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תורת אש

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, is remarkable for the extreme realism with which it portrays human character. Its heroes are not superhuman. Its non-heroes are not archetypal villains. The best have failings; the worst often have saving virtues. I know of no other religious literature quite like it.

This makes it very difficult to use biblical narrative to teach a simple, black-and-white approach to ethics. And that -- argued R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes (Mevo ha-Aggadot) -- is why rabbinic midrash often systematically re-interprets the narrative so that the good become all-good and the bad all-bad. For sound educational reasons, Midrash paints the moral life in terms of black and white.

Yet the plain sense remains ("A biblical passage never loses its plain interpretation", Shabbat 63a), and it is important that we do not lose sight of it. It is as if monotheism brought into being at the same time a profound humanism. God in the Hebrew Bible is nothing like the gods of myth. They were half-human, half-divine. The result was that in the epic literature of pagan cultures, human heroes were seen as almost like gods: semi-divine.

In stark contrast, monotheism creates a total distinction between God and humanity. If God is wholly God, then human beings can be seen as wholly human -- subtle, complex mixtures of strength and weakness. We identify with the heroes of the Bible because, despite their greatness, they never cease to be human, nor do they aspire to be anything else. Hence the phenomenon of which the sedra of Beha'alotecha provides a shattering example: the vulnerability of some of the greatest religious leaders of all time, to depression and despair.

The context is familiar enough. The Israelites are complaining about their food: "The rabble among them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost -- also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!'" (Num 11:4-6)

This is not a new story. We have heard it before (see for example Exodus 16). Yet on this occasion, Moses experiences what one can only call a breakdown: He asked the Lord, "Why have You brought this trouble on Your servant? What have I done to displease You that You put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth?... I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how You are going to treat me, put me to death right now -- if I have found favour in Your eyes -- and do not let me face my own ruin." (Num. 11:11-15)

Moses prays for death! Nor is he the only person in Tanakh to do so. There are at least three others. There is Elijah, when after his successful confrontation with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, Queen Jezebel issues a warrant that he be killed: Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." (I Kings 19:3-4)

There is Jonah, after God had forgiven the inhabitants of Nineveh: Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:1-3)

And there is Jeremiah, after the people fail to heed his message and publicly humiliate him: "O Lord, You enticed me, and I was enticed; You overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me... The word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long... Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought my father the news, made him very glad, saying, "A child is born to you -- a son!"... Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?" (Jeremiah 20:7-18)

Lehavdil elef havdalot: no comparison is intended between the religious heroes of Tanakh and political heroes of the modern world. They are different types, living in different ages, functioning in different spheres. Yet we find a similar phenomenon in one of the great figures of the twentieth century, Winston Churchill. Throughout much of his life he was prone to periods of

acute depression. He called it "the black dog". He told his daughter, "I have achieved a great deal to achieve nothing in the end". He told a friend that "he prays every day for death". In 1944 he told his doctor, Lord Moran, that he kept himself from standing close to a train platform or overlooking the side of a ship because he might be tempted to commit suicide: "A second's desperation would end everything".

Why are the greatest so often haunted by a sense of failure? Storr, in the book mentioned above, offers some compelling psychological insights. But at the simplest level we see certain common features, at least among the biblical prophets: a passionate drive to change the world, combined with a deep sense of personal inadequacy. Moses says, "Who am I... that I should lead the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Ex. 3:11). Jeremiah says: "I cannot speak: I am only a child" (Jer. 1:6). Jonah tries to flee from his mission. The very sense of responsibility that leads a prophet to heed the call of God can lead him to blame himself when the people around him do not heed the same call.

Yet it is that same inner voice that ultimately holds the cure. The prophet does not believe in himself: he believes in God. He does not undertake to lead because he sees himself as a leader, but because he sees a task to be done and no one else willing to do it. His greatness lies not within himself but beyond himself: in his sense of being summoned to a task that must be done however inadequate he knows himself to be.

Despair can be part of leadership itself. For when the prophet sees himself reviled, rebuked, criticised; when his words fall on stony ground; when he sees people listening to what they want to hear, not what they need to hear -- that is when the last layers of self are burned away, leaving only the task, the mission, the call. When that happens, a new greatness is born. It now no longer matters that the prophet is unpopular and unheeded. All that matters is the work and the One who has summoned him to it. That is when the prophet arrives at the truth stated by Rabbi Tarfon: "It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to stand aside from it" (Avot 2:16).

Again without seeking to equate the sacred and the secular, I end with some words spoken by Theodore Roosevelt (in a speech to students at the Sorbonne, Paris, 23 April 1910), which sum up both the challenge and the consolation of leadership in cadences of timeless eloquence:

It is not the critic who counts, Not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, Or where the doer of deeds could actually have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, Whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, Who strives valiantly, Who errs and comes short again and again -- Because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; But who does actually strive to do the deeds, Who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions, Who spends himself in a worthy cause, Who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, And who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, So that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

Leadership in a noble cause can bring despair. But it also is the cure. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah instructs Aharon and through him all of his successors, the High Priests of Israel, that when lighting the great menorah one should make certain that the six outside lamps should all face into the center lamp. There are various opinions amongst the commentators as to how this was to be accomplished. The wicks were bent inwards or perhaps the lamps themselves were tilted towards the middle lamp - or it could have been that this was only one of the recurring miracles that defined the Mishkan and later the Temple in Jerusalem. These are just some of the ideas advanced to explain how this matter was in fact accomplished. The greater question obviously is what lesson is the Torah imparting to us by this instruction that the outside lamps should face the middle lamp. I think that the idea that the Torah wishes us to internalize is that the light of the holy menorah requires focus.

We know that in the physical world the more intense and concentrated the focus of the light, the greater is its ability to illuminate and reveal. Diffused light creates mood and atmosphere but it does not really show what lies before us. The light of the menorah is symbolic of Torah in Jewish life. Torah, its study, support and observance, requires focus and concentration. It cannot serve its true purpose in our lives when it exists amongst us only in a diffused and generalized sense. Our rabbis taught us what the focus of Jewish life is and should be: Torah, Godly service, human kindness and consideration for others. Other causes are only to be granted - diffused light - and they, by themselves, will not serve to erase the darkness of our existence and society. Every human life, every family, even every educational and commercial enterprise requires focus and concentration in order to be successful and productive.

We all have priorities in our lives. These priorities become the plans, actions and ideas that we focus our attention, talents and resources upon. Judaism demands that we focus upon love and study of Torah and its observances. We should concentrate upon our daily conversation, so too speak – our prayer services – with our Creator.

We are required to serve God and do His bidding. And that requires effort, sacrifice and devotion.

It is perhaps the most challenging area of our religious life and demands total focus and concentration. Kindness towards others certainly requires focus. In theory, in a world of diffused light, we all subscribe to the notions of good behavior, social responsibility and charitable ideals. However when we are faced with the individual test of performing a specific human kindness to a specific human being we oftentimes shirk that responsibility. Our focus is not present and thus we are prevented, not out of malice but simply out of lack of concentration from performing the necessary act of kindness that lies before us. The lesson of the menorah is one of focus – the focus that will allow the spirit of Godliness to light our way through our lives.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"The nation was 'kvetching' evilly in the ears of the Lord, and the Lord heard, and His anger inflamed" (Numbers 11:1) Why is there a marked difference between God's reaction to the complaints recorded here in the Book of Numbers compared to His reaction to the Israelites' complaints in the Book of Exodus?

After all, merely three days after the splitting of the sea, they found only "bitter" waters to drink (Exodus 15:24), and God immediately – and without comment – provides Moses with the bark of a special tree that sweetens the waters.

Then, only 30 days after the exodus, upon their arrival at the Tzin Desert, they complain because they have no food (ibid., 16:1-3). God immediately – and without comment – provides the manna.

And finally, when they encamp in Rephidim, they again quarrel with Moses over their lack of water, God tells Moses to strike a large boulder at Horev with the same staff used to strike the Nile River and turn it into blood; this time water would flow from the rock (ibid., 17:1–7)!

And although Moses names this place "Testing and Strife" (Masa u'Meriva), what immediately follows is the successful war against Amalek, won for the Israelites by the Divine response to Moses' hands upraised in prayer to God.

How different is God's reaction to the similar complaints only one year later (see Numbers 1:1), when a fire consumes the edge of the camp and a plague results in mass graves. Why the change?

Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein suggests that it is because the requests and complaints in Exodus were for the basic necessities of life: water, and bread. Although the Israelites should have had greater faith, one can hardly fault them for desiring their existential needs.

In our portion of Beha'alotcha however, they complain not about the scarcity of water, but about the lack of variety in the menu! The verse even introduces the subject by stating that the nation was kvetching evilly in the ears of God – without even mentioning what they were complaining about (Numbers 11:1). And it is for this unspecified complaint that God's fire flares.

After this punishment, the nation cries out, "Who will give us meat to eat?" and then continues with, "We remember the fish we ate for free in Egypt, and the cucumbers and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic; our spirits are dried up with nothing but manna before our eyes" (ibid., v. 4-6). What do they want – meat, or fish, or melons, or garlic?! All of the above for the sake of variety? That is what it seems to be!

God's response is also curious; He tells Moses to appoint 70 elders (ibid., v.16), and sends the Israelites quails to eat. They ask for meat and God gives them rabbis!? And while they eat the quail, they are smitten by the severe plague. Why are they complaining, and why is God so angry? And if, indeed, He is disappointed, even upset, by their finicky desires, why give in to their cravings? And why send them the 70 elders?

Herein lies the essential difference between the complaints in Exodus and Numbers. In Exodus, the nation had a clear goal; they were committed to the mission of becoming a kingdom of priests and a sacred nation, and were anxiously anticipating the content of that mission, a God-given doctrine of compassionate righteousness and moral justice which they must impart to the world.

In order to receive and fulfill their mission they had to live, and so they (legitimately) requested water and bread, survival food. If they did not survive, they would certainly not be able to redeem.

One year later, in Numbers, they had already received the Torah. And, since their necessities were provided for, they were complaining, kvetching, without having substantive issues about which to complain. And they had various gourmet cravings, from meat to garlic.

God understood that had they still been inspired by their mission, had they remained grateful for their freedom and the opportunity it would afford them to forge a committed and idealistic nation, they would not be in need of watermelons and leeks, foods that they themselves had never even tasted. They were really searching for a lost ideal, for their earlier inspiration of becoming a holy nation and kingdom of kohen-teachers.

No wonder God was disappointed and angry. And so he sent them the quails, knowing that once they received it, they would cease craving for it, just as once they gained their freedom from Egyptian servitude they took their freedom for granted, and once they received the Torah at Sinai, the Torah lost its allure.

The Almighty therefore felt that it would be

necessary for many religious role models – 70 wise and sensitive men – to hopefully become the adjutant generals under Moses, who would personally reach out to large numbers of Jews and recharge their batteries as members of a holy nation and a kingdom of kohen-teachers!

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Sounding the Trumpets

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Bamidbar 10:9 presents the mitzva of sounding trumpets during wartime ("When you are at war in your land"), and during a time of trouble ("against an enemy who oppresses you"). Some require that both these conditions be present for the mitzva to be in effect. This leads the *Avnei Nezer* to ask whether we should blow the trumpets only for a voluntary war, or also for a *milchemet mitzva* (obligatory war). After all, since G-d has guaranteed us a successful outcome, one might posit that it is not considered a time of trouble. During the war against Jericho (which was a *milchemet mitzva*), they blew the *shofar* and not the trumpets (*Yehoshua* 6:2). This would seem to prove that blowing the trumpets is limited to a voluntary war.

While some limit the trumpet-blowing to a voluntary war, others offer a different limitation. The *Pri Megadim* points out that the verse uses the word "*be-artzechem*" ("in your Land"). He explains that this is the reason that in his time (18th century) the trumpet was not blown for trouble, as this was limited to trouble in the Land of Israel (or, by extension, trouble for the majority of the world's Jews).

With this background, we can understand why Rav Shraga Feivel Frank (*HaMa'ayan*, 1970) exhorted people to blow trumpets near the *Kotel* in contemporary times of trouble. He argued that this would fulfill the mitzva.

In wartime, the trumpets are sounded as part of a special prayer service designed for this purpose. This prayer service is similar to that of *Mussaf* on Rosh Hashanah, with verses of *Malchuyot* (G-d's kingship), *Zichronot* (asking G-d to remember), and *Shofarot* (about times when a *shofar* was sounded). Some maintain that the trumpets are blown in the battlefield itself, as we see from historical descriptions of the wars of the Maccabees.

Similarly, when our soldiers return from war or when they celebrate victory, they should celebrate and sound the trumpet. This is what King Yehoshaphat did when he returned victorious from the wars against Ammon and Moab. As it states, "For G-d had given them cause for rejoicing over their enemies. They came to Jerusalem to the house of G-d, to the accompaniment of harps, lyres, and trumpets" (*II Divrei HaYamim* 20:27-28). As a result, "The terror of G-d seized all kingdoms of the land when they heard that G-d had fought the enemies of Israel. The kingdom of Yehoshaphat was untroubled, and his G-d granted him respite on all sides" (*ibid.* 29-30).

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The words we recite when taking the Torah from the Ark are biblical in origin: "And it came to pass, when the Ark set forward, that Moses said, 'Rise up, O Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered; and let them that hate You flee before You'" (Numbers 10:35).

This sentence is unique in its importance, as it is inserted between two inverted Hebrew letters nun that together look like bookends. In fact, the Talmud claims that what is between the "bookends" constitutes a book of its own (Shabbat 116a).

What makes this sentence important enough to be a book unto itself?

The central mission of Judaism is to bring ethical monotheism into the world. And the test of ethical behavior is how we act in the most difficult situations. One of those situations is war itself. Therefore, the Torah declares that even when we go to war and are hopeful that the enemy will be dispersed, the Ark must always be with us; a reminder that the moral principles of the Torah – even in the most trying of circumstances – must be upheld.

I witnessed firsthand how the Israel Defense Forces follow this dictum during the Summer 2014 Gaza War. Taken to a drone headquarters, I saw pilots on the ground maneuver drones over Gaza. On large screens, one could see the drones over buildings and people scurrying about. One of the operators told me that they had intelligence that two terrorists would soon leave the building and get onto a motorcycle parked out front.

This is precisely what happened. The pilots quickly maneuvered the drone over the terrorists, but before they pressed the button releasing the weapons, they needed approval from the higher command. Precious seconds passed. Then I heard the words: "chadal, harbeh anashim [abort, too many people]." In other words, don't shoot; too many innocents will be killed.

There is a second sentence in this small book, a sentence we recite when returning the Torah to the Ark: "And when it [the Ark] rested, he said: 'Return, O Lord, unto the ten thousands of the families of Israel'" (Numbers 10:36).

During the First Lebanon War in 1982, I accompanied Rabbi Chaim Druckman into Lebanon, visiting IDF troops. We visited students from his Ohr Etzion Yeshiva preparing to embark on a mission. The rabbi rose to offer words of encouragement. As he concluded, he cried out the sentence of "When the Ark rested." He explained: "I know with God's help, we will prevail. But this sentence offers the prayer that every soldier without exception who goes out will come back."

This experience reminded me of a story attributed to S. Y. Agnon. Once a king reviewed his returning soldiers, who had been victorious in battle. He was ecstatic and joyous. But not so God. The Ruler of rulers, when reviewing the returnees, understood that many soldiers from the battalion were missing and that even a victory constitutes loss and suffering. Individuals were killed in the war, and they would not return.

Thus, these sentences offer a prayer that soldiers who defend Israel act ethically and all come home safely. So important is this prayer that it constitutes a holy book unto itself.

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Aharon's Special Mitzvah

In the end of last week's parasha, Naso, we saw that each tribe's leader brought gifts to the dedication of the Temple in the desert, the Mishkan. This week's parasha, B'ha'alotcha, begins with the command given to Aharon about kindling the lights of the Menorah: "Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, 'Speak to Aharon and say to him: When you kindle the lamps, toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light.'" An immediate problem arises since these Laws were given to the Kohanim two Books earlier in Sh'mot in Parashat Terumah. Our Rabbis all search for a reason for this repetition. Some explain this repetition with as a direct result of its connection to the gifts of the princes that we saw in last week's parasha.

The arrangement of the Menorah took place on the first day of Nisan, the same day as the gift of the first prince, yet it is not mentioned until the twelfth day, after all of the gifts had been given by each tribe. Rashi explains the order of events here by quoting a Midrash which explains that Aharon was distraught after seeing all the gifts from each prince, because neither he nor his tribe (the Leviim) took part in these gifts. Hashem placated him by reiterating the singular responsibility given to him alone for the arranging of the lights of the Menorah each day. This was his contribution to the Mishkan.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Moshe was also distraught that he had not participated in these donations. In answer to Moshe's distress, Hashem inserted the pasuk at the end of last week's parasha, "When Moshe arrived at the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him (Hashem), he heard the Voice communicating with him from atop the Cover that was upon the Ark of the Testimony, from between the two Cherubim, and He spoke to him." Hashem explained to Moshe that his contribution was that he was the only one who spoke directly with Hashem and heard Hashem's Voice through which all of the Laws were given. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the juxtaposition here of the Menorah, even though the Laws were already stated elsewhere, comes to comfort Aharon and Moshe by explaining that their tasks in the Mishkan were greater than all the gifts that were brought, as Aharon gave light and Moshe gave Torah to the people.

Miriam, Moshe and Aharon's sister, was also part of the three pillars of Yisrael, and she also had not brought gifts to the Temple. Even though she is not mentioned in a pasuk here, we can imagine that she was also distraught and needed to be comforted. But Miriam had given everything for the Temple. Her son, Chur, had been killed when he tried to stop the rebels who brought the Golden Calf. His grandson, Miriam's great-grandson, Bezalel, was chosen to build the Mishkan and its Holy vessels. He was responsible for the construction of the very Menorah that Aharon was commanded to kindle each day.

The Rashbam does not use the Midrash as his reason for restating these Laws here. He states that the action of kindling the lights was a permanent daily occurrence. All of the other tasks involving the building of the Mishkan or the fashioning of the Menorah, the Altar, or the Table of the Showbreads, had been completed. Since the kindling of the Menorah was a service which was not completed but renewed each day, the Rashbam argues that it is appropriate to repeat it here, now that the other tasks were completed. The Ramban did not argue directly with this explanation, but his questions indicate that he would contradict this opinion.

The Ramban questions several aspects about the Midrash quoted by Rashi and used as the source for other commentaries. "But it is not clear to me why Hashem consoled Aharon (by reminding him of his function) in lighting the lamps, rather than consoling him with the burning of the incense every morning and evening, which is (the specific function of his) with which Scripture praised him, as it is said, 'they shall put incense before Thee.'" The Ramban goes on to list several additional services which either were done only by the Kohanim or by the Kohein Gadol, himself, such as: the daily meal offering of baked cakes and the service on Yom Kippur which involved the Kohein Gadol entering the Holy of Holies and uttering Hashem's name. The Ramban also questions why Aharon would be distraught that he had not brought offerings like the princes, when he had brought multiple offerings each day of the inauguration process. The Ramban clearly does not accept the Midrash as the reason for the restatement of the Laws of the Menorah at this point.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch approaches this repetition differently. Hirsch explains that the story of the special ideal connection between Hashem and the Jewish people was interrupted with the sin of the Golden Calf. This special Covenant "was to be proclaimed by the erection of the Sanctuary of the Torah and by the associated laws which then form the contents of the

whole of the third book and of the beginning of the fourth up to here. The ideal for which Israel should become the People of Hashem, the ideal towards which it was to be educated through the long course of centuries, yea through the thousands of years which reach to our present day and beyond it." HaRav Hirsch saw this repetition of the laws of kindling the lights as "the revival of national consciousness of the whole nation of being the People of Hashem."

Aharon was commanded at this time to turn the six lights, three on each side of the Menorah, towards the center light which faced the Table of the Showbreads according to one source or the Holy of Holies according to a different source. If the Menorah's lights were placed West to East, they faced the Showbreads. If the lights were placed South to North, they faced the Holy of Holies. According to HaRav Hirsch, if the lights faced the Holy of Holies, "the spirit to be nurtured in the Sanctuary is the idea of seeking Hashem in His Torah and of the covenant relationship between Him and Yisrael depending on their keeping the Torah." If the lights faced the Showbreads, they would symbolize "the spiritual side of life directed to impregnating all the material elements of life." This message was an important message to repeat at this juncture in time, since this was a renewal of the history of the people with a new commitment to Hashem.

As we progress in our own futures, we must remember to keep our focus on the message of Aharon and the Menorah. We must seek our own closeness to Hashem through His Torah and Laws. We must also dedicate our material wealth to the fulfillment of our Holy task on Earth, to bring the Holiness of Hashem into our daily lives to enrich ourselves, our communities, and the world.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"From fifty years old he shall return from the workforce and not work anymore." (Bamidbar 8:24) Lest you think that the Levi'im were granted early retirement benefits, the Midrash and commentaries explain that though a Levi ceased "working" at fifty, the next verse which says, "and he shall serve with his brothers…" proves Levi'im did not give up all their responsibilities upon reaching the age of fifty.

Rather, at fifty years old, they would no longer carry the vessels of the Mishkan from place to place on their shoulders. They would, however, sing during the Avoda, open and close the gates, load wagons, and surround the Mishkan to keep out strangers who didn't belong there. The Midrash sets a distinction between carrying on their shoulders and the other work because at age fifty one's strength begins to wane.

However, this seems rather specific. First of all, we know that the Aron, the holy ark, was not carried by physical strength. Rather, it carried those who carried it! Why, then, would there be a reason to no longer carry it?

Second of all, when they got into Eretz Yisrael, this rule went away, and the only thing that disqualified a Levi was when his voice became too weak to sing properly. Why don't we apply this to the strength of the Levi'im and say that regardless of their age, they should be able to carry the vessels until they actually began to lose their strength.

We'd like to suggest that this rule which applied in the wilderness when the Mishkan was traveling was intended to teach the Levi'im, and everyone else, a lesson in Avodas Hashem. We know, for example, that carrying the holy vessels required complete concentration. Korach was one of those who carried the Aron and they were putting their lives on the line. Had they broken their focus for even an instant, they would have perished.

One who reached this level would have to be an outstanding individual. Now, having reached the pinnacle of his career, there was nowhere else to go. What would happen when his strength began to waver? Before he can even have to worry about that, Hashem ensured he would step down, leaving this role to others. So what was he to do now? Help his brothers.

The Levi was to play a supporting role for the rest of his life, and show that it is possible to be of benefit and usefulness even when you're not the star of the show. They would ensure the camp contained the proper people, and would play a part in the service of Hashem. It may not have been the most primary position, but it was one they could fulfill with love, knowing they were making a difference.

It was also an opportunity to let others shine, and allow the younger people to carry the sacred vessels. As the teachers of the nation, this was an important lesson for the Levi'im to practice themselves, that each person has something valuable to contribute. Perhaps that is why this law only applied in the wilderness, because once the Jews entered Israel, they each had their appointed land, representing the unique roles each tribe and each person played.

A talmid of R' Noach Weinberg z"l, founder of Aish HaTorah, recounted how one evening, R' Noach invited him home to help put up his sukkah and have dinner. When they got there, R' Noach's seven-year-old son was trying to climb a pipe in the corner of the living room. The boy was about six feet off the ground and not getting any higher.

Knowing what would happen in his home, the student braced himself as R' Noach approached the boy, sure the child would get in trouble. But he was in for a surprise. R' Noach got right next to his son, bent over a bit and said, "Stand on my shoulders and I'll help you reach the ceiling."

That's how R' Noach treated every Jew, and that's why he was a giant in Kiruv. He didn't scold; he humbled himself and helped everyone reach higher.

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

For the last fifty years the institution of marriage has been under attack (or at least under siege). There are many reasons for this, such as: changing societal values regarding the fulfillment of individualistic needs or desires; living in a society with high divorce rates leading to a reconsideration of the long-term viability of marriage; redefining what constitutes a marriage; and rising cohabitation and non-traditional living arrangements.

The seriousness of the first reason is perhaps best exemplified by recent data out of China. The Chinese National Census, released in May, indicates a looming population crises as the fertility rate fell to 1.3 children per woman in 2020. A rate below 2.1 usually heralds a population decline. 1.3 is a catastrophic number for Chinese society. The report also noted that, as the fertility rate in China's major metropolitan cities is only about 0.7-0.9, an increasingly urbanized young population could drag the national fertility rate down to 1.0.

There are a number of reasons for this low fertility rate, including many decades of the government regulated one-child policy (increased to two in 2016 and three in 2021). Additionally, the culture's view of the primacy of males over females led many families to choose to have a male child. Today, in China's Gen Z population of 220 million, there is a huge gender imbalance; there are almost 19 million more men than women. To even more severely compound the issue, in a survey of some 3,000 women between the ages 18-26, almost 44% said they will probably never marry or have children.

This looming Chinese catastrophe isn't just a societal issue; it has huge economic repercussions as well. The ever increasing older workforce cannot be replaced by younger workers with these birth rates. While the rest of the world may view this crisis as welcomed news -- a situation that couldn't happen to a more deserving government -- we have to be careful. Unfortunately, it could force those megalomaniacs in Beijing to attempt to achieve some societal goals through military means. This has to be carefully monitored.

The second reason, regarding high divorce rates, is a direct result of living in a disposable society. Growing up I remember there being repair shops for TVs, computers, shoes, etc. In previous generations, when something needed to be fixed they worked on it. Today, the attitude is throw it out and buy another; there is no innate work ethic or desire try to fix anything. Small wonder that the institution of marriage is treated the same way. Of course, this also creates a cascading effect as getting divorced now has less of a stigma.

The last one, the rise of cohabitation, is the focus of a new study by University of Denver psychology professors Scott M. Stanley and Galena K. Rhoades. The two have studied aspects of cohabitation for more than two decades and yet they both remain surprised that as the world has changed -- and cohabitation patterns with it -- the finding on marriage durability hasn't.

They estimate that today over 70% of couples cohabit before marriage. Astonishingly, they conclude that cohabitation is now more a part of dating culture than of marriage culture. So it should come as no shock that, in relative terms, marriages of those who moved in together before getting engaged or married were 48% more likely to end in divorce.

This confirms the 2010 government study called National Survey of Family Growth (NFSG) that concluded that there is a group for whom marriage before 30 is not risky: women who married directly, without ever cohabiting prior to marriage. In fact, women who married between 22 and 30, without first living together, had some of the lowest rates of divorce in the NSFG.

Perhaps at the core of this problem is the fact that, in general, the concept of marriage is misunderstood. On the one hand, marriage carries significant legal implications; property rights, inheritance issues, tax benefits, insurance benefits, custody arrangements, etc.

But that's not what marriage is about. Marriage is about wanting to share your life with someone special whom you love and trust and with whom you want to create a home and family. Someone whom you are committed to giving to and making their life better. It has been said that we fall in love not with our mates' best attributes, but rather in their failings. Because it is in those that we complete them.

We learn some important lessons about the Torah's perspective on marriage from this week's Torah reading.

"Moses heard the people weeping by their families, each one at the entrance of his tent [...]" (11:10).

This week's Torah portion lists various complaints that the Jewish people leveled at God and Moses. One of the issues that they complained bitterly about was the miraculous manna. Remarkably, the verse above that seemingly describes the depths of their unhappiness with the manna is actually interpreted by the sages in the Talmud as an entirely different topic.

The Talmud (Shabbos130a) states: "Any mitzvah that the Jewish people accepted in a quarrelsome manner, such as the prohibition against incestuous relationships, as the Torah (ibid) states, 'Moses heard the people weeping by their families' -- (according to the Talmud they were weeping because they had been prohibited to marry their family members) is likewise still fulfilled while quarreling; for there is no

ketubah(marriage contract) that doesn't cause the parties to quarrel."

This seems to be a little odd. After all, a wedding is a time of great happiness. Why should a ketubahcause quarreling more than any other financial arrangement? Furthermore, what does this have to do with the fact that they were bitter about the prohibition against incestuous relationships? In order to understand this, we must begin by examining the root cause for having forbidden relationships in the first place.

The great medieval sage known as Nachmanides posits in his commentary on Leviticus that it would only be natural for people to choose their closest relatives as mates. For example, many of the complications of trying to merge two disparate families and cultures or dealing with inheritance issues would dissipate if a man were to marry his sister. Why are we forbidden from marrying our closest relatives?

I remember once overhearing a conversation at local park between a mother and child. The boy announced, "When I grow up, I'm going to marry you, Mommy." "You can't marry your own mother," said his older sister. "Then I'll marry you." "You can't marry me either." He looked confused, so they explained, "You can't marry someone in your own family." "You mean I have to marry a total stranger?!" he cried.

We find in Genesis(2:18) God said, "It is not good for man to be alone, I will make a compatible helper for him."The great Biblical commentator known as Rashi explains (ad loc) that if man were inherently self-sufficient he would be comparing himself to God. Just as God is one above, man is one below. In other words, man would consider himself more or less equal to God on the plane below. This would cause man to become totally egocentric and self-centered.

Therefore, the Almighty created a partner for man, someone he would have to merge with to balance him out and become a helpmate and an opposing opinion. This "merger" requires a true partner, one who is a totally separate entity and would not be swallowed up by the merger.

We are overly familiar with our closest relatives. For example, if we go into our sister's home we feel perfectly comfortable opening the fridge and helping ourselves to whatever we want. That is exactly what would happen in a familial marriage; we would always take what we wanted because that familial relationship is just an extension of ourselves. This is true with parents, children, aunts, uncles, etc.

Having to leave your comfort zone and bond with an outside entity (i.e. a non-family member), causes a rethinking of who we are and a continual negotiation on the merged "space." Being obligated to marry outside one's family removes much of the egocentricity that would otherwise naturally be ever present.

On the face of it, completing the ketubahat a wedding is a very odd custom; imagine if at every non-Jewish wedding there would be a public reading of a financial arrangement (such as a prenup) between the bride and groom. All of the guests would feel uncomfortable and it would be inappropriate. Why is the ketubahsuch a central part of the Jewish wedding?

The ultimate expression that we are merging with an outside party is the ketubah. It is a reminder that the husband cannot just be a taker, as he was living in his parents' home. The ketubahis a testament to the fact that the husband has real responsibilities as a giver. It's a reminder that the husband is merging with someone who isn't just an extension of himself; he now has to negotiate his life within someone else's space. Every ketubahis a reminder of this concept, and can easily become a source of conflict. In this way, the ketubahbecomes the de facto definition of a Jewish marriage.

Finally, it is nearly impossible to marry because of a true bond of love. Most people marry because of a combination of infatuation and emotional and physical attraction. A true bond of love develops and grows ever deeper over many decades of experiencing happy times and challenging times and being there for one another -- through thick and thin. Marriage is about a commitment to give another person your loyalty and trust. We cannot view marriage as easily disposable because the bond of love develops in the tears and repairs along the way.