

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

**J**ust beneath the surface of this week's parshah is an exceptionally poignant story. It occurs in the context of Moses' prayer that God appoint a successor as leader of the Jewish people.

One hint is given in the words of God to Moses: "After you have seen you also will be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was." Rashi is intrigued by the apparently superfluous word "also", and makes the comment that "Moses desired to die as Aaron had died."

In what sense was Moses envious of his brother? Was it that he, like Aaron, wished to die painlessly? Surely not. Moses was not afraid of pain. Was it that he envied his brother's popularity? Of Aaron, it was said that when he died, he was mourned by "all the children of Israel", something the Torah does not say in the case of Moses. This too cannot be the answer. Moses knew that leadership does not mean popularity. He did not seek it. He could not have done what he had to do and achieve it.

The Ktav Sofer gives what is surely the correct interpretation: Aaron had the privilege of knowing that his children would follow in his footsteps. Elazar, his son, was appointed as high priest in his lifetime. Indeed to this day kohanim are direct descendants of Aaron. Accordingly to Ktav Sofer, Moses longed to see one of his sons, Gershom or Eliezer, take his place as leader of the people. It was not to be.

Rashi arrives at the same conclusion by noting a second clue. The passage in which Moses asks God to appoint a successor follows directly after the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, who asked that they be permitted to inherit the share in the land of Israel that would have gone to their father, had he not died. Rashi links the two episodes: "When Moses heard God tell him to give the inheritance of Zelophehad to his daughters, he said to himself, 'The time has come that I should make a request of my own -- that my sons should inherit my position.' God replied to him, 'This is not what I have decided. Joshua deserves to receive reward for serving you and never leaving your tent.' This is what Solomon meant when he said, 'He keeps the vineyard shall eat its fruit and he that waits on his master shall be honoured.'" Moses' prayer was not granted.

Thus, with their ears attuned to every nuance, the sages and Rashi reconstructed a narrative that lies

just beneath the surface of the biblical text. What happened to Moses children? Was he, the great leader, inwardly disappointed that they did not inherit his role? What deeper message does the text communicate to us? Is there something of continuing relevance in Moses disappointment? Did God in any way provide him with consolation?

Moses and Aaron epitomise the two great roles in Jewish continuity -- horim and morim -- parents and teachers. A parent hands on the Jewish heritage to his or her children; a teacher does likewise to his or her disciples. Aaron was the archetypal parent; Moses the great example of a teacher (to this day we call him Moshe Rabbenu, 'Moses our teacher'). Aaron was succeeded by his son; Moses by his disciple Joshua.

The sages at various points emphasised that Torah leadership does not pass automatically across the generations. The Talmud (Nedarim 81a) states: "Be careful not to neglect the children of the poor, for from them Torah goes forth, as it is written, 'the water shall flow out of his buckets', meaning 'from the poor among them' goes forth Torah. And why is it not usual for scholars to give birth to children who are scholars? Rabbi Joseph said, that it might not be said that Torah is their legacy. Rabbi Shisha son of Rabbi Idi said, that they should not be arrogant towards the community. Mar Zutra said, because they act high-handedly towards the community."

Were Torah leadership to be dynastic, a matter of inheritance, Judaism would quickly become a society of privilege and hierarchy. To this, the sages were utterly opposed. Everyone has a share in Torah. It is the shared patrimony of every Jew. Nowhere is this more clearly stated than in the great words of Maimonides: "With three crowns was Israel crowned -- with the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of sovereignty. The crown of priesthood was bestowed on Aaron... The crown of sovereignty was given to David... The crown of Torah, however, is for all Israel, as it is said, 'Moses commanded us the Torah, as an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.' Whoever desires it can win it. Do not suppose that the other two crowns are greater than the crown of Torah, for it is said, 'By me kings reign and princes decree justice. By me, princes rule.' Hence we learn the crown of Torah is greater than the other two crowns."

This is one of the great egalitarian statements in Judaism. The crown of Torah is available to whoever

seeks it. There have been societies which sought to create equality by evenly distributing power or wealth. None succeeded fully. The Jewish approach was different. A society of equal dignity is one in which knowledge -- the most important kind of knowledge, namely Torah, knowledge of how to live -- is available equally to all. From earliest times to today, the Jewish people has been a series of communities built around schools, sustained by communal funds so that none should be excluded.

The sages drew a strong connection between home and school, parent and teacher. Thus, for example, Maimonides rules: "A duty rests on every scholar in Israel to teach all disciples who seek instruction from him, even if they are not his children, as it is said, 'And you shall teach them diligently to your children'. According to traditional authority, the term 'your children' includes disciples, for disciples are called children, as it is said, 'And the sons of the prophets came forth' (II Kings 2:3)."

In the same vein he writes elsewhere: "Just as a person is commanded to honour and revere his father, so he is under an obligation to honour and revere his teacher, even to a greater extent than his father, for his father gave him life in this world, while his teacher who instructs him in wisdom secures for him life in the world to come."

The connection runs in the opposite direction also. Consistently throughout the Mosaic books, the role of a parent is defined in terms of teaching and instruction. "You shall teach these things diligently to your children." "It shall come to pass that when your child asks you... thus shall you say to him." Education is a conversation across the generations, between parent and child. In the one verse in which the Bible explains why Abraham was chosen as the father of a new faith it says, "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just". Abraham was chosen to be both a parent and an educator.

Moses was therefore denied the chance to see his children inherit his role, so that his personal disappointment would become a source of hope to future generations. Torah leadership is not the prerogative of an elite. It does not pass through dynastic succession. It is not confined to those descended from great scholars. It is open to each of us, if we will it and give it our best efforts of energy and time. But at the same time, Moses was given a great consolation. Just as, to this day, cohanim are the sons of Aaron, so are all who study Torah the disciples of Moses. To some are given the privilege of being a parent; to others, that of being a teacher. Both are ways in which something of us lives on into the future. Parent-as-teacher, teacher-as-parent: these are Judaism's greatest roles, one immortalised in Aaron, the other made eternal in Moses. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l* © 2026 The

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**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

“Do battle against the Midianites and smite them. They are your enemies because of the plot which they plotted against you concerning the matter of Peor and the matter of Kozbi the daughter of the Prince of Midian.” (Numbers 25:17–18) Why was Kozbi killed? Was it because of her immoral sexual seduction of an Israelite or because she and her Midianite clan worshipped the idol Peor? Rashi (ad loc.) is aware of the textual problem, and suggests that the end-goal of the Midianites, and the reason for which they sent their daughters to tempt the Israeli men, was to get the Israelites to worship Peor. And there seems to be a strong linkage between blatant sexual immorality between Jew and gentile, and Peor as the Mother of all idolatries; but what exactly is the nature of the transgression on the table, sexual immorality between Jew and gentile or the Peor idolatry?

A careful reading of the biblical account of Pinchas's act clearly emphasizes a seeming confusion concerning the nature of the transgression, or a fusion of two transgressions which are intermingled. In the previous Torah reading, the introduction to the story of public cohabitation begins: "And the Israelites dwelt in Shittim, and began to whore after the daughters of Moab. And it happened that the Israelite nation served their idols...and Israel became joined to Ba'al Peor; the anger of God waxed hot against Israel." (Numbers 25:1–3)

Again, what was the sin? Was it whoring, or the idolatry of Peor?

And finally, this same seeming confusion appears in our rabbinic commentaries. Bileam is identified as "ben Beor" (Numbers 22:5) which might be identified with Peor, son of the idol Peor, and when the narrative continues to describe how "Balak took Bileam to the top of Mount Peor" (Numbers 23:28), Rashi comments, "Balak was a great magician, and he saw that the Israelites would eventually be punished because of Peor," which apparently applies to idolatry. However, when the Talmud attempts to describe the evil counsel which Bileam offered the nations who wished to vanquish Israel, the picture presented is one of sexual seduction by the young, nubile, gentile women (Sanhedrin 106a).

And so, we must ask the fundamental question: was the more heinous crime the sexual immorality or the worship of Peor? And what is the real transgression of this idolatry? The answer becomes clear when we attempt to understand the nature of Peor worship. The Mishna in tractate Sanhedrin teaches that Peor was worshipped by defecating in front of him – hardly the kind of appetizing religious cult which one would think would attract masses of adherents. But apparently Peor was very popular, at least with Midian and Moab. And I would

suggest that the means of serving Peor provides a blatantly antithetical message to everything Judaism stands for and is attempting to teach the world. Yes, defecation is a perfectly normal human function, and the individual who relieves himself feels relieved! Hence, that is how god is to be served! Do whatever is natural to do, do whatever makes you feel good, "Let it all hang out"; if this is your nature, if the act is natural for you to do, then it becomes correct to express it, and thereby to express yourself.

Is this not merely a re-statement – or cultural precursor – of much of contemporary, post-modern thought, of Norman O. Brown's *Eros and Civilization* and Herbert Marcuse's attitude toward life?! Discipline has become the "hobgoblin of little minds," and self-expression takes precedence over duty to family, to country, and to ideal. It is a ramification of Korah's "we are all holy" as is, without the necessity of sacrifice and striving, and a precursor of post-modernism, that there are no absolutes with regard to morality or to what is proper or improper conduct. Everyone has the right to his or her feelings, and everyone is right from his or her point of view. Ethics are "situational," dependent upon one's situation, and every individual is a genius when it comes to justifying the realization of his desires in his subjective situation.

This is a far cry from Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* which presumes the price of limiting one's desires in order to form a civil society; it is the very antithesis of the biblical directive (at the predawn of human history in the Garden of Eden) for self-control and self-limitation – not eating forbidden fruit and not defining good and evil based on one's subjective drives. Peor denies absolute morality. For Peor, human is no different from animal; he is a creature of instinct, who may defecate publicly just as animals defecate publicly, and he has no innate responsibility – not before God and not before any other being.

What was the greater crime, worshipping Peor or indulging in public fornication? They are one and the same. Peor teaches that if one feels like fornicating one fornicates, when and with whom one wishes to do it. After all, sex has nothing to do with love and sanctity, and everything to do with a natural physical urge, much more in line with defecation than a sacred union.

From this perspective, the rabbinical voices like the Meiri were absolutely correct: idolatry has little to do with theology and much to do with the "disgusting, immoral practices" of those who follow the teachings of the likes of Peor. And Zimri ben Salou was not only expressing a desire; he was rebelling against Moses, against God, and against the very foundation of Torah. *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](http://bit.ly/RiskinBemidbar). © 2026 Ohr Torah*

*Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

**RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"l**

## Wein Online

**A** further count of the Jewish people is recorded for us in this week's parsha. Though the numbers match almost exactly to the count that was reported at the beginning of the book of Bamidbar, the Torah nevertheless goes through it again with precision. All of the commentators to the Torah have struggled to find meaning in this counting of Israel once again.

Equally troubling is the fact that over the decades of Israel's sojourn in the desert, no material change in the amount occurred. It seems that the Torah, early on, wished to inform us of the few in number that would characterize the Jewish people throughout its millennia long history.

The Jewish people, have yet to make up the numbers it lost during the Holocaust. The count in this week's parsha illustrates the struggle of the Jewish people to survive demographically. God promised us that we would be the smallest in numbers of all peoples and at the same time He ordained us to build families and guarantee our existence demographically from one generation to the next.

The low birth rate and the high number of intermarriages among many sections of Jewish society are harmful to our continued existence. Yet the high birth rate and demographic growth within the religiously observant Jewish communities in Israel and worldwide offer us a window of hope and optimism. The simple truth is that Judaism cannot survive without there being Jews. Our task is to provide those necessary individual Jews to the Jewish nation as a whole.

The Torah counts people. Except for the necessary public accounting of the wealth collected and spent on the Mishkan construction and its artifacts, and the priestly vestments, we do not find another detailed count of money or wealth in the Torah. People are the most important items in Jewish life. And even people are never counted directly – only indirectly through coins, sheep, etc. – for what number can truly encompass the value and quality of an individual person.

There is a tendency in the world to count wealth, to see wealth as the most important commodity in national or personal lives. I recall that as a rabbi in Miami Beach decades ago I witnessed hundreds of retired people queuing up in front of the local banks four times a year to have their interest dividend recorded in their savings account passbook.

As is usual, there were people who pushed and shoved and attempted to force their way to the head of the line. People were expendable to these pushers and shovers - the physical count of money, which their savings passbook represented to them, prevailed over simple basic human consideration for other people.

Not so in the view of the Torah. For us, people

count the most. From the Torah's repetitive in counting of the Jewish people, we become aware that people, for us, are truly the most precious commodity. With this in mind we certainly should strive to act accordingly, based upon the values that the Torah has implanted within the Jewish people over the ages. © 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

## **Naming Names**

**O**ur Rabbis tell us that one of the worst sins is to embarrass someone in public. Even if the embarrassment only lasts a short time, the suffering caused by that embarrassment can have a long-lasting effect on an individual and his family. Even when a person is required to rebuke his neighbor in order to elicit teshuvah, a change in his behavior, the rebuke should be done in private if possible. Even when a person must be punished, the Torah often will not disclose the name of the sinner unless it is important to the event which took place. We see this clearly earlier in the Torah with the various sins attributed to Datan and Aviram. The Midrash identifies them as the two Jewish men whom Moshe stopped from fighting in Egypt, as those who complained at the Red Sea that Hashem would bury them at the Sea instead of in Egypt because there was a shortage of empty graves in Egypt, and as those who set out Manna on Shabbat to make it appear that Moshe was creating laws instead of receiving them from Hashem. Yet in each of these cases, their names were not stated. Only when their actions reached the stage of rebellion and arrogance did the Torah state their names. The same was true of the man who gathered sticks on Shabbat even after being warned that this was against Hashem's laws. His name was never stated in the Torah though it is implied to be Tzelaphchad when his daughters wished to claim his inheritance.

Our Rabbis ask why, if this caution against embarrassment is so strong, did the Torah this week disclose what was kept silent last week. At the end of last week's parasha, we learned that the B'nei Yisrael were enticed by the daughters of Moav to perform acts of worshipping other gods. "A Man of the Children of Israel came and brought the Midianite woman near to his brothers before the eyes of Moshe and before the eyes of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel; and they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." According to our premise, it was appropriate that these two names should not be divulged. Yet in this week's parasha, we find that Hashem did divulge their names. Hashem praised Pinchas and rewarded him with being elevated to become a full Kohein. Afterwards, for no apparent reason, Hashem divulged the names of the two

sinners: "The name of the slain Israelite man, who was slain with the Midianite woman was Zimri, the son of Salu, prince of a father's house of the Shimonites. And the name of the slain Midianite woman was Cozbi, daughter of Zur; he was a head of peoples, of a father's house in Midian."

While we may understand the purpose of not naming them in last week's parasha and the purpose of naming them in this week's parasha, we must ask what compelled Hashem to appear as if He changed His mind. HaAmek Davar explains that it was important to know that Pinchas had placed himself in danger from the entire tribe of Shimon because he struck the leader of that tribe. According to HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin, Zimri's real name was Shlumiel ben Tzurishadai. When he started to question Hashem, his name was changed to Shaol (ask) the son of the Canaanite woman. When he openly rebelled, he became Zimri. In spite of the danger involved, Pinchas understood that he had to act immediately to prevent an even greater disaster falling upon the Jewish People. Normally, a person who committed this sin would have already been warned, captured, and brought to trial. If the courts determined that the death penalty was justified, the courts would determine the exact context of the sin to know which of the four death penalties applied. They would then carry out that punishment, with the witnesses of the sin participating in the administration of that punishment. All of this would have taken several days. Pinchas could have been punished for not following this procedure, in which case, his actions were equivalent to murder and punishable with death. But Pinchas also understood that he could not wait; Hashem had already begun a plague on the nation for worshipping other gods. Pinchas' zealous actions saved many from death, even though twenty-four thousand people perished from their behavior.

The killing of Cozbi, the daughter of Tzur, brings about another set of questions. The Ramban explains that the Midianites had encouraged the daughters of Moav to prostitute themselves in order to lure the B'nei Yisrael to worship Baal-Peor. Yet here was a Midianite princess participating in this lewd behavior. This placed Pinchas in danger of being attacked by the Midian and Moav. That is why Hashem instructed Moshe to "antagonize the Midianites and smite them." HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the Midianites had to be slain because they "still continue to employ the seductive arts which they have already exercised with only too great success against you. In this they differ from the Moabites, who after they had once succeeded in bringing trouble and corruption and death to you, ceased from further attempts." The Midianites continued to demonstrate their hatred of the Jews, but now with a renewed purpose of revenge for Cozbi's death at the hands of a Jew. One must keep in mind that Moshe's father-in-law was Yitro, a Priest of Midian. This meant

that Moshe would be required to fight against his in-laws' families. We are also told that the command to smite the Midianites was because "they conspired against you over the matter of Peor and over the matter of Cozbi, daughter of a prince of Midian." Cozbi was worthy of the death penalty, not because of her prostitution, but because of her enticing others to worship Baal-Peor.

Abarbanel asks a different question concerning Pinchas and his actions. Was Pinchas forced to act zealously because Cozbi and Zimri cohabited in public, or was he prompted by the fact that this cohabitation occurred at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, thus insulting Hashem by their actions? Pinchas was also not yet a "Kohein," as he was too young when the Kohanim were invested with their responsibilities. But now Hashem raised him to the rank of a Priest because his act served as an atonement for their sins, and as a Priest, he would continue to serve to bring about the atonement of others. Still, Pinchas could have been eliminated from the Priesthood because he acted zealously and committed murder. It was only through Hashem's intervention that the people understood that Hashem would have killed Cozbi and Zimri had Pinchas not acted so quickly.

Zealotry is not an option that we have a right to choose today. Pinchas was a Tzaddik and knew all the halachic options before he acted. His decision could have endangered him and his fellow Jews, but Hashem understood and protected him. While we may not act zealously in this manner, may we be knowledgeable and willing to risk our lives to protect Hashem's honor. © 2026 Rabbi D. Levin

#### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

### Tishbi Will Answer

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

**S**ome say that Pinchas is the same person as Eliyahu Ha-navi (the prophet Elijah). We await his coming, as promised by the prophet Malachi, with great anticipation. Eliyahu will provide answers to all our questions, clarifying laws as well as facts. Thus, the word "teiku," sometimes found in the Talmud following an unresolved question, is understood in folk etymology as an acronym for "*Tishbi yetaretz kushiyot u'ba'ayot*" ("Eliyahu will resolve all questions and difficulties").

Here is an example of a law to be clarified. When collecting a debt, do we leave the debtor the items which he needs to support himself? After all, when people donate to the *Beit HaMikdash*, we take their needs into account. Does this apply to debts owed to people as well?

The Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 114a) records that this question was once answered by Eliyahu based on a *gezeirah shavah*. (By the way, his view was not accepted by all. Even those who chose to accept his view were not doing so because he was a prophet. As we know, the Torah is not in heaven, nor is a prophet permitted to

make new laws. Rather, Eliyahu was no less a Torah scholar than anyone else, and might have even been better than most.)

Here are some examples of facts with which Eliyahu will help us. He will clarify whether certain *terumah* has become impure, and the status of a piece of meat which was out of a Jew's sight. He will be able to adjudicate monetary disputes in which a rabbinic court could not reach a decision and the money was held in abeyance. These cases are all very specific.

Eliyahu will also clear up some general doubts found in rabbinic literature about how things work: Do people base a meal (*kovea seudah*) on wine in the same way that they do on bread? Would a dead person have allowed certain disrespect of his body on the part of his heirs? May we write *tefillin* on the skin of a kosher fish, or is it considered disgusting? To resolve these doubts, we will rely on the prophetic power of Eliyahu, whose arrival we eagerly await. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

#### RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

### Migdal Ohr

**"T**he name of the Israelite man, who was smitten with the Midianite woman, was Zimri ben Solu, chief of a father's house of the Tribe of Shimon." (Bamidbar 25:14) A careful reading of this and the next verse will yield an anomaly, in that there is a distinctive change in syntax when the Torah discusses the male and female participants in the horrific sin which Pinchas ended. Here it refers first to the nationality, then the gender, and then gives the name of Zimri. In the next posuk, it says her gender, then her nationality, then gives the name Cozbi.

It also repeats the word smitten twice by Zimri, but only once by Cozbi. The meforshim, including the Ohr HaChaim and the Kli Yakar discuss these differences, and explain they are not random or without meaning.

In essence, everyone has both a personal and a national identity. However, for the Jew, the national identity takes precedence. Their existence as a part of the Jewish People is overriding to their existence as an individual. Their behavior, therefore, must reflect this basic difference. Being true to yourself means being true to who you are as part of the Jewish People, and only then following what you believe to be your personal "truth."

Zimri's sin was categorically different than Cozbi's. She had the right to choose her own behavior. The fact that she came from an aristocratic family only highlighted the hatred Midian had for the Jews, that they would allow an individual of lofty status to be the catalyst to bring the Jews to sin. But she was a solitary woman, doing what she wanted.

Zimri, however, defied his own status with his act. He did not act as a Jewish man, thereby denying his

essence, a product of his proximity to Cozbi. But though he did this, he was not able to completely eradicate his status. After the sin was over and atoned for by his death, the Torah tells us, "He was an Israelite man." Chazal tell us, (Sanhedrin 44a) "Chata Yisrael: af al pi she'chata, Yisrael hu – a Jew, though he sins, is still a Jew."

The Jewish soul remains pure and untouched, even when it is caked with sin like so much mud. One cannot remove himself from his Jewish connection even though he makes bad choices. At the end, his soul, once cleansed through whatever means are necessary, will remain part of the Jewish People and of Hashem.

Even Zimri, who publicly desecrated Hashem's name, could not sever his connection with Klal Yisrael. His personal identity still took a backseat to his national one. So it is with each of us. We should try to live up to our roles as members of Klal Yisrael, because at the end of the day, that will never go away. We will remain beloved and necessary members of the royal family of Hashem, no matter how hard we try to abdicate.

*Rabbi Y.Y. Jacobson tells the moving story of the Seret-Vizhnitzer Rebbe, whose Friday-night tisch (a communal meal) was attended by a struggling young man. The boy had strayed from his Chasidic roots, but still returned on this Friday night to the table of the Rebbe.*

*When the Rebbe wished him, "Good Shabbos," the boy told him, "I drove here tonight, in a car." He did not expect what happened next. The Rebbe grabbed him and held him in a warm embrace. He said, (in Yiddish,) "My child, you can come here whenever you want, and however you want!"*

*People nearby were surprised that he didn't at least ask the boy not to drive there next time. But the Rebbe saw what they didn't see. He saw the boy was looking for proof that he didn't belong.*

*"I was sure he would tell me I was too far gone; that I'd cut myself off. Instead, he made me aware that it wasn't possible, and that I would always have a place at his tisch." © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr*

## **RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG**

### **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

Last week, while attending the wedding of a friend's son, I was approached by a devoted reader of this column who told me that he has been faithfully reading it for many years and that he really appreciates what I write. He then lowered his voice and said, "You don't actually write them, do you?" I answered that I most assuredly do, but that he is in good company. Over the past seven years, since I took over the writing responsibilities from my beloved friend Rabbi Packouz of blessed memory, I have been repeatedly asked who writes the weekly column. On at least four separate occasions I have been asked for the contact information of my ghost writer.

I then told him that I believed their thought process went something along the lines of, "I know that moron; there's no way he can put a cogent thought together much less string a series of sentences into a weekly column." He replied with a smile, "That's exactly what I was thinking!"

It reminded me of the time, many years ago, when I was asked by a very close friend if I played "negative tapes" in my mind. I had no idea what he was talking about so he explained that many people have a voice in their head that continually repeats in the background: "You're not smart enough. You're not good-looking enough. You're not ambitious enough."

I told him that, aside from it not being a very logical or effective way to live one's life, my overinflated ego was such that I never actually believed any of those things.

But what I failed to consider at the time was that the reason for my healthy emotional state was most likely due to the fact that I had been raised by extraordinary parents who focused on developing my strengths and constantly conveyed that they believed in me. This instilled me with a certain level of self-confidence and self-esteem (qualities that my wife would likely tell you are wholly unwarranted).

This reminds me of a teaching that I heard many years ago from my brilliant father. There is a Torah obligation to give constructive criticism (Leviticus 19:17) and he was giving a class on criticism and the proper way to go about dispensing it. He explained that it was crucial to learn how to give constructive criticism because the harm of saying something negative to someone is not momentary – it can last a lifetime.

Unfortunately, most people view themselves through the eyes of others – meaning their perception of what others think of them is how they actually see themselves (which is a terrible way to live). My father explained that when a person hears a negative comment about himself it may cause him to repeat it to himself over and over for years or even decades to come. Thus, one negative comment can reverberate thousands of times in a person's mind, which can be torturous. I understood that this is what my friend was referring to when he asked me if I played negative tapes in my head.

Navigating these turbulent waters can be very tricky. A young lawyer friend recounted the following incident that happened to him a few months ago.

"I accidentally hit 'reply all' on a firm-wide email. It wasn't even scandalous; I just sent 'Sounds good, thanks!' to eighty-five people who absolutely did not need to know that it sounded good to me. The moment I realized what I'd done, my heart dropped into my shoes. I didn't just close the laptop; I physically backed away from it like it was a live grenade. I spent the rest of the afternoon drafting an elaborate apology email in my head, and then I wasted an hour weighing the pros and cons of calling attention to my faux pas. I absentmindedly

started wondering if the witness protection program accepts people whose only crime is digital incompetence. When I checked my inbox six hours later – expecting a pitchfork mob – there were zero replies. Nobody cared. Which, somehow, managed to hurt my feelings in a completely different way.”

In this week’s Torah reading we find a very relevant lesson regarding self-worth and the importance of knowing who we truly are in order to have self-esteem.

“God said to Moses and Elazar the son of Aaron the priest; take a census of the entire congregation of Israel from twenty years and up according to their fathers’ house [...] The sons of Reuven: Chanoch, the family of the Chanochi to Pallu the Pallui family [...]” (Numbers 26:1-5).

In this week’s Torah portion, we find the Jewish people nearing the end of their forty years of wandering in the desert and on the cusp of entering the Land of Israel. The Almighty commands Moses and his nephew Elazar (who ascended to the position of High Priest after his father Aaron’s death) to conduct a new census of the Jewish people. This census came on the heels of the terrible plague that wiped out tens of thousands of Israelites.

The biblical commentator Rashi quotes a beautiful analogy from a teaching found in the Midrash Tanchuma on this week’s Torah reading. “Says the Midrash; ‘This can be compared to a shepherd who comes to discover that wolves have attacked his flock of sheep, so he carefully counts them to know the number of survivors.’ Likewise, the Almighty commands Moses to count the Jewish people – those who survived the plague.”

The people were counted by their families (“according to their fathers’ house”). The Midrash Rabbah (Shir HaShirim 4:12) explains that to all the family names, the Hebrew letter “ה – hay” was added as a prefix and the Hebrew letter “י – yud” was appended as a suffix. Thus, the family of Chanoch was referred to as “HaChanochi.”

The Midrash goes on to explain the reason for this. The Hebrew letters yud and hay comprise one of God’s names. What was the reason for the sudden attachment of God’s name to each and every family in the Jewish nation?

The reason for this change to their names, says the Midrash, is that the nations of the world mocked the purity of the Jewish lineage. They pointed out that the Egyptians, who had complete control of the Jewish men (whom they enslaved), must have surely violated the Jewish women. They therefore argued that many so-called Israelites were actually descendants of their Egyptian overlords.

Because of this the Almighty attached His name to the names of each and every one of the Jewish families in order to attest to the purity of their Jewish ancestry. However, this teaching requires further

clarification.

It is difficult to understand how adding two letters to the names of the Jewish families deflects the defamatory accusations of the other nations. After all, the Torah is part of the heritage of the Jewish people; it is hard to believe that other nations would take it as concrete proof that God Himself was affirming the purity of the Jewish lineage.

The only possible answer is that the Almighty didn’t really do it to deflect the claims of the nations of the world. Rather, this was done to assuage the insecurities of Israelites themselves.

At that time, the Jewish people were recovering from a plague that decimated a significant portion of the nation. This plague had come as a punishment for their involvement in licentious behavior and acts of depravity while consorting with the daughters of Midian (see Numbers 25:1-9). These transgressions seemed to indicate a presence of immoral character – the sort of character traits distinctly attributed to Egyptian nature and culture.

(In fact, the sages point out that the reason our forefather Abraham, who was traveling to Egypt due to a famine in the Land of Israel, wanted to hide his beautiful wife Sara from the Egyptians was because they were well-known for being depraved and would think nothing of snatching her away from him.)

Consequently, given that these immoral transgressions were committed by a large number of Israelites, it might have lent some credence to the notion that the allegations of the nations of the world were indeed true (i.e. that many Israelites were of Egyptian parentage). For this reason, the Almighty lent His holy name to the Jewish families to reassure them that they were of pure lineage.

But there is a much deeper lesson here.

One of the terrible outcomes of having poor self-esteem is that we mistakenly try to combat it and its debilitating effects by deflecting responsibility for mistakes we make. Consequently, we often ascribe our failings to issues that are beyond our control (such as parentage), when in truth we must own our mistakes and work to improve ourselves.

Perhaps the real lesson that we can learn from here is that God is lending His name to our lineage to tell us that our past is in His hands, but the present and future are in our own. At the end of the day, isn’t that the most empowering message of all? © 2026 Rabbi Y. Zweig & [shabbatshalom.org](http://shabbatshalom.org)

**SHLOMO KATZ**

**Hama'ayan**

**R'** Moshe Yehoshua Hager z"l (1916-2012; Vizhnitzer Rebbe) writes: With the month of Tammuz waning, the High Holidays are rapidly approaching. Indeed, "Tammuz" (Tav-Mem-Vav-Zayin) can be seen as an acronym of the Hebrew phrase,

"Z'manei Teshuvah Me'mashmishin U'va'in" / "The times for repentance are coming closer and closer." Therefore, now is the time to examine one's actions, cease any bad deeds, and increase one's good deeds.

The Vizhnitzer Rebbe continues: This is alluded to in our Parashah, in the verse (28:3), "And you shall say to them, 'This is the fire-offering that you are to offer to Hashem--male lambs in their first year, unblemished, two a day, as a continual elevation offering.'" The Gematria of the Hebrew words "Ve'amarta La'hem" / "And you shall say to them" equals the Gematria of "Atah" (Ayin-Tav-Heh) plus 248. Midrash Bereishit Rabbah says that the word "Atah" alludes to Teshuvah. [An explanation of this connection is beyond the scope of this space.] Thus, the verse is exhorting us to repent now in order to "repair" all 248 of our limbs. This Teshuvah should be done with Simchah / joy, out of both Yir'ah / fear or awe and Ahavah / love for Hashem. Indeed, the Hebrew word "Ha'isheh" (Heh-Aleph-Shin-Heh) / "the fire-offering" has the same Gematria as the initials of Simchah, Yir'ah, and Ahavah.

The Vizhnitzer Rebbe concludes: Know that repenting completely requires setting aside time to examine one's deeds. Otherwise, one cannot know for what to repent. Also, one must study works that teach Yir'ah in order to understand why one is in this world and to learn how to perfect his soul. (Yeshuot Moshe)

"Moshe did as Hashem had commanded him. He took Yehoshua and stood him before Elazar Ha'kohen and before the entire assembly. He leaned his hands upon him and commanded him, as Hashem had spoken through Moshe." (27:22-23) Midrash Yalkut Shimoni comments on the verse (Hoshea 11:1): "For Yisrael is a lad, and I loved him" -- Moshe said to Yehoshua: "This people that I am turning over to you are still kid goats. They are still infants, and you should not be too exacting with them, for even their Master is not exacting about their misdeeds. At the Yam Suf, they rebelled, and the angels said, 'They are rebelling, and You are silent?!' Hashem replied, 'They are but youth, and one cannot be too exacting with youth. Just as a baby is born dirty and is washed off, so it is with Yisrael.'" [Until here from the Midrash]

R' Yerachmiel Shulman z"l Hy"d (Menahel Ruchani of the Bet Yosef-Novardok Yeshiva in Pinsk, Poland; killed in the Holocaust) writes: Our Sages refer to the Generation of the Desert as the "Dor De'ah" / "Generation of Discernment." Nevertheless, Hashem judged them as if they were youth, whose ability to discern right from wrong is limited. In this vein, our Sages say, "A person cannot fully grasp what his teacher of Torah is imparting until 40 years have passed." Hashem tolerated Bnei Yisrael's misdeeds, because the Torah had not yet "settled in" and become a part of their reality; they were but "youth" when it came to living a Torah life in day-to-day practice.

R' Shulman continues: A parent's love for his child enables him to tolerate the hard work of raising that child. We read (Kohelet 3:11), "He has also put an Olam / enigma into their minds so that man cannot comprehend what Elokim has done from beginning to end." The word "Olam" can be read "Elem" / "youth." Hashem put the youth into their minds (and hearts) -- He caused parents to love their children so they will tolerate their mistakes.

This, concludes R' Shulman, is what Moshe told Yehoshua: Emulate Hashem's ways! When a wise person behaves in a way that is beneath him, think of him as a youth; then, you will be able to tolerate him and lead him gently. (Peninei Ha'shlaimut: Sha'ar Ha'savlanut 1:4)

"Therefore, say, 'Behold! I give him My covenant of peace.'" (25:12) Midrash Bemidbar Rabbah states: "Justice requires that Pinchas receive his reward." [Until here from the Midrash]

R' Shalom Mordechai Schwadron z"l (1835-1911; a leading Halachic authority in Galicia) writes: R' Yosef Albo z"l (Spain; 1380-1444) teaches that when Hashem judges man's sins, He judges based on man's level, as if to say, "What more could one expect from a lowly human?" In contrast, when He weighs man's good deeds, He does so from His own perspective, as if to say, "Look how man did the Will of the King of Kings!"

In light of this, writes R' Schwadron, we can understand the above Midrash as follows: "Justice requires that Pinchas receive his reward," i.e., Strict Justice would dictate that man be rewarded only on his own level. But, due to My Kindness, I reward man with eternal reward, a reward on My level. (Techelet Mordechai)

R' Eliezer Papo z"l (1785-1827; rabbi in Sarajevo, best known as author of Pele Yo'etz) explains the above Midrash as follows: We read (Devarim 6:25), "And it will be a Tzedakah for us if we are careful to perform this entire commandment before Hashem, our Elokim, as He commanded us." R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194-1270; Spain and Eretz Yisrael) explains that all reward we receive for our Mitzvot is "Tzedakah" / "charity," for we are Hashem's servants and we are obligated to serve Him, whether or not He would reward us. However, writes R' Papo, that is true only when we are doing only what we are commanded, as the quoted verse says: "As He commanded us." When Pinchas risked his life to save Bnei Yisrael from annihilation, he went well beyond what he was commanded to do. Therefore, "Justice requires that Pinchas receive his reward." (Elef Ha'magen) © 2021 S. Katz & torah.org

