

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Act 3 is the subject of the book of Shemot. God rescues the Israelites from Egypt as He once rescued Noah from the Flood. As with Noah (and Abraham), God makes a covenant, this time at Sinai, and it is far more extensive than its precursors. It is a blueprint for social order, for an entire society based on law and justice. Yet again, however, humans create chaos, by making a Golden Calf a mere forty days after the great revelation. God threatens catastrophe, destroying the whole nation and beginning again with Moses, as He had done with Noah and Abraham (Ex. 32:10). Only Moses' passionate plea prevents this from happening. God then institutes a new order.

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

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

Tragically, as Bamidbar unfolds, we see that the Israelites turn out to be their own worst enemy. They complain about the food. Miriam and Aaron complain about Moses. Then comes the catastrophe, the episode of the spies, in which the people, demoralised, show that they are not yet ready for freedom. Again, as in the case of the Golden Calf, there is chaos in the camp. Again God threatens to destroy the nation and begin again with Moses (Num. 14:12). Again only Moses' powerful plea saves the day. God decides once more to begin again, this time with the next generation and a new leader. The book of Devarim is Moses' prelude to Act 5, which takes place in the days of his successor Joshua.

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

And so the Jewish people keeps repeating the story told five times in the Torah. God creates order. Humans create chaos. Bad things happen, then God

and Israel begin again. Will the story never end? One way or another it is no coincidence that Bamidbar usually precedes Shavuot, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah at Sinai. God never tires of reminding us that the central human challenge in every age is whether freedom can coexist with order. It can, when humans freely choose to follow God's laws, given in one way to humanity after the Flood and in another to Israel after the exodus.

The alternative, ancient and modern, is the rule of power, in which, as Thucydides said, the strong do as they will and the weak suffer as they must. That is not freedom as the Torah understands it, nor is it a recipe for love and justice. Each year as we prepare for Shavuot by reading parshat Bamidbar, we hear God's call: here in the Torah and its mitzvot is the way to create a freedom that honours order, and a social order that honours human freedom. There is no other way. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l* © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust [rabbisacks.org](http://rabbisacks.org)

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Shabbat Shalom**

“Count the heads of the entire witness community of the children 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 provided them with a moral and ethical constitution for a soon-to-be established sovereign state, along with a commitment of faith to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests, which is their mission for the world; the twelve uniquely endowed and individually directed tribes, each with its own flag, are united around a common Sanctuary dedicated to divine service; a standing army is organized; the tribe of Levi is trained to teach Torah and fulfill all the requirements for the sacrificial service. The only missing ingredient is the necessary obligatory war to pave the way for our settlement of the Promised Land of Israel!

But what follows instead is a total degeneration, a descent from the heights of an exalted rooftop down to the depths of a muddied pit. The Hebrews become involved in petty squabbles and tiresome complaints; the reconnaissance mission decides against the attempt to conquer Israel; Korach, Datan, and Aviram stage a rebellion against Moses; a prince of the tribe of Simeon defies Moses' leadership by publicly fornicating with a Midianite woman; the entire desert generation dies in the wilderness; and only Moses' successor, Joshua, and the newly-born generation will get to live in the Promised Land.

What happened and why? How could a nation so committed that it pledges “Whatever the Lord has

spoken we shall do and we shall internalize" (Exodus 24:7) completely lose their sense of purpose and idealism and "gang up" against the very individual who was their great liberator and law-giver?

I believe that the reason for the change is hinted at in the Midrashic name of this fourth book of the Bible, Sefer Pikudim – the "Book of Censuses" in Hebrew, or the book of Numbers (number counts) in English, after the two censuses, or number counts, of the population, which are taken between its covers. Indeed, our book (and this portion) opens with the command to count the Israelites, stipulating as follows: "Count the heads of the entire witness community of the children of Israel, by their families, by their parents' houses, with the number of names of each male body, from twenty years of age and above, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel." (Numbers 1:2–3)

Such are the details of the census given at the beginning of the book, when the Israelites are still imbued with a vision of mission and "manifest destiny," and when we still expect them to wage a war for the liberation of the Land of Israel.

However, twenty-five chapters later, after the scouts' refusal to attempt to conquer Israel, after the various rebellions against Moses culminating in Prince Zimri ben Salou's shameful public adultery with the Midianite Kozbi bat Tzur directly in front of the presence of Moses himself, a second census is ordered: "Count the heads of the entire witness community of the children of Israel, from twenty years of age and above, with their household parents, everyone eligible for army conscription." (Numbers 26:2)

It is clear that the identification of each Israelite for the purpose of the census is radically different in the second census from the way it was in the first census. The first time the count included "the families [proving 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 missing, with only the names of the household parents of each individual provided!

Clearly, herein – between the lines of the significant omissions – lies the secret of the degeneration of the Israelites. This is apparently why the Midrash names this the "Book of Censuses" (Sefer Pikudim) rather than the Book of the Desert (Bamidbar): in order to point us towards the solution to our presenting problem by highlighting the different stipulations of each census respectively. 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; by the second census, however, that connection was woefully gone, and the individual only related to his immediate biological parents. Allow me to explain.

The book of Exodus, our birth as a nation, is built upon 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 which would make them "a blessing for all the nations of the world" (Genesis 12:3) and ideals to which they were to "command their children and their households after them" (Genesis 18:19). This unique Hebraic culture was to be nurtured and developed within a special land, the Land of Israel, which is the very "body" and the national expression, the physical matrix, of our eternal covenant with God. Only against the backdrop of their land and state would Israel be able to teach compassionate righteousness and moral justice to the other nation-states. 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 sensitive humanity and sovereign nationality; these founding parents established the foundation for the continuity of an eternal people through whom the entire world will eventually be blessed by the peace of ultimate redemption.

"Yichus," lineage or pedigree, has little to do with privilege and special rights but has everything to do with responsibility and ancestral empowerment. Grandfather Jacob 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 and Ike and Jackie but rather means linking them to their patriarch's ideals, to their values, to their commitments. It also means endowing them – 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 with 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 connected them to the tribal children of our patriarchs and matriarchs. And the loss of connectedness to Abraham and Sarah resulted in a disconnect from the God of our forebears, from the promise and the covenant of that God, from the unique message and mission of Israel provided by the DNA and idealistic life-models of our ancestors. That generation lost faith in itself, became in "their own eyes as grasshoppers, and so were they in the eyes of their enemies," and lost the courage to conquer the land, despaired of the dream to teach the world. By disconnecting from their past, they lost their future; and so, they did not even merit individual names, names which would count and could only be

counted if they were linked with the proud names which founded Jewish eternity. Herein lies the secret of the dissolution of the desert generation. Are we in Israel today not faced with a similar disconnectedness from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, from Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, patriarchs and matriarchs of our past who must always remain paradigms for our future? *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Vayikra: Sacrifice, Sanctity & Silence, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at [bit.ly/RiskinVayikra](http://bit.ly/RiskinVayikra). ©2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

### Wein Online

**T**he count of the Jewish people as it appears in this week's parsha is always a difficult issue to appreciate and understand. What are we to learn from all of the detailed descriptions and seemingly exact numbers? The general lesson that every Jew counts – and is to be counted, is most apparent. But that lesson can be learned from a much more concise précis of the population of the Jews than the long description that appears in the parsha. I think that the messenger here is itself the message. By that I mean that the Torah wishes to express its relationship to the Jewish people simply by dwelling on an “unnecessary” lengthy detailed counting of its numbers. For those with whom we have a loving relationship, there are no unnecessary or superfluous acts or gestures. The rabbis compare this type of relationship, in a wry way, to one counting one's money.

For instance, the criterion for the speed and intensity of reciting the words of prayer is the rate of speed that one would use in counting valuable coins. The care in counting is itself the expression of the underlying attachment to what is being counted. I always note that people leaving the ATM cash dispenser invariably check the bills that they have received. This is not only an act of prudence; it is an act of affection and importance. So, the count of the Jews in the parsha, even in its detail and length, is logical and makes perfect sense. Another understanding of this issue can be found in the description of the counters themselves and not only in the description of the ones counted. Moshe, Aharon, Elazar and Itamar are the leaders of the Jewish people. They are responsible for the physical and spiritual welfare of the Jewish people in its totality. Part of their task is to somehow know all of their millions of constituents – to have some sort of relationship and affinity to each individual Jew.

The leaders of Israel always saw themselves as being parents of all Jews. Some Jews crave affection and others need very tough love. The enormous diversity – twelve different tribes that are

counted separately before being united in one total number of the whole people – of the Jewish people, is emphasized by the sheer individual counting of them. The responsibility for the fate of the Jewish people is a heavy burden for leaders to bear. But it is an unavoidable one that automatically comes with the posts of leadership. And the counters of the Jewish people are themselves the leaders of the people, aware at all times that the people rely upon their leadership and wisdom. And they must also be aware that each of those counted are somehow to be accommodated in their needs and development.

So, counting the Jewish people are not empty numbers to the leaders of Israel but rather, the list of challenges and opportunities presented before them. May both the counters and the counted of Israel in our day be great in numbers, spirit and accomplishments. ©2025 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

### Going Up the Mountain

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**W**hen 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ**

## **Migdal Ohr**

**“H**ashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first [day] of the second month from the Exodus from Egypt saying.” (Bamidbar 1:1) The book of Bamidbar begins with the command to count the Jews. Rashi comments, already on the first verse, that because Hashem loves us so much, He is constantly counting us. Rashi further comments that when Hashem wanted to rest His countenance upon us, he counted us the third time.

The Mishkan was erected on the 1st of Nisan, so on the 1st of Iyar He counted us. If you ask that this is not “at the time” Hashem placed His Shechina upon us, we can explain that one is not considered a permanent resident in a city until thirty days has passed. Therefore, now that Hashem’s presence was becoming “permanent,” it was time to count us.

There may also be another level of explanation here for us to examine and learn from. The Mishkan had been erected with great fanfare. The Princes had brought their offerings for nearly two weeks, and the Mishkan was inaugurated with much pomp, circumstance, and joy. Now that this was settling down, though, and things got into a routine, there was the risk that some would feel disenfranchised.

Though everyone had contributed to the Mishkan to the best of their ability, they didn’t all bring the same things. It’s possible that once the initial excitement wore off, people who had not brought the most precious things could feel they were not as involved or responsible for the Mishkan as some others. They might look at their contributions and feel they were less important than those of others. They might even feel the Mishkan belonged to others more than themselves.

For this reason, Hashem said to Moshe, “Count the Jews.” Hashem wanted every person to recognize that they are precious for their individual contribution to the world, which is different than anyone else’s. We are each on our own track in our journey to come close to Hashem and we cannot objectively compare our successes to those of others.

Indeed, Hashem counts us at every moment, collectively but also individually. He loves us for who we are, and the uniqueness we possess. He doesn’t compare us to others and find us wanting. This message had to be conveyed, and so it was done at a time when people could have begun feeling they didn’t matter, so we always remember how special and

precious we are to Hashem.

*A king gave three men each a plot of land and told them to plant it and report back to him at the end of the season. The first man came to report that he had produced thirty bushels of wheat. The king was pleased and gave him a bag of gold. The second man, who had produced fifty bushels of wheat, was eagerly awaiting the king’s response. To his shock, the king gave him a tongue-lashing about being lazy. But what happened next truly boggled his mind.*

*The third fellow quietly admitted that he had only produced fifteen bushels of wheat. This time the king ran over and hugged him, then gave him a very large award. The middle farmer cried foul. “I don’t understand,” he said, “I produced more wheat than either of them yet you castigated me and rewarded them?!”*

*“It’s quite simple,” replied the monarch. “The first man’s field was expected to produce thirty bushels. He worked responsibly and it did so. Your field was so fertile that it should have produced one hundred bushels, yet you produced only fifty, proof that you did not put your heart into doing my will. But,” said the king, “the third fellow’s field should only have produced ten bushels. If he produced fifteen, that means he went above and beyond simply because I asked. THAT is why he stands out.”* ©2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

**RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

## **Leviim as Guardians**

**A**t the end of Sefer Sh’mot (Exodus), the Torah described the establishment and the dedication of the Mishkan, the portable Temple that was the resting place for Hashem among the People of Yisrael. Sefer Vayikra (Leviticus) discussed the various offerings in the Temple, the concepts of tahor (pure) and tamei (impure), the inauguration of the Kohanim, Aharon and his sons, and the appointment of the Leviim as servants of Hashem. As we begin Sefer Bamidbar (Numbers), the relationships of the Leviim to the Kohanim and to the other tribes of the people is spelled out more clearly.

The Torah states: “Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, ‘Bring near the tribe of Levi, and have it stand before Aharon, the Kohen, and they shall serve him. And they shall safeguard his charge and the charge of the entire assembly before the Tent of Meeting, to perform the service of the Mishkan. They shall safeguard the utensils of the Tent of Meeting and the charge of the B’nei Yisrael, to perform the service of the Mishkan. You shall give the Leviim to Aharon and his sons, given, given are they to him from the B’nei Yisrael. You shall appoint Aharon and his sons, and they shall safeguard their priesthood; and the alien who approaches shall die.’”

The translation that appears often does not give the nuanced understanding that comes from the

actual text. Here the Torah says, “Hakreiv et mateh Levi, bring near the tribe of Levi.” HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the Torah twice before used the term, “v’hikravta, you will bring forth” instead of “hakreiv, bring forth.” Though both are a command form of the root word, their practical difference indicates a difference in the type of “bringing near.” The first two forms (v’hikravta) indicate a physical bringing forth, that Moshe was to physically position the tribe of Levi “before” the Tent of Meeting or “before” Hashem. In our parasha, the Torah uses “hakreiv” to indicate a spiritual bringing forth; that the Leviim should become nearer to Aharon on the spiritual level to serve Hashem directly for the Kohanim’s service in the Mishkan.

The translation is also often not exact, and leaves room for misunderstanding. The translation tells us that the Leviim were to stand before Aharon, the Kohen, “and serve him.” The actual words of the Torah are “V’sheirtu oto.” Rashi explains that the words mean to assist Aharon in guarding the Mishkan from non-Kohanim who might attempt to enter, as it says, “and the alien who approaches shall die.” The Siftei Chachamim, a commentary on and further explanation of Rashi, explain that the word “oto” could be read “ito, with him,” meaning that the Leviim would work with Aharon, not for him. HaAmek Davar explains that a major task of the Kohanim was the bringing of the various offerings to the Altar. It was up to the people to bring the various offerings to the Temple for the Kohanim to offer on the Altar. It was to be the responsibility of the Leviim to prepare these offerings and the libations at their proper time. HaAmek Davar also states that the Leviim were responsible to examine each of the vessels of the Mishkan to be certain that they were solid, complete, and able to serve their tasks properly. If there was a flaw in any vessel, it was unable to bestow kedusha, holiness, on the offering.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains why the Leviim were chosen. Hashem desired that “the whole of the service in the Sanctuary rests just on ‘service,’ and in ‘service,’ has its root and symbolic meaning just in obedience. It is to represent ‘joyful obedience,’ happy submission to the Will of Hashem – the evidence of its revelation resting in its ‘Abode’ – is something that came to us directly from Hashem Himself – how this ‘given nature of the Torah is always to be kept before our eyes by the position of its ‘evidence’ in the center of the nation.” Those who were to guard the “Abode” acted as a bridge between the Kohanim and the nation. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the two mentions of the word “given” are here used to inform us that the Leviim were given now and for all time to the Kohanim. After the Leviim were sanctified for this task, the Leviim were “given, given to Me,” to indicate that they should know that they were not servants to Aharon, but servants to Hashem.

The Torah states that the Leviim would

“safeguard his (Aharon’s) charge.” This indicated that their service was as an assistant to Aharon and the needs of the Kohanim. There were only three Kohanim, after the death of Nadav and Avihu, and the tasks that these three Kohanim were too great for them to prepare and bring the offerings on their own. But it was not only the task of the offerings that were aided by the Leviim. They also offered songs when the Kohanim performed their tasks. The Leviim were also given the responsibility of “the charge of the entire assembly,” namely, the other tribes of the B’nei Yisrael when they brought their offerings. As mentioned earlier, they acted as a bridge between the Holy Kohanim and the rest of the B’nei Yisrael. They actively prepared the offerings of the people but also kept them at a distance from the Holy areas which were the working domains of the Kohanim alone. The Mishkan, because of its portable nature, also had to be assembled and disassembled at the beginning and end of every journey. The Leviim both accepted upon themselves that responsibility based on the instructions from Hashem, but also prevented non-Kohanim from approaching the Holy vessels of the Mishkan and the parts of the disassembled Mishkan, itself.

The next pasuk in the Torah states, “And I, behold! I have taken the Leviim from among the B’nei Yisrael, in place of the firstborn, the first issue of every womb among the B’nei Yisrael, and the Leviim shall be Mine.” This pasuk begs the question of why the firstborn were replaced by the Leviim. While we know that Hashem had taken the firstborn as a reminder that He spared their lives when he slaughtered the firstborn of the Egyptians, we have no evidence that they ever assisted the Kohanim prior to being replaced. The firstborn failed to represent Hashem at the Golden Calf, so they were stripped of their holiness and their service in the Mishkan. HaRav Hirsch explains that they only lost their holiness but not their designation as being Hashem’s possession. The Leviim, however, had been treated specially in Egypt because of their holiness, and this holiness was never lost.

We can understand the special responsibilities of the Leviim, and we can strive to emulate them by serving Hashem and the rest of our brethren. May we succeed in that task. © 2025 Rabbi D. Levin

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**A**s we seem ready to enter Israel, a counting of the Jewish People takes place. Nachmanides offers several rationales for this census (Numbers 1:45).

First, it expresses God’s mercy. When Jacob came to Egypt, he brought with him only seventy souls. Now, thanks to God’s strong and compassionate hand, the Jews are a stronger nation, mighty in number, ready to enter the land of Israel. The census served to say “todah rabbah” (thank You very much) to God.

Nachmanides adds that every person, regardless of status in society, had to pass by Moses and Aaron to be counted separately. In most countries, when a census is taken, there is a great danger that the very people the census is supposed to benefit become mere numbers. As individuals, their identity is secondary. They are "numbers, not names." But in the Torah census, the emphasis is on every individual; each is unique and irreplaceable – as it states, "se'u et rosh" (Numbers 1:2). Homiletically, this could teach us to count each rosh (head), each person, looking into each one's eyes because each is the world.

Finally and pragmatically, Nachmanides says, since the Jews were preparing to enter the land of Israel, it was important to know how many soldiers were available for impending war. While God helps, no nation should rely on miracles; proper military preparations were necessary. Thus, the Torah states, "From twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to war [yotzei tzava] in Israel" (Numbers 1:3).

While the biblical term tzava is normatively associated with the army, it can be understood more broadly as meaning hosts or emissaries of God, whose mission is to serve society. Indeed, on another occasion, the Torah uses the phrase ba la'tzava (4:3). Yotzei tzava refers to the army of combatants who go out into the field to battle. Ba la'tzava, literally "who come to service," refers to those who remain in place, serving the community – giving to the infirm, the poor, the elderly and all in need.

From my perspective, upon finishing high school, everyone should be subject to a "draft." Those who wish can be yotzei tzava and join the military. Others may choose ba la'tzava, to serve in other ways, to give back to the community that has given them so much.

Being part of the tzava not only contributes to society at large but ennobles and refines the character of a nation's youth, turning them into better citizens: an "army of givers." ©2022 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 AVI SHAFRAN**

## Cross-Currents

**W**e read parshas Bamidbar (Bimidbar, if one wants to be didactic) on the Shabbos before Shavuos. The meaning of that juxtaposition might lie in the word by which the parsha is known (however one chooses to render it).

Rav Yisrael Salanter saw a trenchant message in the fact that Shavuos, unlike Pesach and Sukkos, has no set date. Tied as it is to the beginning of the Omer count on the second day of Pesach, its 50th day - at least when Rosh Chodesh was dependent on the sighting of new moons -- could have fallen on the 5th,

6th or 7th day of Sivan.

Rav Yisrael explained that since we know that Shavuos is zman mattan Toraseinu (note zman, not yom, as the holiday may not fall on the date of Sivan on which the Torah was actually given), its lack of an identifiable set day telegraphs the idea that Torah is unbounded by time. On a simple level, that means it applies fully in every "modern" era; on a deeper one, that it transcends time itself, as per Chazal's statement that it was the blueprint of the universe that Hashem, so to speak, used to create creation.

A parallel message, about space, may inhere in the desert, a "no-place," being the locus of Mattan Torah. Here, too, there is a simple idea, that Torah is not bound to any special place but rather applies in all places; and a deeper one, that it transcends space itself, which, like time, is in the end something created.

That time and space are not "givens" of the universe, but, rather part of what was created at bria ha'olam (aka the "Big Bang") is a commonplace today, although it wasn't always so, as philosophers maintained over centuries that there was never any "beginning" to the universe and that space is a fixed, eternal grid. ©2025 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

**RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON**

## Perceptions

**W**riter's block is a real thing for some. There are an infinite number of ideas in the world, and yet a writer can feel as if they have lost access to all of them. They can feel like a television once the network has gone off the air: just a lot of meaningless and annoying fuzz and buzz. Incredibly frustrating.

After writing over 115 books, thank God, I don't experience that. I have grown so confident that I won't do an outline for any of my books, and I have no problem coming up with chapters as I go along. One day I will feel like, "Well, I guess that's it," having no idea what to write next and feeling like a barren desert. And then, hours later I will see, hear, or experience something that says, "Hey, this will make a great book or next chapter," and feel as if the desert has miraculously bloomed. It's like a personal Har Sinai and Kabbalas HaTorah all over again!

I learned a long time ago not to take any credit for any of it. I am not the bestselling author I hoped to become, and I don't even know how many people enjoy what I write. Few people make a full living off writing books, and even fewer of writing Torah books. We remain the People of the Book even in the digital age, but it is usually very specific books that those "people" buy plenty of.

I do get the occasional comment to warm my heart and inspire my fingers. In this business, if you help even one person to get more out of life, dayainu. Honestly, I cannot fathom the top-selling secular books on Amazon already having 45,000 plus reader



responses within months. Even if millions buy their books, it is amazing that so many people are inspired to later come back and leave their feedback. Ten reader responses, for me, is already a lot, and that can take two years after publishing.

If you plan to make a full parnassah off of writing Jewish books, you had better get used to eating mann, because that's what it's like. With the exception of a few whose mazel is to succeed at their writing, most receive only a fraction of what they need to live off of, and even more only get a fraction of a fraction. But they also probably did not write their sefer to be safer financially, but instead to share their personal portion of Torah with others. Being able to do that is often reward enough for them...us.

Dedications make a big difference when you had to pay for printing costs, and even more so now that you can print on demand, especially through Amazon. That's a big advantage of a Torah book over a secular book: you can pay to be a part of it and earn merit in this world and the World to Come for doing so. And the author can end up with some money to survive long enough to write another book and share even more Torah.

But at the end of the writing day, all of that is second to one of the main merits of writing a Torah book, at least from my perspective. How many people will read them will be an ongoing issue, but later. Parnassah will be a consideration once published. But the magic of writing a Torah book is during the entire process, and it makes you feel rich even when you're not. It's about being in the zone, just not that one...even when writing a Torah book for children.

You feel like a conduit between God and the paper. It feels as if Torah insights mystically appear in your mind as you continue to write, as if drawn from some infinite but invisible spiritual well of knowledge. You feel elated and inspired as insight after insight courses through spiritual veins from your brain to your fingers. You feel so gifted because you can't help but feel that you are not responsible for any of it because you clearly are not.

Surprisingly, that feels better than living with the illusion that you are responsible for your accomplishments. There are other parts of my life where it is easy to be confused about that and only catch the mistake later, if at all. But in trying to understand Torah, and then share it with others, it is so much clearer that it only happens if God is the one making it happen, not you. Feel blessed if He chooses to work through you, very blessed.

Hence, the connection between the giving of Torah and the desert. It might have seemed more logical to have given such holy words of God in the holiest land in the world. But God didn't do that. Instead, He gave the holiest knowledge in one of the least holy places in the world, the desert.

Because, as the Gemora says, a desert symbolizes complete simplicity and humility, just like matzah. Even Har Sinai was the lowest of mountains in the area by Divine choice to teach us the most important lesson about receiving, learning, and transmitting Torah: DON'T GET IN THE WAY!

It's okay to have a lot of personality. Many people do. It's okay to be unique and do your own thing, your own way. It's just that, when it comes to working on behalf of God, you need to get out of the way. You need to make sure that your ego doesn't interfere with being a shaliach of Hashem, because the more ego you allow in, the more God you push out.

And at the end of the day, and really the end of our lives, the only meaningful things we'll take with us to the next world are all the times we were good shlichim for God. That's when we'll look back and see all the times we let ego get in our way of being a conduit for the light of God, and we'll regret each time.

The Torah is unlimited, an infinite wellspring of knowledge and wisdom. And all that stands between us and it, and all the incredible pleasure we can get from accessing it, is us, our egos. That's something we can work with. ©2025 Rabbi P. Winston and torah.org

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

### **Weekly Dvar**

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

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

