes camped and moved forward in a unit (more literally, a square), each was close to the center where the Tabernacle stood, helping avoid any potential rivalry. All were equal. There is, however, an alternative opinion: the tribes moved forward in a straight line.

It has been suggested that the deeper meaning of this debate speaks to the question of whether Jewish history is circular or linear. Thus, our journey through the desert is not only viewed as a "movement in space" but "a movement in time."

In the end, Jewish history reflects both views – circular and linear in dialectic, forming a spiral. In other words, history repeats itself but always with a new twist.

This observation reminds me of the way I opened my phone conversations with my father during his later years. My father and mother had made aliyah. Knowing that Israel was fast moving, I would quote the prophets: "chadashim la'bekarim" (something new every day). My father would respond without hesitation, completing the phrase: "Rabbah emunatecha" (Great is our belief in God; Lamentations 3:23).

Every day, like Jewish history, brings something new. It is linear. Yet it also has sameness; it is circular. With the help of God, we will make it through, as we have for thousands of years, if we remember the message of the encampment, of stepping back and making space for the other. ©2023 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 LEVIN

The Census

Sefer Bamidbar is known in English as the Book of Numbers. The beginning of the Sefer and the parasha contains a census of the B'nei Yisrael in the wilderness. Our Rabbis have explained that Hashem counted the people after some tragedies in the wilderness, but this time the count was because He treasured the people. We must also remember that the count was made of only men who were of eligible age for the army (20-60), but even men who were unable to

serve because of a physical or other impairment were counted. There was no count made of women, children, or elderly. A separate count was made of the Leviim and Kohanim as they did not serve in the army, but in the Temple instead. The ages for their service were also different than the ages for the army, so the count for them differed in its parameters.

The Torah in our parasha states, "And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first day of the second month in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, 'Take for yourself the sum of all the assembly of the Bnei Yisrael, by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male by their polls. From twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to war (assembly) in Israel, you shall number them by their hosts, even you and Aharon. And with you there shall be a man of every tribe, every one head of his father's house.'"

The Or HaChaim explains that Hashem first revealed that He spoke to the B'nei Yisrael in the Wilderness of Sinai, and then He revealed the more specific place, the Tent of Meeting. Once He had revealed the place, He then revealed the time. He began with the day, the first day, and then revealed the more specific time of the second month. Only then did He reveal the year of that day and month, and tied all His revelation to the exodus from Egypt. The Midrash reports that Moshe asked Hashem how he would be able to bring six hundred thousand men to stand at the opening of the Tent of Meeting. Hashem answered that even though some would be close and others quite far away, the souls of the six hundred thousand would be with Him between the poles that were used to carry the Holy Ark.

Sforno presents a problem with our understanding the phrase, "all that are able to go forth to war." He views this aspect of the count to be misleading. Hashem asked Moshe and Aharon to count the men but not for battle. Had the B'nei Yisrael not accepted the negative report of the spies that went into the land, they would have entered the land immediately and not had to battle with the inhabitants of the land. The people who dwelled in the land would have been deathly afraid of this multitude of people led by Hashem, and they would have fled the land instead of offering resistance. Hashem would have guided the B'nei Yisrael without one soldier dying. Since the B'nei Yisrael did sin by accepting the negative words of the spies, they were punished with forty additional years in the desert, and the people who dwelled in the land became even more evil which required that they be destroyed by force in battle.

HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the first Book of the Torah was needed to establish Hashem as the Creator, and the beginnings of the forefathers as the foundation for the relationship between Hashem and the B'nei Yisrael. The second

Book of the Torah established the debt that the B'nei Yisrael would have for being freed from Egypt and receiving the Torah on Sinai. The third Book of the Torah was devoted to the tribe of Levi, as the Kohanim and Leviim were responsible for the Temple and its service, the offerings, and ritual purity and impurity. The fourth Book of the Torah, Bamidbar, established the unity of the different tribes into one nation, serving Hashem. Though the tribes would maintain their uniqueness and those special qualities based on the blessing from their father, Ya'akov, the unity of the tribes was necessary to define the people as a nation. Still, their individuality was maintained in the census. Sforno points out that the people here are counted by tribe but also by family name, whereas, a later count in Sefer Devarim, counts the people by tribe only, mentioning the name of the leader of the tribe but then only the number of people in each tribe.

The Torah states, "From twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel, you shall number them by their hosts." The Ramban argues that the word "tzava, army (able to go to war)" is used in the Torah as any gathering of the people, not necessarily a military one. He reasons then that the elimination of those under the age of twenty is due to the fact that children under twenty did not participate in the assemblies of the people. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that there were many reasons for the count, and war was only one purpose. He interprets the term tzava to refer to the "hosts (assembly) of Hashem." HaRav Sorotzkin also demonstrates that the term "and upwards" also had a limitation, namely, upward only until the age of sixty. He uses the story of the spies, where the punishment to that generation for accepting the evil report did not apply to those who were over the age of sixty or under the age of twenty.

The Ramban refers to a Midrash from Bamidbar Rabah concerning the phrase "se'u et rosh, raise up the head (take the sum)." This parallels the language that Yosef used when interpreting the dreams of the wine steward and the baker when he was imprisoned. Yosef began each interpretation with the prediction that Par'oh would "raise up the head" of both men. The wine steward and the baker did not know, until Yosef continued, that Par'oh would "raise up one head" to return him to his position, while Par'oh would "raise up the other head" from off his shoulders by hanging him. The Ramban explains that the Midrash is telling us that this was a warning to Moshe and the people that their leaders would be judged accordingly: if they are worthy, they will become exalted, but if they prove unworthy, they will all die. This is precisely what happened with the spies. The twelve who were chosen were all worthy leaders, yet only two of the twelve returned with a good report. The ten leaders who were unworthy were punished before the rest of the people, and the two who were worthy were rewarded by Hashem.

It would be wise for our leaders today to give heed to the words of our Midrash. Our politicians throughout the world are all corrupt. We have grown so weary as to accept that corruption is the very definition of politicians. But we must contrast this with our great Rabbis. Their lives are without scandal, their words of Torah are pure and treasured, their legacy expands with each generation. May we follow their example in our own lives. ©2023 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**haron and his sons shall come when the camp is moving and take down the screening curtain and cover in it the ark of the testimony." (Bamidbar 4:5) This parsha begins with a count of the Jews, and then assigns roles for the various families of the Tribe of Levi in their work in the Mishkan. Chapter 4 begins discussing what the Tribe of Kehas would be responsible for, and then interjects this verse about the Kohanim before we are told what the actual responsibilities of Kehas would be.

The parsha will continue and explain that their job would be to carry the holiest objects of the Mishkan, the Ark, the Shulchan, the Menorah, altars, screening curtain (paroches) and the other vessels. However, before they are able to begin their job, the Kohanim must come and wrap these items in the various covers as described by the Torah.

Twice, the Torah warns that the Levi'im might be in danger of death. Once it says that the vessels were covered lest the Levi'im touch them and die, and later it says, "They shall not see the dismantling of the Kodosh and die." The Ramban explains this second one as meaning they should not watch as the items are wrapped in their covers.

If the problem was touching the items, why could they not see them being covered? If the problem was seeing the vessels, then the need to wrap them wasn't about touching them.

Perhaps the message of this section relates to our appreciation and reverence for Hashem and His dwelling place. The Torah is specific about how the various items were to be covered. The different colors of the cloths represented different things, such as Hashem's kingship and His omnipotence. When they were wrapped this way, then even in their covered state, they would induce awe as those beholding them would recognize what they represented. To carry them barehanded would render them too familiar.

Not only that, but were they even to see the vessels placed into those coverings, the message would also be lessened. Again, to view the items not in their place of honor and purpose in the Mishkan, but being packed for travel, would be to minimize their meaning and decrease the Levi'im's appreciation for these items, and in turn, their reverence for the Shechina's resting

place, and Chas V'Shalom, for Hashem.

This message resounds for us all, that we should try to remain in awe of Hashem, as well as those who serve Him. We must view those who are close to Hashem with respect and recognize that they are holy vessels of his.

More than this, we should learn to find ways of respecting and appreciating others and not allowing their images to become tarnished in our minds. By looking away in their moments of failure or error, and focusing on the good they do and greatness that lies within them, we will be better able to honor Hashem and all that is His, and live with the recognition that everything in the world is here for His glory.

One Erev Yom Kippur, after Mincha in MTJ, everybody hurried home to eat the seudah hamafsekes and finish preparing for Yom Kippur. R' Moshe Feinstein, z"l, however, had other plans. Walking home with his talmid, he suggested that they visit the elderly rav of Boyan. This rav was bedridden, and R' Moshe was aware that most people would be too busy to visit him on Erev Yom Kippur. His talmid agreed and they both hastened to reach his house.

When they arrived, they found the rav lying in bed alone and dejected. The rav's face lit up when he saw R' Moshe and his talmid. They sat down, and R' Moshe talked to the Rav at length, without showing the slightest bit of impatience or worry about the passing time. R' Moshe sat and talked until he saw a discernible change in the Rav's mood. Only then did he arise, and wish the Rav a gemar chasimah tovah. Once he was outside, he quickly hurried his steps to reach home in time to eat the seudah hamafsekes. ©2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

It wasn't that long ago when personal responsibility and hard work were considered the American way. If you wanted material success you understood that it began with either an education or a learned skill and a willingness to make sacrifices to achieve your dream. You were diligent, learned everything you could about your industry, and created the life you wanted.

The same applied in other areas of life. To lose weight, you knew it took a healthy diet, an exercise regimen, consistent hard work, and a certain stick-to-it attitude. There was an ingrained belief that we were responsible for taking care of ourselves and taking personal responsibility for the issues in our lives.

Ron Haskins, in a piece for the Brookings Institution, defined personal responsibility as the "willingness to both accept the importance of standards that society establishes for individual behavior and to make strenuous personal efforts to live by those standards." He adds that, when these standards are not met, responsible people do not play victim and "do not

look around for some factor outside themselves to blame."

Boy, that seems like a very long time ago. Those days of taking personal responsibility are over. Rather than work and contribute to society, a vast number of Americans have become content to let society take care of them; in fact, they both expect and demand it. Short cuts reign supreme; tummy tucks, insulin shots, liposuction, and fad diets have seemingly become the preferred methods for weight loss.

A few years ago, psychologist Dr. Linda Sapadin coined a term that defines this malady: Responsibility Deficit Disorder (RDD). How exciting it is to be present to witness the birth of a new mental disorder!

The real issue is that those afflicted with RDD aren't the ones suffering from this disease -- it's the rest of society that suffers. Society is no longer required to only make sure everyone has an equal opportunity; society is now expected to make everyone equal (equity) regardless of the efforts expended in one's personal growth.

Moreover, it has somehow become the norm for society to be responsible for adjusting for every issue with which individuals struggle. Society is expected to both redefine science (gender neutrality) and the English language to accommodate a whole new slew of mental disorders (gender dysphoria, etc.). In direct contrast to Haskins' philosophy of an individual adapting to society's mores and values, we now have society being challenged to change to fit the individual. It's quite terrible to say the least.

Yes, many -- if not most -- of these issues can be traced to terrible parenting. In 2013, Texas defense attorneys turned being a spoiled, entitled 16-year-old into a defense for vehicular manslaughter. An over-indulged childhood with few boundaries meant the defendant was unable to understand the concept of consequences as his parents never held him accountable. It was argued that this malady, called "affluenza," made him less culpable for his action of drunkenly plowing his car into four people, killing them and injuring and paralyzing two of his own friends.

There are a few ways parents corrupt the personal development of their children. The most obvious is giving their kids too many material goods or outrageous activities (e.g. spending tens of thousands of dollars on taking them to the Super Bowl) without requiring that their children to earn these rewards. This breeds entitlement rather than responsibility and achievement.

Another way is when parents do the things that their children ought to do for themselves (e.g. cleaning up after them, getting them into colleges, finding them jobs, etc.). Parents believe they are "helping," but in reality they are communicating that they don't think their children should or could do it on their own. Either way, the result is that their children never learn self-

sufficiency. This leads to an incompetence in basic life skills, which creates harmfully low self-esteem.

But part of taking personal responsibility includes understanding where your parents may have failed you and owning up to your own contributions and failings. It reminds me of the person who visited their therapist.

Therapist: It seems like you place the burden of all your failures on others, refusing to take responsibility due to learned helplessness, despite most of your problems being solvable.

Patient: Yeah, I get that from my mother.

Of course taking responsibility is only the beginning of the process. A person also has to take affirmative steps to deal with the mistakes of the past and ensure that they don't repeat them. Taking responsibility without a pledge to oneself to commit to real change doesn't really accomplish much. This reminds me of another joke.

It was November 11, 1918 and the German representative was just about to sign the Treaty of Versailles ending the war. The most important part of the treaty was the Germans owning up to starting the war and the reparations that they would make for their crimes. The German representative was just about to sign the treaty when the representative of the Allies looked at him and said, "So you take full responsibility for starting the war?" He replied, "Yes, we take full responsibility for starting World War One."

Allies representative, "One?"

This week's Torah portion has a fascinating lesson related to this. "And God spoke to Moses in the desert of Sinai [...] saying: 'Take a census of all the congregation of the Children of Israel'" (Numbers 1:1-2).

The fourth book of the Torah, known as Sefer Bamidbar (literally, "Book of Being in the Desert"), opens with God asking Moses to undertake a comprehensive counting of the Jewish people. Therefore, our sages refer to this fourth book of the Torah as The Book of Counting (see Mishna Yoma 68b and Rashi ad loc.). In fact, even in English we don't translate it literally (i.e. "In the Desert"), rather the fourth book of the Torah has come to be known as Numbers.

This is odd for a number of reasons, but what is so significant about the counting that this event has come to define the entire book? In other words, Sefer Bamidbar spans a period of forty years; how is it that an event that took place at the beginning of the forty years came to define the entire volume?

Rashi (1:1) explains that the Almighty counts the Jewish people as an expression of His deep love for us. By counting us, God is showing His desire to be connected to us. It is fascinating to note that the word that Rashi uses to describe this love is "chiba," which is derived from the Hebrew word "chav -- responsibility."

This is because true love is taking responsibility for the object of your affection. A true love relationship

requires you to be a giver. This means making sure to take good care of your beloved. Still, as discussed above, this process can be corrupted. How do we truly express love by taking responsibility without causing the object of our love to become irresponsible?

There is a very unusual custom that is observed when a boy turns bar mitzvah. Until the age of 13, in the heavenly court, a father is held responsible for his son's mistakes and indiscretions. From the age of 13 on, the boy is held responsible for his own acts. Thus, during the bar mitzvah ceremony a father recites in front of the entire congregation a prayer of appreciation that he is no longer responsible for his son's mistakes.

This seems to run counter to Jewish teachings. We find that the Almighty is compared to an eagle that places its young on its wings to protect them from hunters shooting arrows from below. The eagle is expressing the sentiment that "I'd prefer to have the arrow enter me than enter my child." So too the Almighty protected the Jewish people during the exodus from Egypt -- coming between the Egyptians and the Jewish people and absorbing the arrows and catapults of the Egyptian army.

But which is it? Do we want to absorb the blows for our children or do we want to be absolved from their indiscretions and let them suffer on their own?

The answer is obvious. We must do whatever we can to protect our children from outside forces that wish to hurt them through no fault of their own -- like the eagle protecting its young from hunters below. But we must also make sure to know when to step back; that, once they are old enough, they suffer the consequences of their own mistakes. It may be hard to watch, but it's the only way for them to grow, become responsible, and learn to achieve.

This is why our sages chose the name the Book of Counting for the desert experience. This fourth volume of the Torah begins with a statement of God's steadfast love and support for his people. Throughout the sometimes tumultuous experiences of forty years in the desert, the people were held accountable for their own actions -- including the sins which precluded both the Jewish people and Moses himself from entering the Land of Israel. But God's love never wavered. God showed us how to properly raise our children: you help guide them until they can grow on their own -- and then you watch your eagles fly. ©2023 Rabbi Y. Zweig & shabbatsahalom.org

