

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

One of the most amusing scenes in Anglo-Jewish history occurred on 14 October 1663. A mere seven years had passed since Oliver Cromwell had found no legal bar to Jews living in England (hence the so-called "return" of 1656). A small synagogue was opened in Creechurch Lane in the City of London, forerunner of Bevis Marks (1701), the oldest still-extant place of Jewish worship in Britain.

The famous diarist Samuel Pepys decided to pay a visit to this new curiosity, to see how Jews conducted themselves at prayer. What he saw amazed and scandalised him. As chance or Providence had it, the day of his visit turned out to be Simchat Torah. This is how he described what he saw: "And anon their Laws that they take out of the press [i.e. the Ark] are carried by several men, four or five several burthens in all, and they do relieve one another; and whether it is that every one desires to have the carrying of it, I cannot tell, thus they carried it round about the room while such a service is singing... But, Lord! to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true G-d, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this." (The Diary of Samuel Pepys, 14 October 1663)

This was not the kind of behaviour he was used to in a house of worship.

There is something unique about the relationship of Jews to the Torah, the way we stand in its presence as if it were a king, dance with it as if it were a bride, listen to it telling our story and study it, as we say in our prayers, as "our life and the length of our days." There are few more poignant lines of prayer than the one contained in a poem said at Neilah, at the end of Yom Kippur: Ein shiyur rak ha-Torah ha-zot: "Nothing remains," after the destruction of the Temple and the loss of the land, "but this Torah." A book, a scroll, was all that stood between Jews and despair.

What non-Jews (and sometimes Jews) fail to appreciate is how, in Judaism, Torah represents law as love, and love as law. Torah is not just "revealed legislation" as Moses Mendelssohn described it in the eighteenth century. (In his book *Jerusalem*, 1783.) It

represents G-d's faith in our ancestors that He entrusted them with the creation of a society that would become a home for His presence and an example to the world.

One of the keys as to how this worked is contained in the parsha of Bemidbar, always read before Shavuot, the commemoration of the giving of the Torah. This reminds us how central is the idea of wilderness -- the desert, no man's land -- is to Judaism. It is midbar, wilderness, that gives our parsha and the book as a whole its name. It was in the desert that the Israelites made a covenant with G-d and received the Torah, their constitution as a nation under the sovereignty of G-d. It is the desert that provides the setting for four of the five books of the Torah, and it was there that the Israelites experienced their most intimate contact with G-d, who sent them water from a rock, manna from heaven and surrounded them with clouds of glory.

What story is being told here? The Torah is telling us three things fundamental to Jewish identity. First is the unique phenomenon that in Judaism the law preceded the land. For every other nation in history the reverse was the case. First came the land, then human settlements, first in small groups, then in villages, towns and cities. Then came forms of order and governance and a legal system: first the land, then the law.

The fact that in Judaism the Torah was given *bemidbar*, in the desert, before they had even entered the land, meant that uniquely Jews and Judaism were able to survive, their identity intact, even in exile. Because the law came before the land, even when Jews lost the land they still had the law. This meant that even in exile, Jews were still a nation. G-d remained their sovereign. The covenant was still in place. Even without a geography, they had an ongoing history. Even before they entered the land, Jews had been given the ability to survive outside the land.

Second, there is a tantalising connection between midbar, 'wilderness,' and *davar*, 'word.' Where other nations found the gods in nature -- the rain, the earth, fertility and the seasons of the agricultural year -- Jews discovered G-d in transcendence, beyond nature, a G-d who could not be seen but rather heard. In the desert, there is no nature. Instead there is emptiness and silence, a silence in which one can hear the unearthly voice of the One-beyond-the-world. As Edmond Jabs put it: "The word cannot dwell except in

the silence of other words. To speak is, accordingly, to lean on a metaphor of the desert." (Du Desert au Libre, Paris, Pierre Belford, 1980)

The historian Eric Voegelin saw this as fundamental to the completely new form of spirituality born in the experience of the Israelites: "When we undertake the exodus and wander into the world, in order to found a new society elsewhere, we discover the world as the Desert. The flight leads nowhere, until we stop in order to find our bearings beyond the world. When the world has become Desert, man is at last in the solitude in which he can hear thunderingly the voice of the spirit that with its urgent whispering has already driven and rescued him from Sheol [the domain of death]. In the Desert G-d spoke to the leader and his tribes; in the desert, by listening to the voice, by accepting its offer, and by submitting to its command, they had at last reached life and became the people chosen by G-d." (Israel and Revelation, Louisiana State University Press, 1956, 153)

In the silence of the desert Israel became the people for whom the primary religious experience was not seeing but listening and hearing: Shema Yisrael. The G-d of Israel revealed Himself in speech. Judaism is a religion of holy words, in which the most sacred object is a book, a scroll, a text.

Third, and most remarkable, is the interpretation the prophets gave to those formative years in which the Israelites, having left Egypt and not yet entered the land, were alone with G-d. Hosea, predicting a second exodus, says in G-d's name: "I will lead her into the wilderness [says G-d about the Israelites] / 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."

Jeremiah says in G-d's name: "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown." Shir ha-Shirim, The Song of Songs, contains the line, "Who is this coming up from the wilderness leaning on her beloved?" (8:5).

Common to each of these texts is the idea of the desert as a honeymoon in which G-d and the people, imagined as bridegroom and bride, were alone together, consummating their union in love. To be sure, in the Torah itself we see the Israelites as a recalcitrant, obstinate people complaining and rebelling against the G-d. Yet the prophets in retrospect saw things differently. The wilderness was a kind of yichud, an alone-togetherness, in which the people and G-d bonded in love.

Most instructive in this context is the work of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep who focused attention on the importance of rites of passage. (The Rites of Passage. [Chicago]: University of Chicago, 1960) 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 last is incorporation, re-entering society with a new identity. Between the two comes the crucial stage of transition when, having cast off one identity but not yet donned another, you are remade, reborn, refashioned.

Van Gennep used the term liminal, from the Latin word for "threshold," to describe this transitional state when you are in a kind of no-man's-land between the old and the new. That is what the wilderness signifies for Israel: liminal space between slavery and freedom, past and future, exile and return, Egypt and the Promised Land. The desert was the space that made transition and transformation possible. There, in no-man's-land, the Israelites, alone with G-d and with one another, could cast off one identity and assume another. There they could be reborn, no longer slaves to Pharaoh, instead servants of G-d, summoned to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Seeing the wilderness as the space-between helps us to see the connection between the Israelites in the days of Moses and the ancestor whose name they bore. For it was Jacob among the patriarchs who had his most intense experiences of G-d in liminal space, between the place he was leaving and the one he was travelling to, alone and at night.

It was there, fleeing from his brother Esau but not yet arrived at the house of Laban, that he saw a vision of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending, and there on his return that he fought with a stranger from night until dawn and was given the name Israel. These episodes can now be seen to be prefigurations of what would later happen to his descendants (maaseh avot siman le-banim, "the acts of the fathers are a sign of what would later happen to the children"). (See Ramban, Commentary to Gen. 12:6.)

The desert thus became the birthplace of a wholly new relationship between G-d and humankind, a relationship built on covenant, speech and love as concretized in the Torah. Distant from the great centres of civilization, a people found themselves alone with G-d and there consummated a bond that neither exile nor tragedy could break. That is the moral truth at the beating heart of our faith: that it is not power or politics that link us to G-d, but love.

Joy in the celebration of that love led King David to "leap and dance" when the ark was brought into Jerusalem, earning the disapproval of King Saul's daughter Michal (2 Sam. 6:16), and many centuries later led the Anglo-Jews of Creechurch Lane to dance on Simchat Torah to the disapproval of Samuel Pepys. When love defeats dignity, faith is alive and well. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* ©2015 Rabbi Lord J.

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they left the Land of Egypt." (Numbers 1:1) How can we transform a no-man's land into a domain of sanctity? The Book of Numbers, which we begin reading this Sabbath, provides an answer to this question. In doing so, it addresses the uncertainties and complexities of transitions: from Egyptian servitude to desert freedom and from abject slavery to the possibility of redemption.

Perhaps most importantly, this fourth book of the Bible offers a glimpse into the complexities assailing the greatest leader in world history, Moses, and the challenges he faced in leading this transformation.

A fierce advocate for his people and passionate lover of God, Moshe Rabbeinu is a towering persona who reminded a nation about its mission in the world and inspired humanity with his clarion call about the human right to freedom. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding his stunningly remarkable achievements, Moses left the world frustrated and disappointed, having been denied his dream of joining his people in the Promised Land.

Fortunately, God's greatest prophet has been resoundingly vindicated by Jewish history. The Jewish People's dramatic and historic return to the Land of Israel continues to draw inspiration from his teachings and longings, as well as from his legacy. The book that bears his name, "Torat Moshe," is humanity's blueprint for redemption.

It is with this context in mind that we approach the book of "Bamidbar" ("In the Desert"), an apt name for a work that documents the Jewish People's 40-years of transition between Egypt and the Land of Canaan. Indeed, this desert period serves as the precursor of – as well as a most poignant metaphor for – the nearly two thousand years of homeless wandering that characterized much of Jewish history from the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

The Hebrew word for desert, midbar, contains meanings and allusions that in many ways have served as a beacon for our exile. An example of this is the word for leader, which, though most commonly referred to in Hebrew as manhig, our Sages also referred to as dabar, fully cognizant of its shared Hebrew letter root d-b-r with midbar. (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 8a).

In the Bible, the paradigmatic position of leadership – as exemplified by Abraham, Moses, and David – is the shepherd. And the desert is, of course, the most natural place for a shepherd to lead his flock: the sheep can comfortably wander in a virtual no-man's

land and graze on the vegetation of the various oases or their outskirts without the problem of stealing from private property or harming the ecology of settled habitations.

And perhaps the letter-root d-b-r means leader-shepherd because it also means "word" (dibur). Just as the shepherd directs the flock using sounds and words, the leader of people must also inspire and lead with the verbal message he communicates. Indeed, the Aseret Ha-Dibrot (literally, "The Ten Utterances," but better known as "The Ten Commandments") were revealed in the Sinai desert (midbar), and they govern the Jewish People – as well as a good part of the whole world – to this very day.

Moreover, it is important to note that wherever the Jewish People wandered in the desert, they were always accompanied by the portable desert sanctuary (mishkan), which is derived from the word Shekhina (Divine Presence). However, God was not in the Sanctuary, for even the greatest expanse of the heavens cannot contain the Divine Presence, as King Solomon declared when he dedicated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem (I Kings 8:27). It was rather God's word (dibur), which was in the sanctuary, in the form of The Ten Utterances (Aseret Ha-Dibrot) on the Tablets of Stone preserved in the Holy Ark, as well as the ongoing and continuing Word of God that He would speak from between the cherubs on above the Holy Ark (Exodus 25:16-22).

It was by means of these Divine words (dibrot) that even the desert (midbar) – a metaphor for an inhospitable and alien exile environment: boiling hot by day, freezing cold by night, and deficient in water, the elixir of life – can be transformed into sacred space, the place of the Divine word (dibur).

Indeed, the words from the desert of Sinai succeeded in sanctifying the many Marrakeshes and Vilnas and New Yorks of our wanderings. The world is a desert (midbar) waiting to become a sanctuary (d'vir) by means of God's word (dibur), communicated by inspiring leaders (dabarim). ©2022 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

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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 include the Tabernacle and the Temple in the prohibition of touching. However, the straightforward reading of the *Mechilta* is as we explained above, that these are excluded from the prohibition. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's reading as well as the entire book of Bamidbar is replete with the numbers of the populations of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai. Slightly more than 600,000 male Jews over the age of twenty comprise the population of the Jewish people under the leadership of Moshe. Extrapolating the old, the young, infirmed, the women and the multitudes of people of other nations that left Egypt together with the Jewish people, most Rabbinic authorities estimate a Jewish population of between two and three million souls.

As important as it may be for us to be aware of the population numbers, the question arises: why does the Torah spend so many verses and details in enumerating the population of the Jewish people at that time? What is the religious, spiritual, or historical perspective necessary for us to understand this listing? Regarding this question, there are many proposed ideas and answers, but it is almost universally accepted by all commentaries that this is one of the areas of the Torah where mystery prevails over mere human understanding and logical reasoning.

In short, whatever answers we may give to this problem of why the population numbers seem so important, and occupy such prominence in the book itself, is difficult for us mere mortals to comprehend its true message and meaning. Apparently, the greater the detail, the greater the mystery that it engenders. Since

the words of the Torah are eternal accounts of the Jewish people and its population, this indicates that, somehow, this remain a source of inspiration and spiritual holiness for all generations.

One of the interesting facets of the detailed counting is the fact that the Torah lists the names of the leaders of the individual tribes who participated at arriving at this census of the people. As difficult as it is for us to understand the count itself, it is doubly difficult for us to understand the prominence given the names of the leaders of the tribes. This is true because we are aware that none of these people would survive the 40-year sojourn in the desert, and all of them would be replaced with new leaders of their respective tribes, before the entry of the Jewish people into the land of Israel after the death of Moshe.

One understanding of this difficulty is that the Torah wants to constantly remind us that it is a book about people and their behavior, and not about cold facts, events, trends, and esoteric knowledge. The Torah wishes us to remember that people are not merely ciphers or numbers but, rather, flesh and blood individuals, personalities, all different one from another.

The words of the Talmud are that we are all cast from one mold, but no two of us are alike. Since the Torah expends so much detail, both in the count of the people, as well as the specific names of who counted them emphasizes that we are talking about actual people, and not only about numbers per se. This is a fundamental lesson in Judaism, and it is also why the Torah calls itself the book of the generations of humankind. ©2022 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

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

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

Nachmanides adds that every person, regardless of status in society, had to pass by Moses and Aaron to be counted separately. In most countries, when a census is taken, there is a great danger that the very people the census is supposed to benefit become mere numbers. As individuals, their identity is secondary. They are "numbers, not names." But in the Torah census, the emphasis is on every individual; each is unique and irreplaceable – as it states, "se'u et

rosh" (Numbers 1:2). Homiletically, this could teach us to count each rosh (head), each person, looking into each one's eyes because each is the world.

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

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

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

Being part of the tzava not only contributes to society at large but ennobles and refines the character of a nation's youth, turning them into better citizens: an "army of givers." ©2022 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And the Levites for the tribe of their fathers were not counted among them." (Bamidbar 1:47) The day Moshe received the commandment to count the Jews, he immediately gathered the tribal leaders who were mentioned and dove right into the mitzvah of Hashem to perform a census. However, one group was left out. When the leaders were mentioned, no one was mentioned from the Tribe of Levi. Moshe did not know what was planned for the Levi'im, so he waited.

For their part, the Levi'im waited also. While Moshe was busy counting the rest of the Jews, reviewing documents of their lineage and counting by families, the Levi'im did nothing. They didn't prepare their family genealogy for presentation and they didn't clamor to be counted. They simply waited for instruction.

So why weren't they included? Why were they any worse than the rest of the tribes? The others had a leader appointed by Hashem and they were the focus

of this special census. Why were the Levites singled out to be ignored?

Only when Moshe and the elders finished counting the other tribes, which certainly took some time, did they get the answer. The Levites could not be counted among the rest of the Jews because they were not "ordinary" Jews. On the contrary, they had an elevated position – they would carry the Mishkan! Not that they weren't counted because they were just "shleppers," but by virtue of their special nature and purpose to serve Hashem, they required their own special count.

While other Jews were counted from the age of twenty years old and up, the Levi'im were counted from the age of just thirty days! Their dedication to the service of Hashem made them worthy of counting even when they were too young to actually do anything. The Levi'im were special, and this showed itself in how they reacted.

Had another tribe been ignored, they might have spoken up and asked why. "Why should we not be counted?! We have fine lineage too. See our family documents!" It would have been justified, but that isn't what Shevet Levi did.

Instead, they understood their role was to be the transmitters of Torah and the keepers of holiness. In order to do that, they had to follow Hashem's commands and not assume power on their own. They waited because they understood that those dedicated to serving Hashem are not judged or valued by the same scales that others are. They recognized that if Hashem wanted them to be counted, He would say so, and if He did not, then they would count, by not being counted.

The true eved Hashem is happy with whatever role Hashem designates for him, and Hashem wanted everyone to learn this lesson from the Levi'im. That's why the command to count them only came after they exhibited their trust in Him, and showed why they deserved to be counted with a completely different scale.

A boy came home from school one day, excited to share the news with his family that he'd gotten a part in the school play.

"What part did you get?" asked his father.

"I play the part of the Jewish husband," he replied enthusiastically.

His grandmother, overhearing this, frowned. "You go back to your teacher," she said, "and you tell her you want a speaking part!" ©2022 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

This world is, well, not what it could be, and I am being polite. Years ago, I would have said it lost its moral compass. Now, it's so out of kilter that it is

hard to watch from day-to-day. Not from the inside, meaning as one of the people who is excited about the way the world is going, but from the outside, or more accurately, from above, from God's perspective.

How can we possibly know God's perspective, especially at a time in history when prophecy does not exist, at least in any public and obvious way? We can know it because we have the Torah, which is God's perspective revealed along time ago through prophecy. And being God, and therefore, it is timeless, He wrote it in such a way that it could be relevant in every generation. People who think it isn't relevant have an insufficient grasp of Torah or of human history, and usually both.

Learning Torah is going to school. School is ideally where you are supposed to learn what life is about, and therefore what is important in life. We only live one life (at a time), and every moment passed is a moment lost. The only way to hang on to a moment is by using it to build something meaningful in the present for the future. It can't be an investment of time unless it is able to yield positive dividends, mostly in the next world, but ideally in this world as well.

God made man with a plan. But what is it? He gave us a world to use, but how? That's what the Torah teaches us. If a person does not learn this from Torah, then they tend to "learn" it from life, but that has generally not worked out well for mankind.

It's not that the meaning of life cannot be learned from life itself. It's just that, though a picture can be worth a thousand words, there's seldom enough clarity to know specifically what to do in specific situations. If there was, then schools could scrap all their textbooks and use pictures only to give people an education. People need truth described in precise language, if they are going to be able to apply it in life.

This is why human history has been less a directed one with periodic lapses of chaos, and more one of chaos with periodic moments of direction. People aren't even trying to figure out life. They're just trying to have the best time they can given the challenges that come their way and, the hurdles they have to jump over just to stay afloat.

To make matters a lot worse, some people have figured out how to capitalize on the naiveté of others and their vulnerability to the lure of physical pleasure. They have learned how to use marketing and advertising and social media to persuade people to buy what they are selling, regardless of actual need. And while it satisfies the whims of people who have little or no knowledge of what life is actually about, this has made its makers exceedingly rich and powerful...and over time, even corrupt.

You don't have to choose to become corrupt. It is just the inevitable result of success without any fear of God. This may sound weird to someone who does believe in God and does fear Him. But to those who

lack both, it is just the way of the world. There are those at the top, and those at the bottom, and for such people the trick in life is to use the latter to become one of the former.

On one hand, it is amazing how, after all this time, the same rules apply. I'm not talking about God's rules, because they're eternal. I'm talking about how money still rocks the world and drives society, and how many people are prepared to sacrifice the truth on the altar of wealth.

That's the first sign that man is lost. Money is valuable to most people because it makes life comfortable. When we have to worry about what we spend, we're uneasy. When money is no object, we feel so incredibly free...even if we are totally enslaved to the yetzer hara because of it. Even God-fearing people have to struggle with the issue from time-to-time.

Look at what it has done today. It has made billionaires out of some people, and heroes out of some of those billionaires. It has put them in positions of tremendous influence and given them the ability to make life-and-death decisions on behalf of billions of people, as they see fit. According to the watchdogs, they are not doing a very good job of it.

It can be a daunting job for people who believe in God and have a sense of divine accountability. At least they would be concerned about having to answer to God for any mistakes they made. But if they aren't concerned, then whom do they fear enough to make them think twice about what they decide when what they decide impacts the lives of so many?

They are the ones to keep your eye on because history comes down to them. History is rarely about the masses who might be the nicest and hardest working people around. But these people also tend to be those who wish to "stay out of things," as strongly opinionated as they might be. They'd rather trust their leadership, and rather blindly at that, to direct their society and tell them what to do. Whereas the yetzer hara of a leader might push them to control others, the yetzer hara of the man on the street is to let others control them, if it helps them have a more comfortable life.

This is true of every society. It's the very nature of mankind. The only thing that really separates one society from another is the quality of their leadership, which is a function of what the leaders believe and, the system they live by to keep them honest. When the leadership is corrupt, the world they lead becomes corrupt.

Money has never been the root of evil. The root of evil is the yetzer hara inside every individual, and the Satan on the outside who works overtime to seduce the yetzer hara of a person to follow after him. But money is key to comforts of all kinds, and comfort is the yetzer hara's greatest joy and goal in life. This gives the people with the most money the most attractive

credentials, and the greatest power to manipulate unsuspecting masses.

Admittedly, I am saying all of this to do more than make comments on this week's parsha and about the importance of Torah in advance of Shavuot. I am, to say the least, very concerned about the direction of world society in general, which has become more transparent in the last couple of years.

Many others see it too, including some from within those societies, and they are writing about it, reporting what they can about what is happening. They are disturbed by it, and they want to change it. They are very worried about where things will end up, and how it will limit the quality of life of the world in which they belong. They are fighters, and the true heroes of those societies.

I'm not sure how global their perspective is, or has to be. I don't know if they believe in the Bible, or know how much it is the basis of world history, even today. They're not necessarily concerned that God will bring another flood of some sort and destroy the world. They're more concerned that society might self-destruct, and become the playground for those who ran it into the ground.

The main thing is that they seem to have a sense of right and wrong, a moral compass that they follow. They are prepared to risk a lot personally for the sake of so many people they will never meet. That alone gives them great credentials to do what they do. They should be the ones leading their societies. The fact that they are fighting against the current leadership and chain-of-command is a disturbing piece of evidence about where society is headed.

I think this is an important part of the message of this week's parsha. In this world leadership is key to everything. The average person places their life and the lives of the ones they love in the hands of their leaders. Shouldn't they be more careful about whom they chose to fill such positions? Can we afford to assume that our leaders have our best interests in mind as a matter-of-fact, especially in societies where God has been excluded?

How do I come to this conclusion about the parsha? Because the parsha starts off talking about counting the entire nation, which turns masses of people into numbers alone. But then it switches tracks and identifies each tribe's leader by name. It makes them stand out and seem more important than the rest of the population.

They were princes of the people, but they did not buy their way into their positions. Korach will try that much later on, and it will only result in corruption and destruction, as it always eventually does. And though lineage played a major part in their retaining of their positions, you can be sure that if they lacked fear of God and were abusive in any way, they would have been replaced by someone more spiritually worthy.

This is why Rashi will later explain in Parashas Shlach that the spies who were also leaders of their tribes, only became corrupt once they left the camp. Had they been spiritually corrupt while they stood before Moshe to receive their mission, they would have been rejected and replaced. And had they been evil from the start, the souls of the sons of Ya'akov, each leader's forebear, would not have reincarnated into them to help them succeed on their journey.

Look what being a leader did for Rus. She descended from Moav, the son of Lot and his daughter. They are such a detestable people from the Torah's point-of-view that, a male Moabite can never convert.

Even though Rus's husband did not request it, she eventually converted to Judaism. And when her mother-in-law's husband died, Rus took care of her. Even after her own husband died, Rus continued to be more concerned about Naomi her mother-in-law than herself.

When Naomi decided to return home to Eretz Yisroel, Rus went with her, leaving behind everything she had known. She accepted a life of poverty and humiliation just to be able to look after her mother-in-law.

For a while, the situation remained bleak, but Rus's loyalty to her mother-in-law did not waver. It was for that reason that Boaz noticed her, eventually did yibum with her, and she gave birth to Oved, the great-grandfather of Dovid HaMelech and the line of Moshiach.

God loves His leaders. His leaders, and not the ones who are in it for their own personal gain and the adulation of others. ©2022 Rabbi P. Winston and torah.org

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Firstborn Redemption

We learn in several places in the Torah that the priesthood and all service in the Temple was originally to be the responsibility of the firstborn males from every tribe. When the firstborn participated in the sin of the Golden Calf, this leadership role was taken from them and given to the Tribe of Levi which included the Kohanim. Although this decree was mentioned earlier in the Torah, the actual commandment, which transferred that leadership and responsibility and the exchange of the Leviim in place of the firstborn, did not take place until this parasha.

The Torah tells us, "And Hashem said to Moshe, 'Count every firstborn male of the B'nei Yisrael from one month of age and up, and take a census of their names. You shall take the Leviim for Me, I am Hashem, in place of every firstborn of the B'nei Yisrael, and the animals of the Leviim in place of every firstborn of the animals of the B'nei Yisrael.' Moshe counted, as Hashem had commanded him, every firstborn of the B'nei Yisrael. Every firstborn male according to the number of their names, from one month of age and up,

according to their countings, was twenty-two thousand, two hundred and seventy-three. Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, 'Take the Leviim in place of every firstborn of the B'nei Yisrael, and the animals of the Leviim in place of their animals, and the Leviim shall be Mine, I am Hashem. And as for those redeemed of (the firstborn), the two hundred and seventy-three of the firstborn of the B'nei Yisrael who are in excess of the Leviim, you shall take five shekels each according to the head count, in the sacred shekel shall you take; the shekel is twenty geirah.'

Several questions arise from this passage. We are told that the reason for this replacement was because of the sin of the Golden Calf, yet the Torah discusses a replacement of the firstborn sons as well as the firstborn animals. Rashi explains that we are not talking here about the kosher animals which already belong to the Temple and are not replaced for any reason even if they have a blemish. Here it refers to the redemption of a firstborn donkey by a sheep, and one sheep of a Levi could be used to redeem many firstborn donkeys. Rashi explains that there is no count made of the individual firstborn donkeys and the sheep which replaced them. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the donkey, as a beast of burden, represents moveable goods. The redemption of the firstborn donkey indicates that "all lifeless family possessions belong to Hashem, and redeeming it with a sheep given to the Kohein illustrates that all lifeless possessions have value and meaning only in their convertibility into living human possibilities of furthering the general purposes of the Sanctuary."

The pasuk before the section which we quoted places the count of the Leviim at twenty-two thousand. Rashi and many other meforshim explain that this number is inaccurate. If we add the numbers of Kahat, Gershon, and Merari, the actual number is an additional three hundred. The Kli Yakar says that Hashem lowered the number to read three hundred less in order to teach that the camp of the Shechinah, that part of Hashem that dwells among the people, cannot exist in less than twenty-two thousand people. The ibn Ezra suggests that the number did not deal with hundreds just as other counts did not deal with less than ten. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that this number was to be used to offset the firstborn of the B'nei Yisrael, and the three hundred names of the Leviim which were not counted were firstborn Leviim and could not be used to offset the firstborn of a different tribe.

When the count of the firstborn of the B'nei Yisrael were matched with the Leviim, the two hundred seventy-three extra firstborn had to be redeemed with money. HaRav Sorotzkin presented us with a Midrash which described Moshe's problem. If Moshe would approach a firstborn son and demand the five-shekel redemption fee, the firstborn could easily claim that he was one of those who was matched against a Levi, and

someone other than he was one who still had to be redeemed with money. To solve this problem, Moshe made a lottery in which he wrote the name "son of Levi" on tickets equal to the number of Leviim and the words "five sh'kalim" on the number of extra tickets for the extra number of firstborn B'nei Yisrael.

HaRav Sorotzkin questioned the reluctance to be one who gave the five sh'kalim instead of one who was matched against a son of Levi. When the B'nei Yisrael were donating various gold, silver, and other objects for the building of the Temple, the Torah tells us that Moshe had to stop them because they willingly gave too much. Why would the firstborn be reluctant now to thank Hashem for the miracle of saving them when He killed the firstborn Egyptians? HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the donations made to the Temple were given by all, yet, here, only most of the firstborn would be matched against a son of Levi. Only two hundred and seventy-three, approximately one-one hundredth of the firstborn would have to pay. It is part of human nature that people are willing to participate when all are required, but do not like to be singled out as one of the few who must pay. Using HaRav Sorotzkin's logic, had Moshe instead asked all of the firstborn for volunteers to be redeemed by the five-shekel exchange, they might all have been ready to pay the five-shekel redemption. That would not have been a solution since the major reason for the redemption was the replacement of the firstborn by the Leviim. The only reason for the five-shekel redemption was the fact that there were not enough Leviim to displace each of the firstborn.

The Ramban explains that Hashem had sanctified the firstborn when He killed the firstborn Egyptians in the tenth plague. Some Rabbis argue that the firstborn acted as the priests (Kohanim), doing the service of the sacrifices and other religious obligations. When it was declared that the firstborn would be replaced after the Golden Calf, the process for that replacement had not as yet been designated. The firstborn were established as Kodesh, Holy and set aside. Even though Aharon and his sons were assigned the responsibilities of the priests, and the rest of the Leviim were assigned the special support tasks of the Temple, the holiness of the firstborn had not yet been removed and replaced. Only in this parasha does the actual replacement take place.

We know that today most firstborn sons have a pidyon haben, a redemption of the son, by giving five silver coins to a Kohein. Though this child no longer has the holiness that his birth provided him, he maintains the right and the responsibility of a leader within his family. May he grow to accept that leadership and, through his example, guide his siblings to serve Hashem.

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