

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Is our tradition set in stone, or is it open to whatever alteration the scholars desire to make? How legitimate is the claim that "Where there is a rabbinic will, there is a halachic way"? I believe two talmudic passages describing incidents in the life of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus help answer our questions.

Tractate Bava Metzia (59b) records a conflict between Rabbi Eliezer (the "cemented cistern who never loses a drop," according to Ethics of the Fathers) and the sages over whether or not a particular type of oven is subject to ritual impurity. Rabbi Eliezer brings three miracles to support his case, culminating in a "divine voice" which exclaims: "What do you want from My son Rabbi Eliezer? The Law is always in accordance with his view."

Nevertheless, the sages stand their ground. They argued that when Moses said the Torah "is not in heaven" (Deuteronomy 30:12); he meant it had been given to the scholars on earth to interpret. The Oral Law is determined by majority rule; hence the sages can overrule not only Rabbi Eliezer but even G-d Himself!

The Talmud goes on to record Elijah the Prophet's report of G-d's reaction: "The Almighty laughed and said, 'My children have defeated Me, My children have eternalized Me' (the Hebrew nitzhuni can mean both things).

This controversy must have had great significance. It took place after the destruction of the Second Temple, when the sages were reconstituting Judaism from a religion centred on sacrifices to one based around the home and the synagogue.

Rabbi Eliezer believed halachic change could only take place if there was precedent within the tradition itself. So he never stated a law which he had not heard from his teacher (B.T. Succa 37).

The majority of the scholars disagreed. They believed that with the 13 principles of hermeneutic logic communicated by G-d to Moses, they could plumb the depths of the Bible, explicating even the crowns on each letter, to interpret and apply the Law.

Seeing that Rabbi Eliezer was not budging, these sages placed a ban (herem) on him and sent Rabbi Akiva, his disciple, to inform Eliezer.

Hearing of the ban, Rabbi Eliezer cried out to G-d, and Rabban Gamliel, the head of the

delegitimizing Sanhedrin, died immediately as punishment. This talmudic passage closes with the words: "After the destruction of the Temple, all gates to G-d are closed except the claim of unfair treatment."

The second incident (B.T. Sanhedrin 68a) takes place when Rabbi Eliezer is critically ill. Since he is still under ban, when Rabbi Akiva and his friends come to visit, they stand at a distance of four cubits. "Why have you come?" he asks.

"We have come to study Torah from you," they reply.

"Why haven't you come until now?" he asks.

"We had no time," they lamely reply.

"You will not die natural deaths," he says.

Rabbi Eliezer then places his arms upon his heart. In deep anguish, he declares; "Woe unto you, my two arms, which are like two Torah scrolls which have been tied up.... Much Torah have I taught, but my students took from me less than can fit into an eye dropper..."

His erstwhile colleagues ask him about the halachic status of a particular shoe. He declares it "pure" and with that word his soul leaves his body. Rabbi Joshua rises to his feet and declares, "The ban has been lifted, the ban has been lifted."

In his eulogy, Rabbi Akiva cries out: "My father! My father! The chariot of Israel..." - the words of Elisha when Elijah was transported to heaven.

Somehow tradition and change must be orchestrated in such a fashion that Halacha never ossifies, but neither can it become totally malleable. This is the greatest challenge of our generation. © 2011 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The parsha of this week, and certain portions of this particular Chumash as a whole, deals with the counting of the people of Israel. The traditional Jewish commentators always saw the repeated counting of the Jewish people, that we see in the desert as recorded in the Torah and later in the Land of Israel as well, as a sign of love. People always count and check up on their important assets, whether familial, social or financial.

Everyone checks on their financial portfolios and so to speak counts their money. This is such an inborn natural trait that the halacha, when it wishes to

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describe the necessary attention and care due to the recitation of the words of our prayer services, compares this level of care "as though one was counting one's money coins."

Naturally, counting people is far different than counting money or other inanimate objects. Every human being is different than anyone else. Our fingerprints and DNA are unique to ourselves as are our opinions, thoughts, character traits and behavior patterns. It is therefore imperative that the Lord alone order and supervise the count of the Jewish people. A purely human count will not truly reveal the diversity and human qualities embedded in the cold numbers that jump from the printed page of the Chumash.

Perhaps this is the message that Jewish tradition tells us when it warns us humans not to count people coldly and statistically purely by number lest a plague of troubles follow such a count. Counting people as identical creatures and thinking of them in that fashion always brings about troubles and tragedies both in personal lives and in national Jewish life as well.

Much is made of the disparity in numbers between the individual tribes of Israel. Some of the tribes have a very large population while others are relatively small in number. While the simple surface explanations to this phenomenon have to do with demographic patterns within families and groups, the rabbis always searched for deeper spiritual and supernatural reasons for these disparities.

Much of this can be traced to the relative hardships that each of the individual tribes suffered during the centuries of Egyptian slavery and persecution. The tribe of Levi was pretty much exempted from the true horrors of Egyptian persecution-therefore, the blessing of the Torah that "the greater the persecution, the more those Jews became more numerous."

The tribe of Shimon still suffered from criticism of their behavior and their undue aggressiveness by their father regarding the incidents of Shechem and Yosef. Therefore their numbers were always small and the tribe itself as an independent entity practically ceased to exist after the Jewish people established themselves in the Land of Israel.

The blessings of Yaakov to Yosef and the favored position of Yosef and his rise to power vis a vis his brothers enabled the combined numbers of the

tribes of Menashe and Efrayim to far surpass those of any of the other tribes of Israel. Apparently many lessons and much guidance is tucked away within the seemingly dry numbers that are recorded in this week's parsha. © 2011 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

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

In English, the book we begin this week is called Numbers, for an obvious reason. It begins with a census, and there is a second count toward the end of the book. On this view, the central theme of the book is demography. The Israelites, still at Sinai at the beginning of the book, but on the brink of the Promised Land by its end, are now a sizeable nation, numbering 600,000 men of an age to embark on military service.

Within Jewish tradition however, it has become known as Bemidbar, "in the wilderness," suggesting a very different theme. The superficial reason for the name is that this is the first distinctive word in the book's opening verse. But the work of two anthropologists, Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, suggest a deeper possibility. The fact that Israel's formative experience was in the wilderness turns out to be highly significant. For it is there that the people experience one of the Torah's most revolutionary ideas, namely that an ideal society is one in which everyone has equal dignity under the sovereignty of G-d.

Van Gennep in his *The Rites of Passage* argued that societies develop rituals to mark the transition from one state to the next-from childhood to adulthood, for example, or from being single to being married-and they involve three stages. The first is separation, a symbolic break with the past. The third is incorporation, re-entering society with a new identity. Between the two is the crucial stage of transition when, having said goodbye to who you were but not yet hello to who you are about to become, you are recast, reborn, refashioned.

Van Gennep used the term liminal, from the Latin word for "threshold," to describe this second state when you are in a kind of no-man's-land between the old and the new. That is clearly what the wilderness signifies for Israel: liminal space between Egypt and the Promised Land. There Israel is reborn, no longer a group of escaping slaves but "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The desert-a no-man's-land with no settled populations, no cities, no civilizational order-is the place where Jacob's descendants, alone with G-d, cast off one identity and assume another.

This analysis helps us understand some of the details of the book of Exodus. The daubing of the doorposts with blood (Ex. 12:7) is part of the first, separation, stage during which the door through which

you walk as you leave your old life behind has special symbolic significance.

Likewise the division of the Red Sea. The division of one thing into two, through which something or someone passes, is a symbolic enactment of transition, as it was for Abraham in the passage (Gen 15:10-21) in which G-d tells him about his children's future exile and enslavement. Abraham divides animals, G-d divides the sea, but the movement between the two halves is what signals the phase-change.

Note also that Jacob has his two defining encounters with G-d in liminal space, between his home and that of Laban (Gen. 28:10-22, and 32:22-32).

Victor Turner added one additional element to this analysis. He drew a distinction between society and what he called *communitas*. Society is always marked by structure and hierarchy. Some have power, some don't. There are classes, castes, ranks, orders, gradations of status and honour.

For Turner what makes the experience of liminal space vivid and transformative is that in the desert there are no hierarchies. Instead, there is "an intense comradeship and egalitarianism. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenised." People cast together in the no-man's-land of the desert experience the "essential and generic human bond." That is what he means by *communitas*, a rare and special state in which, for a brief but memorable period, everyone is equal.

We now begin to understand the significance of Midbar, "wilderness," in the spiritual life of Israel. It was the place where they experienced with an intensity they had never felt before nor would they easily again, the unmediated closeness of G-d which bound them to Him and to one another.

That is what Hosea means when he speaks in G-d's name of a day when Israel will experience, as it were, a second honeymoon: "Therefore I am now going to allure her; / 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 up out of Egypt. / 'In that day,' declares the LORD, / 'you will call me 'my husband'; / you will no longer call me 'my master.'"" (Hos. 2:14-16)

We also now understand the significance of the account at the beginning of Bamidbar, in which the twelve tribes were encamped, in rows of three on the four sides of the Tabernacle, each equidistant from the holy. Each tribe was different, but (with the exception of the Levites) all were equal. They ate the same food, manna from heaven. They drank the same drink, water from a rock or well. None yet had lands of their own, for the desert has no owners. There was no economic or territorial conflict between them.

The entire description of the camp at the beginning of Bemidbar with its emphasis on equality fits perfectly Turner's description of *communitas*, the ideal state people only experience in liminal space where

they have left the past (Egypt) behind but have not yet reached their future destination, the land of Israel. They have not yet begun building a society with all the inequalities to which society gives rise. For the moment they are together, their tents forming a perfect square with the Sanctuary at its centre.

The poignancy of the book of Bemidbar lies in the fact that this *communitas* lasted so briefly. The serene mood of its beginning will soon be shattered by quarrel after quarrel, rebellion after rebellion, a series of disruptions that would cost an entire generation their chance of entering the land.

Yet Bemidbar opens, as does the book of Bereishit, with a scene of blessed order, there natural, here social, there divided into six days, here into twelve (2x6) tribes, each person in Bemidbar like each species in Bereishit, in his or her rightful place, "each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house" (2:1).

So the wilderness was not just a place; it was a state of being, a moment of solidarity, midway between enslavement in Egypt and the social inequalities that would later emerge in Israel, an ideal never to be forgotten even if never fully captured again in real space and time.

Judaism never forgot its vision of natural and social harmony, set out respectively in the beginnings of the books of Genesis and Numbers, as if to say, what once was could be again, if only we heed the word of G-d.

(The books referred to are: Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, University of Chicago Press, 1960. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, Transaction Publishers, 1969. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, Cornell University Press, 1974) © 2011 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

There is much repetition in the verbiage used to describe the results of the census taken a little over a year after the exodus from Egypt. Besides reflecting the importance of each Tribe (and every member of each Tribe), using the same expressions over and over again highlight any slight differences within this description. One such nuance, one that is widely discussed, is how the Tribes are introduced. Although Reuvain is introduced by telling us that "the sons of Reuvain were" (Bamaidbar 1:20), most likely because they are the first Tribe listed, almost all the other Tribes are introduced with "for the sons of" ("livnay"). The only exception is Naftali (1:32), for whom the "lamed" is left off; they are introduced with just "the sons" ("b'nay"). There are two basic approaches given to explain this discrepancy, one based on the ratio of the genders and the other based on Naftali being

counted last. Yet, there are vast differences within each of these approaches.

The most widely suggested explanation (see Baal HaTurim, Rabbeinu Bachye, and many of the Tosafists) is that the Tribe of Naftali consisted of more females than males, whereas every other Tribe had more males than females. This suggestion is supported by numerous factors. When Yaakov blessed his sons, he compared Naftali to an ewe, not a ram, whereas all the other Tribes who were compared to animals were compared to the male of the species (see Rabbi Chavel's comments on Rabbeinu Bachye). The first letters of the words "ayala sh'lucha ha'nosain" (Beraishis 49:21, where Naftali is compared to an ewe) spell out the word "isha" (woman). And when the census is taken after all the males 20-60 years old had died (Bamidbar 26:1-51), leaving every Tribe with a female majority, none of the Tribes are introduced with the word "livnay;" only the word "b'nay" is used.

If there are differences between the characteristics of an ewe and a ram, it may very well be that it was a characteristic inherent only in ewes that Yaakov was highlighting. And even though none of the Tribes (in Parashas Pin'chas) were introduced with the word "livnay," their sons are. If having more females than males means using only "b'nay," since subdividing each Tribe by families doesn't change the fact that all the adult males died, "livnay" shouldn't have been used at all. On top of that, there are Midrashic sources (Lekach Tov, Midrash HaGadol) that say just the opposite; the reason Naftali is introduced with "b'nay" instead of "livnay" is because there were few, if any, females born to them. (These sources would have to explain why "b'nay" is used exclusively after all the adult males died—even for those Tribes who previously had enough females to use "livnay.")

Either way, it is interesting that these commentators thought the difference between Tribes with a higher female population and those with fewer females was significant enough for the Torah to point it out to us. Especially since after marriage the woman would be with her husband's Tribe, not her father's (so the impact of the ratio of the female population on a particular Tribe was limited to those who were not yet married). Unless there was a shidduch crisis in the desert, Naftali having more female children, or virtually none, only made a difference until they got married. On the other hand, this may be the Torah's way of telling us how much of an impact a woman has on her husband, and by extension, his Tribe. Naftali was either impacted by having to marry out of the Tribe, or impacted the other Tribes when their daughters moved there after marriage.

There is much discussion about the results of this census matching the census taken seven months earlier (see Ramban on Shemos 30:12). A number of commentators (e.g. Panim Yafos and Malbim), say that the purpose of this census was only to figure out how

many were in each Tribe; the total (for the nation) was already known from the previous census. Therefore, after the total of the first eleven Tribes was known, the number of people in the twelfth Tribe, Naftali, was known even before they were counted. Chasam Sofer (quoted by his student, Maharam Shik, included in the "complete" Toras Moshe) points out that the Tribe of Naftali was counted individually anyway, so that they could meet Moshe and Aharon personally and receive their blessing (see Ramban on Bamidbar 1:45). Nevertheless, since the amount of adult males was known even before they were counted, the Torah changes the way it introduces their total.

Others explain the difference based on the method through which the census was taken. There are two similar versions quoted in the name of the Ariz"l, one by Rav Chayim Vital, and the other by the Netziv, who heard it from his father-in-law, Rabbi Yitzchok Volozhin. The first (quoted by the Chidah in P'nay Dovid), has the first stage of the census to be going from house to house and writing down everyone's name in a ledger. After all the names were written in the ledger, each Tribe, one at a time, took the ledger and copied the names of those from their Tribe into their own, new ledger. After the first eleven Tribes had copied all of the names down, only the names of those from the twelfth Tribe, Naftali, were left, and no new ledger needed to be written. The fact that Naftali didn't have to write a new ledger, but used the original one, is reflected in the change in how their census was introduced. (I am assuming that as each name was written in the new ledger for the other Tribes, that name was crossed off the original ledger; otherwise they would still need to compile a separate list for Naftali.) The Netziv's version has each of the names being on a separate piece of paper and put in a box, with each Tribe removing the pieces of paper containing the names from their Tribe, one at a time, and putting it in a separate box. After the first eleven Tribes had pulled all the pieces of paper from the original box and put them in their own, only the pieces of paper from Naftali were left, so were able to stay in the original box. (I'm not sure how, without divine intervention, they could pull out the names of one Tribe at a time;

I would think they needed twelve separate boxes, and as each piece of paper was pulled out of the large box, it was put in its appropriate smaller box.)

The Vilna Gaon and Bikuray Aviv (included in "Gan Raveh") are quoted as having suggested that each Tribe was called out, one at a time. Initially, all twelve Tribes were physically together, in one group. After Reuvain called out from the group to be counted, only eleven Tribes were left together. This continued until only Naftali was left. Since every other Tribe had to be called out to become distinct, the Torah introduces them using "livnay." Naftali, however, was already a distinct group even before they were counted, so was referenced as "b'nay Naftali." This approach has the

advantage of not needing to know the total before the census was taken and not having to figure out the logistics of leaving Naftali in the original box or on the original ledger. It also explains why all the Tribes were later referred to as "b'nay," since by that census, each Tribe had already been distinct for decades. Each family, though, identified now in order to divide up the Promised Land they were about to enter, had not yet been separated within the Tribe, so were referenced with "livnay." © 2011 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah reveals Hashem's indescribable love for His people. The prophet Hosheia opens with warm words of blessing and says, "The Jewish people will be likened to the sand of the sea that cannot be measured or counted." Hosheia digresses then and says, "And in place of not being recognized as My nation, they will be regarded as 'the sons of Hashem.'" This passage indicates that, prior to this prophecy, they experienced serious rejection. In truth, the preceding chapter reveals that they temporarily forfeited their prominent status of Hashem's people. Scriptures state, "Declare them no longer My nation because they are not Mine and I am not theirs" (1:9) Yet, one passage later we find Hashem blessing His people in an unlimited capacity conveying upon them the elevated status of "sons of Hashem." We are amazed by this sudden, drastic change of attitude from total rejection to full acceptance in an unparalleled way. What brought about this change and what can we learn from it?

Chazal address these questions and answer with the following analogy. A king was enraged by his wife's atrocious behavior and immediately summoned a scribe to prepare her divorce document. He calmed down, shortly thereafter, and decided not to carry out his original plan. However, he faced a serious dilemma because he was unwilling to cancel the scribe and reveal his drastic change of heart. He finally resolved his problem and ordered the scribe to rewrite his marriage contract doubling its previous financial commitment. Chazal conclude that the same was true of Hashem. After instructing Hosheia to deliver sharp words of reprimand Hashem retracted them. However, instead of canceling the initial prophecy Hashem tempered it with warm words of blessing. These words were so uplifting that they reflected the Jewish people in a newly gained status of "sons of Hashem". (Sifrei, Parshas Balak)

We can attempt to uncover Chazal's hidden lesson in the following manner. When studying the analogy of the king and his wife we sense the king's deep affection for her. Although he was angered to the point of total rejection this anger was short-lived. He was appeased within moments and his true affection

immediately surfaced. In order to compensate for his initial rash response, he strengthened his relationship with her by doubling his expression of affection. The queen undoubtedly understood her husband's compassionate response to her outrageous behavior. Instead of totally rejecting her he actually increased his commitment to her. She sensed this as his way of securing their relationship even after her previous conduct. This unbelievably kind response evoked similar feelings from her and she reciprocated with her fullest expression of appreciation to him.

This analogy reveals Hashem's deep love and affection for His people. The Jewish people in Hosheia's times severely stayed from Hashem's will and engaged themselves in atrocious idolatrous practices. Hashem's was enraged by their behavior and summoned the prophet Hosheia to serve them their rejection papers. This severe response elicited Hashem's counter response of unlimited compassion for them and He immediately retracted His harsh decree. However, Hashem did not stop there but saw it appropriate to intensify His relationship with His cherished people. He therefore elevated them from their previous status of merely His people to the highly coveted status of His children.

We now understand Chazal's message to us. Hashem was sincerely angered by the Jewish people's conduct and sent Hosheia to reject them. Yet, even this angry response could not interfere with Hashem's boundless love for His people and He immediately retracted His harsh words. The Jewish people however, needed to understand the severity of their actions. Hashem therefore instructed Hosheia to reveal the entire story, their intended rejection and ultimate acceptance. Hosheia's prophecy served its purpose well and the Jewish people sensed Hashem's boundless love for them. Although their actions called for total rejection Hashem's compassion for them would not allow this. Instead of rejecting them Hashem actually increased His display of affection towards them. This undoubtedly evoked their reciprocal response which ultimately produced their side of their newly gained status of "sons of Hashem". They previously enjoyed the status of Hashem's people but after this they would be known as His cherished children.

We find a parallel to the above in this week's sedra which describes the Jewish nation's encampment. They were previously stationed at the foot of Mount Sinai for nearly a year. During that time they developed a special relationship with Hashem receiving His Torah and witnessed many revelations. This intimate bond, however, was interrupted by their inexcusable plunge into idolatry. Hashem was enraged by their atrocious behavior and immediately summoned Moshe Rabbeinu to deliver their rejection papers. Hashem informed His loyal prophet of His intention and Moshe Rabbeinu pleaded on their behalf. Moshe subsequently sensitized the people to their severe

wrongdoing and they returned from their shameful inappropriate path. Hashem accepted their repentance and reclaimed His nation. But Hashem's compassion extended far beyond forgiveness and He therefore consented to dwell amongst them resting His Divine Presence in the Mishkan.

In our sedra we discover that even the Mishkan was insufficient expression of Hashem's love for His people. He therefore acquiesced in their request and permitted them to camp around the Holy Ark and encircle His Divine Presence. This special opportunity created an incredible feeling of affection, tantamount to embracing Hashem Himself. Indeed Shlomo Hamelech refers to this unbelievable experience of intimacy in the following terms, "And His flag was for me an expression of love". (Shir Hashirim 2:4)

Although Hashem initially rejected His people this did not interfere with His boundless love for them. After rededicating themselves to Him they deserved all of His warmth and affection, even the sensation of embracement itself. We learn from this the unbelievable love Hashem possesses for His people and that even during moments of rejection Hashem's true affection for us is never effected. © 2011 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's portion contains a counting of the Jewish people. Nachmanides offers several ideas to explain the reason for such a census. Each reason has a deep message.

First, the census expresses G-d's mercy. When Yaakov (Jacob) came to Egypt he brought with him only seventy souls. Now, thanks to G-d's strong and compassionate hand in Egypt, the Jews were a stronger nation as they prepared to enter the land of Israel in large numbers.

The message: one should not take G-d's gifts for granted. Proper thanks is due the Almighty for the existence, growth and success of the people of Israel. The census was a way of saying "todah rabbah" to G-d.

Nachmanides also explains that each person received a special merit by virtue of being counted separately. Every single person, no matter their status in society, had to pass by the leaders, by Moshe (Moses) and Ahron (Aaron) and be counted. They set their eyes upon each person as an individual.

The message: in most countries-like here in the US-when a census is taken, there is a great danger that the very people who the census is supposed to benefit, become mere numbers. As individuals, their names are secondary. In the Torah census, the accent is on every persona, showing us that each is created as unique and irreplaceable images of G-d.

Finally, since the Jews were preparing to enter the land of Israel, the count was necessary. It was important to find out how many soldiers were available

for pending war. Invariably, before wartime the Bible almost always tells us that a census was taken.

The message: while G-d is always there to help, no individual or nation should rely on miracles. As humans, we must do what we can in order to help ourselves. In this case, proper preparation was necessary before entering Israel.

These three views actually interface. A comment made by S. Y. Agnon illustrates the point:

Once a king reviewed his returning soldiers who had been victorious in battle. He was ecstatic and joyous upon their valiant return. But G-d is not like this type of king. G-d, the King of Kings, when reviewing the returnees, understands that they are not necessarily those who left with the same battalion. Individuals were killed in the war and they, unfortunately, would not be coming back.

Here we have the co-mingling of the three opinions offered by Nachmanides. When going to war, each soldier must be viewed as a person with endless value. Upon returning safely, all returnees ought to give thanks to the Lord.

These are important ideas worth remembering especially when considering current events. Too often it is tragically the case that an Israeli soldier is struck down and, we in the Diaspora don't know, or having become so accustomed to these losses, fail to reflect on the tragedy. Those murdered become a mere number and we fail to feel the pain of the bereaved families and friends.

It should not be this way. The loss of a soldier killed defending the land and people of Israel is a deep loss not only for his family and friends, but for all Jewish people. Similarly, the loss of any of our sisters and brothers who are victims of terror.

May we be spared such losses. © 2011 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 NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

How many barricades have been stormed over the last few hundred years for the ideals of universal equality! How much blood has been shed! From earliest childhood we have been brought up to believe that all people are created equal, that no single individual has more rights or privileges or obligations than any other individual. We have been taught to aspire to a classless society, and to look askance at other societies that have rigid caste systems. Indeed, these are among the very foundations of the society in which we live.

In this week's Torah portion, however, we find an altogether different view. The Torah describes the encampment of the Jewish people in the desert, each tribe occupying a specified position under its own

banner. "The people of Israel did everything Hashem had commanded Moses," the Torah concludes. "This is how they encamped and this is how they traveled."

The question is obvious. Why make special mention of the compliance of the Jewish people with the divine instructions for encamping and traveling? What was so commendable about it?

The Midrash explains that the people were indeed to be commended for their unquestioning compliance. The Levites occupied the position of honor in the center of the encampment near the Tabernacle, while the other tribes, many of whom were superior in wisdom and knowledge to the Levites, occupied positions on the fringes. Nonetheless, to their everlasting credit, they did not raise any objections or attempt to push the Levites aside. They submitted willingly to the divine wisdom that had assigned hereditary roles to all the tribes.

But was this indeed a fair system? Was it right that for all generations no member of another tribe could aspire to the priestly duties of the Levites? What happened to upward mobility? How can this be reconciled with our contemporary conception of justice?

The answer lies in the difference between the Jewish attitude and the contemporary secular attitude. In the secular view, the purpose of each individual's existence is solely for personal fulfillment. Therefore, if all people are inherently equal, their purposes are also equal, and no one should be allowed to take precedence over someone else.

In the Jewish view, on the other hand, all people are united in one common purpose, the fulfillment of the divine plan for the world. Each person in the world has a divinely assigned role which will allow him to contribute to the universal effort to fulfill the will of Hashem. Some roles are, of course, more prominent and prestigious than others. But in the greater scheme of things, everyone is of equal importance, since everyone's contribution is essential towards achieving the greater common goal.

As we prepare for Shavuos, the Festival of the Giving of the Torah, these thoughts give us new insight into the statement of our Sages that at Mount Sinai the Jewish people "encamped together as one man with one heart." The acceptance of the Torah engendered a profound unity among the Jewish people, because all their lives became focused on the single sublime goal of fulfilling the will of the Creator.

A great sage once asked his disciples a riddle. "Which part of a car is the most important?"

"The engine," replied one disciple.

"The wheels," said another.

"The transmission," said a third.

"The driver!" called out yet another in a burst of inspiration.

The sage shook his head. "You are all wrong. If the car is missing any of these things you mention it cannot move. So you see, they are all of equal

importance. But more important than how the car works is the purpose it serves. The most important part of a car is its passenger!"

In our own lives, we cannot help but feel occasional pangs of jealousy or resentment when we compare ourselves to others. But if we transcend the narrow parameters of our personal situation and see ourselves as playing a vital role in a vast universal plan, we can gain an altogether different perspective on the world. We will come to the realization that those people, whose superior endowments we resented, are not our rivals on the surface of this planet. All of us are on the same team. We are the wheels and the engines and the brakes and the batteries, and as long as we pool our individual talents and endowments for the greater purpose of fulfilling the will of Hashem, we will never have any reason to be discontented with the roles we have been assigned. © 2011 Rabbi N. Reich & Project Genesis, Inc.

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

Life is just so busy. Traveling to work, back home, family responsibilities, household responsibilities; the days seem to go by in a blur-like fashion. My wife and I find this pace to be the most difficult adjustment of living in the States.

The Ramcha"l explains that Paroah's plan to keep the Jews as slaves was to keep them as busy as possible. This wouldn't allow for the introspection and growth which would render them worthy of redemption. Life in Israel seemed to go at a much slower pace. There was more time to focus on what was being accomplished without having to spend so much time and energy on just getting there.

We read the parsha of Bamidbar as we are making our final preparations for Shavuos. As such, Bamidbar must reveal some sort of a game-plan to make our Kabalas HaTorah a greater reality on Shavuos itself and one that will last throughout the year.

"And Hashem spoke to Moshe in Midbar {the wilderness of} Sinai. [1:1]" According to the Medrash [Rabbah 1:7], the passuk is stressing that the Torah was given in the Midbar. Many different explanations are offered but an idea that struck me is the hushed, serene, solitude of a midbar. Time for thoughts. Time for self-awareness, self-understanding, self-assessment. That is what enabled a Kabalas HaTorah.

And us? Our already busy, hectic lives are incessantly invaded by our cellphones, beepers and all the myriad electronic, multi-tasking devices that provide us with "all noise, all the time." I longingly recall the summers I spent running a sleep-away camp in Israel without a phone in our bungalow. The sweet sounds of silence...

When Eliyahu HaNavi witnessed Hashem's presence, we are told that at first a stone-shattering

wind passed, but Hashem's presence was not manifested in that wind. That was followed by a clamorous din and then by a blaze but Hashem's presence wasn't found in either of those. Finally, Hashem's awesome presence was evident-in the guise of a soft, gentle voice.

As we prepare for Shavuot, we need to find or create that environment and those moments when that soft, gentle, resonating voice of Hashem can be heard and felt, enabling us to shift our focus from the clutter of our lives to the purpose of our existence. © 2011 Rabbi Y. Ciner & torah.org

RABBI NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF

Sfas Emes

Let's work with the last paragraph on the first page of the Bemidbar Sfas Emes. That paragraph begins: "R. Meir omeir: 'Kohl ha'oseik baTorah lishma...' (ArtScroll: "Whoever engages in Torah study for its own sake...").

What, exactly, is "Torah lishma?" ArtScroll's translation, just quoted, is the mainline pshat. But we should be aware that great debates have swirled around this question. Thus, for example, a major theme of R. Chayim Volozhiner's sefer Nefesh Hachayim is clarifying what is "Torah lishma" (and what is not!)

The Sfas Emes begins with a definition that looks simple. "Torah lishma", says the Sfas Emes, is exactly what its sheim (name) indicates. The word "Torah" means instruction. Hence, "Torah lishma" means learning to provide instruction; that is, learning in order to know how to live one's life.

Note how far we have come from the mainline pshat of "Torah for its own sake". And the Sfas Emes immediately adds new ingredients making for a much richer dish. He quickly dispels any notion that intellectuality per se is part of the story. On the contrary, as the Sfas Emes told us last week (Bechukosai, 5632), our objective in learning Torah should not be "lei'da"-to acquire knowledge-and/or "le'hasig"-to make intellectual achievements. Rather, our goal in learning Torah should be to subordinate our personal intellect, so that we can know and follow retzon HaShem (the will of HaShem).

(It would be a mistake to conclude from the preceding sentences that the Sfas Emes was anti-intellectual. He was so involved in intellectual activity that he completed his chidushim on Shas before he was 25 years old. And thereafter, when he became Gerrer Rebbe, his ma'amarim always conveyed deep thought.)

The Sfas Emes moves on now to another topic. This parsha-and the Sefer that it begins-are called: "Bemidbar"; that is, "in the desert". Accordingly, the Sfas Emes focuses on the meaning of the key word: "midbar"-to see what additional information it may contain. First, he alludes to two Medrashim in Medrash Rabba which work with the word "midbar". These

Medrashim resonate with the word "midbar" in other contexts. Conceivably, they may provide additional information on the word "midbar" in the present context.

One Medrash (Medrash Rabba, Bemidbar, 1:7) tells us that to progress in the study of Torah, a person must de-emphasize his ego. That is, he must consider himself "hefkair"-accessible to all claimants-like the midbar, the desert. A second Medrash (in Medrash Rabba, 1:2) cites the midbar as the place where Bnei Yisroel welcomed HaShem's Presence. The Sfas Emes then gives us his own non-pshat on "midbar." We know the shorsh (root) DBR in leshon hakodesh means "to speak". The Sfas Emes points to another meaning of that root: namely, "to lead". So far, the Sfas Emes is on solid, non-controversial etymological ground. He then proceeds to more allusive territory. If DBR means "to lead", he finds it plausible to read MDBR as an Aramaic passive form; i.e., "to be led". Thus, Bnei Yisroel in the midbar on their way to Eretz Yisroel conducted themselves as people who had given themselves over totally to HaShem's leadership. Similarly we, in traversing segments of our lives that may resemble a midbar, should try to live in accordance with HaShem's will. This perspective follows directly from the Sfas Emes's reading of "midbar" as "being led."

The Sfas Emes offers us a simile, from Yeshayahu (10, 15) to help us achieve this new self-image. He suggests that we view ourselves "ka'garzen be'yad he'chotzev" ("as the axe in the hand of the wood-cutter"). This simile should sound familiar. We encounter it in one of the piyutim on the night of Kol Nidrei). There is a great paradox/challenge here. For this subordination of our will to retzon HaShem itself requires a strong act of volition on our part.

The Sfas Emes concludes this paragraph of his text by calling up another pasuk in Yeshayahu (43:7): "Kohl ha'nikra bi'shemi ve'lichvodi berasiv". ("Everyone who is called by My Name and whom I have created for My glory...") But wait! The pasuk just quoted contains the word "shemi". That word rings a bell. Earlier in this ma'amar, we saw a word from the same root (sheim), when the Sfas Emes was discussing "Torah li'shma." So, with his artful crafting of the ma'amar, the Sfas Emes is telling us his concluding thoughts on this subject. "Torah Li'shma", says the Sfas Emes, means: that we live our lives in a way that redounds to HaShem's glory! © 2011 Rabbi N.C. Leff & torah.org

