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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

On the face of it the connections between the sedra and haftarah of Bemidbar are slender. The first has to do with demography. Bemidbar begins with a census of the people. The haftarah begins with Hosea's vision of a time when "the number of the children of Israel will be like the sand on the sea-shore which cannot be measured or numbered." There was a time when the Israelites could be counted; the day will come when they will be countless. That is one contrast between the future and the past.

The second goes deeper. The sedra and the book that bears its name are called Bemidbar, "in the wilderness". The book is about the wilderness years in both a physical and spiritual sense: a time of wandering and internal conflict. Hosea, however, foresees a time when God will bring the people back to the desert and there enact a second honeymoon: I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her . . .There she will respond as in the days of her youth, As in the day she came out of Egypt.

What gives the haftarah its special resonance, however, is the fact that Bemidbar is always read on the Shabbat preceding Shavuot, the festival of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The fact that tradition chose this of all prophetic passages tells us something deeply moving about how the Jewish people understood this festival and about the Torah itself as the living connection between a people and God. The story of Hosea is one of the strangest of that great chain of visionaries we call the prophets. It is the story of a marriage. The prophet married a woman called Gomer. He was deeply in love with her. We can infer this, because of all the prophets, Hosea is the most eloquent and passionate on the subject of love. Gomer, however, proved faithless. She left home, had a series of lovers, was serially unfaithful, and was eventually forced to sell herself into slavery. Yet Hosea, caught between anger and tender longing, found that he could not relinquish his love for her.

In a flash of prophetic insight, God leads him to understand that his own personal experience mirrors that between God and the Israelites. He had rescued them from slavery, led them through the wilderness and brought them to their new home, the land of Israel. But the people proved faithless. They worshipped other gods. They were promiscuous in their spiritual attachments. By rights, says God, I should have abandoned them. I should have called them (as the prophet called his third child) Lo-ammi, "you are not My people". Yet God's love is inextinguishable. He too cannot let go. Whatever the people's sins, He will bring them back into the desert, scene of their first love, and their marriage will be renewed.

The Talmud in Pesachim gives an extraordinary account of the dialogue between God and Hosea – the unwritten story of the episode that precedes chapter 1 of the book of Hosea: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Hosea, "Your children have sinned." To this, the prophet should have replied, " – they are Your children, the children of your favoured ones, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Be merciful to them." Not only did he not say this, but he actually said, "Lord of the universe, the whole world is yours. Exchange them for another nation." The Holy One, blessed be He, said, "What shall I do with this old man? I will tell him to go and marry a prostitute and have children by her. Then I will tell him to send her away. If he can, then I too will send Israel away."

There are few more telling passages in the whole of rabbinic literature. If I were to summarise it, I would say: Who is a leader of the Jewish people? Only one who loves the Jewish people. Reading the prophetic literature, it is easy to see the prophets as social critics. They see the people's faults; they speak them aloud; their message is often a negative one, foretelling disaster. The Talmud is telling us that such a view is superficial and misses the essential point. The prophets loved their people. They spoke not out of condemnation but from the depths of deep desire. They knew that Israel was capable of, and had been summoned to, great things. They never criticised in order to distance themselves, to set themselves above and apart. They spoke in love – God's love. That is why, in Israel's darkest nights, the prophets always had a message of hope.

There is one verse in the haftarah so deep that it deserves special attention. God is telling the prophet about the time yet to come when He will bring His people

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back to the places they once visited, the desert where they first pledged their love, and there they will renew their relationship: In that day – declares the Lord – you will call Me 'my husband'; you will no longer call Me 'my master'.

The resonances of this sentence are impossible to capture in translation. The key words in Hebrew are Ish and Baal, and they both mean 'husband'. Hosea is telling us about two kinds of marital relationships – and two kinds of culture. One is signalled by the word Baal, which not only means 'husband' but is also the name of the Caananite god. Baal, one of the central figures in the pantheon of the ancient Near East, was the storm god of lightning and the fertility god who sends rain to impregnate the ground. He was the macho deity who represented sex and power on a cosmic scale.

Hosea, punning on the name, hints at the kind of world that emerges when you worship sex and power. It is a world without loyalties, where relationships are casual and people taken advantage of and then dropped. A marriage predicated on the word Baal is a relationship of male dominance in which women are used not loved, owned not honoured. The word Baal means, among other things, 'owner'.

Against this Hosea describes a different kind of relationship. Here his literary device is not pun but quotation. In using the word Ish to describe the relationship between God and His people, the prophet is evoking a verse at the beginning of Genesis – the words of the first man seeing the first woman: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called 'woman' for she was taken out of man."

Daringly, Hosea suggests that the making of woman from man mirrors the creation of humanity from God. First they are separated, then they are joined again, but now as two distinct persons each of whom respects the integrity of the other. What joins them is a new kind of relationship built on fidelity and trust.

How we understand the giving of the Torah depends on how we see the relationship between God and the people He chose to be His special witnesses on earth. Inevitably, the language of Judaism when it speaks of God is metaphorical. The Infinite cannot be compassed in finite categories. The metaphors the prophets use are many. God is, among other things, artist, creator, king, master, warrior, shepherd, judge, teacher, redeemer and father. From the point of view of God-as-king, the Torah is the code of laws He ordains for the people He rules. From the perspective of God-as-father-and-teacher, it represents the instructions He gives His children as to how they should best live. Adopting the image of artist-creator, Jewish mystics throughout the ages saw the Torah as the architecture of the universe, the deep structure of existence.

Of all the metaphors, however, the most lovely and most intimate was of God as husband, with Israel as His bride. Isaiah says: For your Maker is your husband, The Lord Almighty is his name . . . (54:5)

Likewise Jeremiah: 'Return, faithless people,' declares the Lord, 'for I am your husband.' (3:14)

This is how Ezekiel describes the marriage between God and Israel in the days of Moses: Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you — declares the Lord God – and you became mine. (16:8)

From this perspective, the Torah is more than a constitution and code of laws, more than a set of instructions or even the metaphysical DNA of the universe. It is a marriage contract – a token and gesture of love.

When attraction, that most fleeting of emotions, seeks to perpetuate itself as love, it takes the form of marriage: marriage as covenant, in which both parties pledge themselves to one another, to be loyal, steadfast, to stay together through difficult times as well as good and to achieve together what neither could do alone. A marriage is created not by force or coercion but by words – the word given, the word received, the word honoured in faithfulness and trust. There are such things as the laws of marriage (the respective responsibilities of husband and wife), but marriage of its essence is more than a dispassionate set of obligations and rights. It is law suffused with love, and love translated into law. That, according to this metaphor, is what the Sinai event was.

The supreme poet of marriage was Hosea. By reading this haftarah on the Shabbat before Shavuot, we make a momentous affirmation: that in giving the Torah to Israel, God was not asserting His power, dominance or lordship over Israel (what Hosea means when he uses the word ba'al). He was declaring His love. That is why it is no accident that the words with which the haftarah ends – among the most beautiful in the entire religious literature of mankind – are the words Jewish men recite every weekday morning as they wind the strap of the hand-tefillin like a wedding ring around their finger, renewing daily the marriage covenant of Sinai: I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice, love and compassion; I will betroth you to me in faithfulness, And you will know God.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"By their families, by their parents' houses." (Numbers 1:2) Early in the book of Numbers, the Torah records the first census in the history of the Jewish people: "Count the heads of the entire witness community of the children of Israel, by their families, by their parents' houses" (Numbers 1:2).

Certainly a census is a momentous event – not only as a profile of a nation's most important natural resource – its people – but also as a means of enhancing each national with a sense of pride in his newly acquired significance as a member of an important nation.

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

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

In contrast, Levi's other sons, Kehat (Numbers 4:2) and Merari (Numbers 4:27) are presented in the book of Numbers in a manner similar to the presentation of the rest of the tribes – first by their "families" and only afterwards by their "fathers' houses." Why should there be such a reversal in phraseology in the case of Levi and the children of Gershon?

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

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

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

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

In contrast, the children of Kehat were in charge of the much heavier items, such as the Menora and the Ark. In Bamidbar Rabba (5:1), we read the following description: "When the Jews were traveling, two sparks of flame came out from the two poles of the Ark of the Tablets of Law." The Kehatites volunteered to put their lives on the line and risk the fire in order to bear the Holy Ark. And their brothers the Merarites learned from their example, volunteering to transport the heaviest wood and metals. These children of Levi were anxious to be their own people, to establish their own yichus. As a result, the Torah counts them in accord with "their children and their parents' house" – themselves and their children coming first!

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

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

generations will trace their lineage back to me." *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bemidbar: Trials & Tribulations in Times of Transition, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase* at bit.ly/RiskinBemidbar. *© 2026 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"L

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 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. *© 2012 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 DAVID LEVIN

Yosef or Ephraim and Menashe

Sefer Bamidbar is called Numbers in English because it begins with a count of every man between the ages of twenty and sixty according to each tribe. Hashem instructed Moshe and Aharon to count each of the twelve tribes except the tribe of Levi. Still, the Torah wished to maintain the concept of twelve tribes, so the tribe of Yosef was counted as Ephraim and Menashe (Yosef's oldest two sons) separately. There are many other times in the Torah when the tribes are designated as twelve, including Levi; and in those cases Ephraim and Menashe are combined to form the tribe of Yosef. It is important to understand when Yosef is divided and when it is combined.

The first appearance of Ephraim and Menashe as separate parts of the tribe of Yosef occurs in the first book of the Torah, Bereishit (Genesis) just before the death of Ya'akov. Ya'akov called Yosef to his bedside and blessed Yosef's two sons with the blessing that: "And now, your two sons who were born to you in Egypt before my coming to you in Egypt shall be mine; Ephraim and Menashe shall be mine like Reuvein and Shimon. But progeny born to you after them shall be yours; they will be included under the name of their brothers with regard to their inheritance." Here, Ya'akov elevated Yosef's oldest two sons to the level of his own sons, taking the place of Yosef when delineating inheritance. This also kept the concept of twelve tribes inheriting the land even though the tribe of Levi would be excluded from inheritance of the land. This action gave the right of his firstborn to Yosef, even though he was the second to last son. (He was, however, the firstborn of Rachel.)

One could argue that the first mention of the twelve sons as tribes was in Bereishit when Ya'akov led his family down to Egypt. One could answer that the Torah is only mentioning the names of all of Ya'akov's family while not specifically referring to them as separate tribes. In the second book of the Torah, Sh'mot, the Jews were taken out of Egypt; and though the Midrash

explains that they traveled as separate tribes, there is no direct mention in the Torah of that arrangement. At no place does it describe that the tribes remained separated, even though various Midrashim speak of each tribe crossing the Red Sea in its own separate pathway. Throughout the second book of the Torah, individuals may have been mentioned as coming from an individual tribe, but at no point did the Torah discuss an individual tribe acting as a separate tribe. The only tribe mentioned for an action as a tribe was the tribe of Levi. This occurred after the sin of the Golden Calf, when the tribe of Levi rallied around Moshe to destroy those who had worshipped the Golden Calf. Only during two of the last parshiot of Sh'mot, Tetzaveh and Pekudei, are the tribes mentioned, but not for any action or commandment. Their names are written on the two stones holding up the apron worn by the Kohein Gadol, and they appear on the stones of the Urim V'Tumim, the breastplate of the Kohein Gadol. The Urim V'Tumim was used to judge the people.

In our parasha, Bamidbar, Hashem required a census of the B'nei Yisrael by tribes. This was not a complete census as this was only a count of the males between the ages of twenty and sixty, namely, men of fighting age. Not included in this census were women, children, elderly, and the tribe of Levi, since the tribe of Levi was not part of the army, but instead was serving Hashem in the Mishkan. Here we see that the count of the tribe of Yosef was separated into Ephraim and Menashe because Levi was not counted. There is also the discussion of where each of the tribes camped around the compound of the Mishkan. Once again Yosef was divided as Ephraim and Menashe because the tribe of Levi was in the camp which immediately surrounded the Mishkan. This created the three camps: (1) the Mishkan and its courtyard, (2) the camp of the Leviim (the three sub-tribes of Levi and the special camp of the Kohanim, Aharon, and Moshe, and (3) the camp of Yisrael, the twelve tribes with Ephraim and Menashe taking the place of Yosef. Here Yosef was divided since Levi was separated from the other tribes.

After the curses of Bilaam and the sins which followed because of the evil Midianite women, another count was made in Parashat Pinchas near the end of Sefer Bamidbar. The census was again done by tribe, but it also emphasized the major families of each tribe for the purpose of inheriting the land. Though the numbers of each tribe were listed, the division of each tribe by families indicated how the land of each tribe would be divided among the families listed within that tribe. After each family within a tribe received its portion, the land would be divided further into the members of the later generations. Once again, Yosef was first divided into Ephraim and Menashe before being divided into the families. This was because the tribe of Levi would receive no inheritance of land but would live within the cities of refuge and other designated cities within each tribe's lands.

In the fifth book of the Torah, Devarim, Moshe commanded the people to stand on Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival to listen to the blessings and curses called out to them by the Kohanim and Leviim from the valley between these mountains. Even though the Leviim were in the valley, the women, children, and elders of the tribe stood on the mountain. Once again, each tribe was mentioned by name so that each tribe could stand on the mountain to which it was assigned. Since the tribe of Levi was mentioned by name, the tribe of Yosef was not divided.

What, then, becomes the deciding factor for either leaving the tribe of Yosef under his name alone or dividing Yosef into Ephraim and Menashe? The fact that the entire tribe of Levi, the Kohanim and Leviim, gave their service to Hashem and His Temple disenfranchised them from inheriting fields, which they would have to cultivate and harvest, and from the army, which would take them away from their service. For other situations, like the stones on the Urim V'Tumim or listening to the blessings and curses from one of the mountains, Levi was included with his brothers as one of the twelve tribes. This service to Hashem combined with the lack of land required that a portion of the produce from each of the other tribes' fields be given to the tribe of Levi.

Today we suffer with no Temple, so the tribe of Levi does not serve Hashem in its special role. We do, however, maintain the gifts to the Leviim and Kohanim in hopes that the Temple will soon be rebuilt and the Leviim and Kohanim will resume their service to Hashem on our behalf.

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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 includes 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

"From twenty years of age and up, all who go out to war, count them for the army, you and Aharon." (Vayikra 22:23) Hashem directed Moshe to take a census of the men from the age of twenty and up, those who could serve in the army. Rashi says we learn from this that one doesn't serve in the military until he is twenty years old.

Now, it doesn't specifically say that they all served in the army, just that this was the age of service. That's because it wasn't the number of soldiers Hashem wanted them to survey, but the number of people who COULD have been soldiers. But why twenty? Even if it is the age of adulthood for whatever reason, why connect that to military service?

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos gives different ages of a person's life. Five years old for learning chumash, ten for learning Mishna, thirteen for mitzvos, fifteen to learn Gemara, eighteen for marriage, and so on. For twenty, it is the age of "pursuit." R' Ovadia Bartenura, a preeminent commentator on the Mishna, explains that once a person has learned Torah (according to the Mishna's schedule), married, and now has a family to support, he begins to pursue a livelihood to support them.

He then offers a second explanation, that the fellow is now "pursued" by Heaven, because we know from Chazal that a person is not punished for their sins by Heaven until the age of twenty. Once he reaches this age, and is liable for transgressions, the Heavenly Court can begin to pursue him for punishment. These seem to be very different explanations, but perhaps they can help us understand why twenty is the age for military duty.

Though technically a Jewish male is a "man" at the age of thirteen, there is a level of maturity still lacking in the teenage years, when a person is concerned with himself, his own growth physically and in knowledge, including finding a wife. Once he reaches twenty, he begins to go outside himself and think of others. Then, he is ready to fight in the army for others. One cannot be selfish in the army. He must follow orders and work together with his comrades, keeping their wellbeing in mind also.

And there is more. At twenty years old, Heaven treats him as an adult and he is responsible for his actions. This is meaningful because he now becomes more aware that there are consequences for what he does, and he also knows to Whom he must reach out when he's in a tough spot. Hashem told Moshe, "Count the men who are able to go to the army, so they realize that they have reached a new level, and that what they do, counts."

This counting had no upward limit imposed, and as the Ramban points out, the word for army can also mean community. These people – as all of us - are part of something larger than themselves, and that never changes.

About a hundred years ago, a mother in a small European village finished doling out the meager bowls of soup which were all her family could afford. Just then, there was a knock on the door. A poor(er) man entered and asked for something to eat.

Before she could reply that they had nothing, one of the children escorted the man to the table and gave him his own portion. The man gratefully ate and left with blessings for the family for their kindness. When he had gone, the mother asked her son, "You know I have no more soup to give you. Why would you give it away?"

"If I had eaten the soup," replied the boy, "what memory would there be of it in two hours? I'd be hungry again anyway and the soup would be gone forever. Now, the mitzvah I did with that soup will live on forever and never be forgotten." © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Just this week a rabbi was telling me of a conversation he had with a woman who was contemplating conversion to Judaism. His initial response to her was, "Why? Do you have a special affinity for laws and lots of strict rules?"

As discussed in prior editions, although there is a special reverence within Jewish law for those who convert, there is no embedded ideology of initiating membership drives for new recruits. In fact, it is quite the opposite; the protocol has always been to do what can be done to discourage those interested in converting to Judaism.

There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is that Judaism is basically the only religion that believes that a person doesn't have to be a member of said religion to earn a share in the World-to-Come. According to Jewish law (and codified by Maimonides) non-Jews can also earn themselves a place in heaven.

Because of this, Jews do not have an obligation to "save" others.

But it is very telling that a perceived negative of adopting Judaism would be the plethora of laws associated with it. This is not surprising; I have heard some version of this very same sentiment many times -- from Orthodox Jews who feel repressed (particularly adolescents and young adults), and sidelong comments from community members ("I cannot believe that so-and-so became Jewish/religious -- all those rules! Don't they know how hard it is to be a Jew?").

Much of the wisdom of the Torah has been distilled into principles of life and ethical behavior and compiled by our sages in the work known as Pirkei Avot -- Ethics of our Fathers. This manual for living a meaningful and principled life was completed about two thousand years ago and the wisdom contained within is quite timeless. Pirkei Avot is part of the Torah known as Mishna, which forms much of the basis of the "Oral Law."

Regarding our current discussion, we find a rather enigmatic teaching in Pirkei Avot, "There is no one freer than one who occupies himself with the study of Torah" (6:2).

At first blush, this statement seems to contradict our intuitive understanding of what it means to follow all the laws of the Torah, as discussed above. In fact, a person who studies the Torah regularly and does his best to keep its commandments is known as an eved Hashem -- a servant of the Almighty. Servitude does not sound like any sort of freedom!

We find a fundamental truth -- one that is a foundational pillar of Judaism -- in every stratum of Jewish texts and philosophical thought. It appears in the Mishna, the Talmud, the Midrash, and in Jewish mysticism:

"The Holy One, Blessed be He, looked into the Torah and created the world" (Bereishis Rabbah 1:1, Zohar Terumah 161a-161b). Likewise, we find in Pirkei Avot mention of the special love that was shown to the Jewish people: "for they were given the instrument (i.e. the holy Torah) from which the world was created" (3:14).

What the Mishna, Midrash, Zohar, and many other sources are referring to is the fact that the Torah is the blueprint for the creation of the world. What this means is that the Torah is the articulation of the will of the Almighty and the ultimate expression of His desire to bring everything into creation. The Almighty, as it were, peered into the Torah to construct the world and all its components.

This is extremely important for many reasons, not the least of which is that it means everything in creation is part of a single entity; a unity. Every single component is a part of a greater whole. This is because everything in creation is really just an expression of the will of the Almighty, Who is the very definition of a unified whole, and everything in creation is an expression of that coherence.

Even when something is perceived as evil -- such as the Angel of Death -- it is simply part of a system set up by the Almighty and is just playing the role for which it was created. Because everything in existence is an articulation of the will of the Almighty and His overarching "oneness," everything in creation has a proper place and reason for its existence.

This is also true of emotions. Emotions like anger and jealousy cannot be viewed as inherently "evil." In the Torah and subsequent classical commentaries, we find that there is a time and place for everything; even emotions like anger, hate, and jealousy are essentially powerful tools that become destructive only when misaligned with truth or used for ego-driven purposes.

However, when these emotions are channeled toward a constructive or holy end, they are an essential component of bringing the world back into realignment. Some examples of this are: Pinchas who was jealous for the honor of the Almighty; Moses getting righteously angry by the sin of the Golden Calf and destroying the first set of the Ten Commandments; and all the places in the Torah where we are enjoined to hate evil and wickedness. There are many such examples throughout the scriptures.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, even "good" emotions and tendencies can be perverted and used in improper ways. A classic example of this is in this week's Torah portion when it mentions the two sons of Aaron:

"Nadav and Avihu died before God when they brought a strange (i.e. unauthorized) fire before Him in the Sinai desert, and they did not have children" (Bamidbar 3:4). However, Nadav and Avihu, according to the Talmud, were in many ways as great as Moses and Aaron. So why did they bring a "strange fire" to the Mishkan? What is the source of the temptation to even commit such a sin?

Additionally, the Torah's comment that Nadav and Avihu had no children appears to be a curious non sequitur in the account of the "strange fire" that cost them their lives. According to the Talmud, however, it is very much in place.

The Talmud derives from here that had they indeed had children then Nadav and Avihu would not have died. As a result, the Talmud concludes that a person who does not attempt to fulfill God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" is liable to the heavenly death penalty. (This means, of course, that they made no attempt to have children. In fact, they never married; had they been married and simply not been blessed with children, then they certainly would have been blameless.)

Still, this is very difficult to understand in light of the fact that the Torah explicitly identifies their sin as the act of bringing an unauthorized fire. How can the Talmud contend that they were given the death penalty because they did not attempt to have children?

Everyone has a desire to be a giver or benefactor. There is something internally compelling about being a giver (or being perceived as one) and we feel good when we give of ourselves to others. Nadav and Avihu did not wish to merely serve in the Tabernacle -- they wanted to make a contribution of their own to the service in the Tabernacle. They wanted to be benefactors. This was really about their own selfish desires.

Nadav and Avihu sought to fulfill this need in their relationship with the Almighty, a context in which it was highly improper. The natural drive to be a giver was thus channeled in an unhealthy and sinful way.

The Talmud is teaching us that the reason the Torah mentions the fact that they had no children was because it was a contributing factor in their deaths. If they had children of their own, then this internal drive to be a giver would have been satisfied and they would not have gone against the word of the Almighty by trying to be a benefactor to the service in the Tabernacle.

Amazingly, this is even reflected by their very names; the name Nadav itself means "benefactor," and the name Avihu is a contraction of the phrase "avi hu -- he is my father," referring to the epitome of a giver. As every father knows, fatherhood is permanent job of supporter -- in every sense of the word.

Thus, everything in creation -- from every iota of physical and metaphysical existence to every single concept, idea, and emotion -- is based on the blueprint of the Torah. Because the Torah is the expression of the will of the Almighty and a reflection of His unity, a person can only find his ultimate fulfillment by being a true servant of His will. In this way, we discover who we are and what role we are meant to play in the "oneness" of creation. It is only in following the Torah that we discover who we really are.

A person may selfishly think he needs pleasure, power, recognition, intimacy, escape, or control. But the Torah teaches him where those drives truly belong and how they are meant to be expressed. That is why Torah study is the first and highest obligation. Through Torah, a person can reach the point where he is not merely restraining desire, but transforming it. In this process he discovers a deeper and healthier fulfillment.

This is particularly important at this time of year because next week we celebrate the holiday of Shavuot -- the holiday celebrating when the Jewish people received the Torah. Upon receiving the Torah, the Jewish people agreed to accept the vision of the Almighty for the world as expressed in the Torah, and to be the caretakers of it and true servants of the Almighty.

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Reflections

The sefer of Bamidbar (or, to be pedantic, B'midar) begins with the word Vayidaber; and the Talmud Yerushalmi even calls the sefer by that latter word.

Both words, as it happens, share the same three-letter Hebrew root, d-v-r, even though one means "desert" and the other "speak."

What common element of meaning could associate a desert with speech?

The answer may lie in yet another word with the exact same three-letter root, a word that means something else entirely, it would seem. In Tehillim, we find the phrase yadber amim tachteinu (47:4), which can be translated "He will guide the nations under us." Although Rashi and the Targum on Tehillim take a different approach to the word yadber, the Gemara (Shabbos 63a) indeed understands the word to mean "guiding," and the context of the pasuk supports that understanding. The Radak and Ibn Ezra also translate it that way.

Speaking (especially the sort of speech with which the word dibbur is associated: clear, strong words) guides the one spoken to in a particular direction, to hearing the meaning or directive of the speaker. So it isn't terribly farfetched to imagine that yadber and vayidaber are subtly related.

Midbar, though, would seem a puzzle.

What occurs is that a midbar is a desolate, featureless place, usually dangerous, for lack of food and water, and the presence of snakes and such. But the challenges and dangers may not be what inheres in the word midbar; certainly, the desert through which the Jews were wandering lacked those threats; the well of Miriam, the mun and the cloud of protection made it a safe place.

But it remained one without distractions, and was the path, if a convoluted one, leading the people, guiding them, to their goal, Eretz Yisrael.

Might the word midbar's essential meaning reflect neither desolation nor danger, but, rather, the idea of an open, featureless, path leading to a goal beyond it, toward which one is being guided?

And, even in our own lives, might obscuring the distractions around and within us help us perceive where we are supposed to go?