

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

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

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

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

But the Torah is not mere history as a sequence of events. The Torah is about the truths that emerge through time. That is one of the great differences between ancient Israel and ancient Greece. Ancient Greece sought truth by contemplating nature and reason. The first gave rise to science, the second to philosophy. Ancient Israel found truth in history, in events and what God told us to learn from them. Science is about nature, Judaism is about human nature, and there is a great difference between them.

This issue of Toras Aish is sponsored
in honor of my little bro'
Yoni Weiss
on his passing of the Israeli CPA exam!
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Nature knows nothing about freewill. Scientists often deny that it exists at all. But humanity is constituted by its freedom. We are what we choose to be. No planet chooses to be hospitable to life. No fish chooses to be a hero. No peacock chooses to be vain. Humans do choose. And in that fact is born the drama to which the whole Torah is a commentary: how can freedom coexist with order? The drama is set on the stage of history, and it plays itself out through five acts, each with multiple scenes.

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

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

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

Act 3 is the subject of the book of Shemot. God rescues the Israelites from Egypt as He once rescued Noah from the Flood. As with Noah (and Abraham), God makes a covenant, this time at Sinai, and it is far more extensive than its precursors. It is a blueprint for social order, for an entire society based on law and justice. Yet again, however, humans create chaos, by making a Golden Calf a mere forty days after the great

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revelation. God threatens catastrophe, destroying the whole nation and beginning again with Moses, as He had done with Noah and Abraham (Ex. 32: 10). Only Moses' passionate plea prevents this from happening. God then institutes a new order.

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

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

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

new leader. The book of Devarim is Moses' prelude to Act 5, which takes place in the days of his successor Joshua.

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

And so the Jewish people keeps repeating the story told five times in the Torah. God creates order. Humans create chaos. Bad things happen, then God and Israel begin again. Will the story never end? One way or another it is no coincidence that Bemidbar usually precedes Shavuot, anniversary of the giving of the Torah at Sinai. God never tires of reminding us that the central human challenge in every age is whether freedom can coexist with order. It can, when humans freely choose to follow God's laws, given in one way to humanity after the Flood and in another to Israel after the exodus.

The alternative, ancient and modern, is the rule of power, in which, as Thucydides said, the strong do as they will and the weak suffer as they must. That is not freedom as the Torah understands it, nor is it a recipe for love and justice. Each year as we prepare for Shavuot by reading parshat Bemidbar, we hear God's call: here in the Torah and its mitzvot is the way to create a freedom that honours order, and a social order that honours human freedom. There is no other way.

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The book of Bamidbar is perhaps one of the saddest, so to speak, of all of the Holy Scriptures.

Whereas the book of Shemot, which records for us the sin of the Golden Calf also gives us pause, it concludes with the final construction of the Mishkan and God's Presence, so to speak, resting within the encampment of Israel. But the book of Bamidbar, which begins on a high note of numerical accomplishment and the seemingly imminent entry of the Jewish people into the Land of Israel, ends on a very sour note. It records the destruction of the entire generation including its leadership without their entrance into the Promised Land.

The narrative of the book of Bamidbar tells us of rebellion and constant carping, military defeats and victories, false blessings, human prejudices and personal bias. But the Torah warned us in its very first chapters that "this is the book of human beings." And all of the weaknesses exhibited by Israel in the desert of

Sinai, as recorded for us in the book of Bamidbar, are definitely part of the usual human story and nature.

Over the decades that I have taught this book of Bamidbar to students and congregants of mine, invariably many of them have then asked me incredulously: "How could the Jewish people have behaved in such a manner?" I cannot speak for that generation of Jews as described in the book of Bamidbar but I wonder to myself "How can so many Jews in our generation relate to the existence of the State of Israel in our time so cavalierly?"

How do we tolerate the cruelties that our one-size-fits-all school systems inflict on the 'different' child? How do we subject our daughters to the indignities of the current matchmaking process? How, indeed!?" And my answer to myself always is that for the great many of us, human nature trumps common sense, logic and true Torah values. I imagine that this may have been true of the generation of the book of Bamidbar as well.

One of the wonders of the book of Bamidbar is that the count of the Jewish people at the end of the forty years of living in the desert was almost exactly the same as it was at the beginning of their sojourn there when they left Egyptian bondage. Though the following is certainly not being proposed by me as an answer or explanation to this unusual fact, I have always thought that this is a subtle reminder to us that that no matter how great the experiences, no matter how magnificent the miracles, no matter how great the leaders, human nature with all of its strengths and weaknesses basically remains the same.

It is not only that the numbers don't change much, the people and the generations didn't and don't change much either. Human nature remains pretty constant. But our task is to recognize that and channel our human nature into productive and holy actions and behavior-to bend to a nobility of will and loyalty. Only by recognizing the propensity of our nature will we be able to accomplish this necessary and noble goal. © 2012 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest... From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks. Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord" (Lev 23:9,10,15,16).

Our Hebrew calendar places us at the end of the count of the Omer which connects Passover and Shavuot, after the modern holidays of Israel

Independence Day and Jerusalem Day. It gives us a perfect opportunity to take a fresh look at the Biblical commandment to count the Omer. In this way, we can understand the connection between Passover and Shavuot, and discern the silent "finger of the Divine" guiding Jewish history.

Our investigation begins with a most problematic phrase which is to be found in the Biblical passage dealing with all of the festivals. "When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest ... From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks. Count fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord" (Lev 23:9,10,15,16).

The count is to begin "on the morrow of the Rest Day", which may be interpreted as either on the day after the Sabbath following the Passover festival or on the day following the first day of the festival of Passover, the sixteenth day of Nissan.

The Sadducees were a second commonwealth religious sect consisting mainly of Kohanim and wealthy aristocrats who were strict Biblical constructionists and who limited the scope of the Oral Law. They maintained the former interpretation, arguing that the count was to begin the day after the Sabbath. This meant that the Israelites would count from Sunday to Sunday for seven weeks with Shavuot always falling out on the fiftieth day, a Sunday.

The Pharisees - the second commonwealth religious sect who made up the religious mainstream were committed to an expanding Oral Law. They would always begin the count on the second night of Passover, Nissan 16, with the specific day of the week remaining fluid, depending on the year.

The Sadducees' interpretation seems much more in line with the plain meaning of our Biblical text, "on the morrow of the Sabbath". For the Pharisees, Shabbat in this context must be taken to mean "festival", a day of rest.

What is the true basis of their debate? Remember that the Pharisees could find themselves harvesting the barley omer on Friday night, which would be impossible for the Sadducees for whom the harvest sacrifice was always on Saturday night, on Sunday eve.

The heart of our understanding of this Pharisee-Sadducee debate lies in two distinct ways of viewing the Festivals and the two distinct and separate New Years of the Hebrew calendar. Tishrei marks the New Year from an agricultural and universalistic perspective, commemorating the creation of the world on Rosh Hashanah and announcing the beginning of the rainy season which is so necessary for the year's good crop and harvest on Sukkot. Nissan, on the other hand, is the first month from an historical and nationalistic perspective, commemorating our exodus from Egypt and our birth as an independent nation.

Which of these two rubrics does the Omer period fit into? The Sadducees logically maintained that it is purely agricultural, - a seven week period which opens with the ripening of barley and concludes with the ripening of wheat, with the rest of the seven species ripening during this time as well. It is a free-standing period of seven Sabbath weeks, paralleling the seven times seven Sabbaticals of forty-nine years and culminating in the purely agricultural Festival of the first fruits (Shavuot). Note as well the centrality of the Shabbat element in this entire picture, emphasizing the morrow of the Sabbath day!

The Pharisees see it differently. Remember, they would say, that the Bible commands the Omer count and barley harvest sacrifice right after its mention of Passover, the first month marking our national independence and entrance into history. Hence they link the count specifically to Passover, beginning on the second even of Passover, thereby the connection from Passover to Shavuot in an extricable bond. And although the period is unmistakably dedicated to the grain harvest, it is also - and for them primarily - the count of in preparation for the Revelation at Sinai. Passover is only the first step of our freedom from slavery, leading up to the much more exalted freedom with our service of the Divine through the Revelation at Sinai on the fiftieth day (Shavuot, according to our oral tradition).

From this historical perspective, Passover only begins a march to freedom, which culminates on Shavuot with the Festival of First Fruits in our Temple. It is the time for our ethical, moral and religious preparation for God's revelation.

Historically, along the way, we fell down on the job, and so we must mourn the loss of 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva's disciples in the abortive Bar Kochba rebellion against Rome, a tragedy which occurred during this period of the calendar year (in 135 CE) because we didn't respect each other sufficiently. The modern calendar, however, brings us renewed hope, with our new festivals of Israeli Independence Day and Jerusalem Day occurring during this same calendar period as well! © 2012 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“For every firstborn is Mine; at the time I smote every firstborn in the Land of Egypt I sanctified for Myself every firstborn of Israel” (Bamidbar 3:13). At first glance, the nature of this "sanctification" would seem to be that the firstborn would perform the religious service. However, this had already been their role well before the tenth plague in Egypt. The reason given for Yaakov's desire to purchase the birthright from Eisav (see Rashi on B'raishis 25:31), and why Eisav said he would die if he retained it (Rashi on 25:32), was

because the firstborn was responsible for bringing offerings to G-d. If this responsibility didn't start until after the exodus, why would Eisav be afraid of it? The Talmud (Z'vachim 112b) tells us that until the Mishkan was built, offerings were brought by the firstborn. This was actually true since Adam (Bamidbar Rabbah 4:8, see also with Rambam's commentary on the Mishna in Z'vachim). Obviously, then, this wasn't the purpose of G-d taking the firstborn "to Him," nor was it the result of this "sanctification."

That doesn't mean nothing changed as a result of this "sanctification." Even though Yaakov bought the birthright from Eisav, after G-d "took" the firstborn for Himself, it could no longer be transferred to a sibling. Another difference is one of perspective. Bringing offerings had been one of the responsibilities of the firstborn in his role as "head of family;" once "sanctified to G-d," though, they were working for Him, and could only take care of personal matters when their responsibilities to G-d allowed it. The fact that it had been a family function allowed the "birthright" to be passed down by a father to a son who was not a firstborn, such as when Noach passed it down to Shem rather than Yefes (see Bamidbar Rabbah 4:8), or even to someone outside the immediate family, such as when Shem gave it to Avraham (ibid). [It should be noted, as this Midrash does, that Avraham wasn't the firstborn in his family either.] According to S'fornu (Bamidbar 3:13, see also Netziv on Sh'mos 13:13), non-holy work was only allowed after a "redemption," a process that was unnecessary before G-d sanctified the firstborn. Nevertheless, even if these changes were considered significant, it doesn't seem that they would be the reason why G-d sanctified the firstborn rather than leaving them with their previous status.

It very well might be that there need not be some grandiose purpose for G-d sanctifying the firstborn and taking them to be His; it could have merely been a function of their being spared when the Egyptian firstborn were killed. It could also have just been included in the greater "firstborn" picture; the same way we give the firstborn animals to G-d as a means of recognizing that He is the source of everything (see Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #18), our firstborn sons "belong to Him," originally by mandating that they perform the Temple service and then by having to "redeem" them (see Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #392). It is another vehicle that helps us remember the miraculous exodus from Egypt, as having the firstborn "belong to G-d" is a direct result of His having smitten the Egyptian firstborn right before we were freed. However, from a macro perspective, something else seems to have occurred as a result of G-d taking the firstborn "to Him" rather than leaving them the way they were.

Until G-d sanctified the firstborn and declared that they were His, their role was almost voluntary; it was their choice (with much input from their family), and

was not automatic. After G-d sanctified the first born, on the other hand, it was no longer up to them or their families to decide who represented them before G-d. The firstborn were now mandated to be the ones to do the service, and had to follow the guidelines they were given. A volunteer has much leeway regarding what tasks he is willing to do, and how he is willing to do them. A worker, on the other hand, must do exactly what his boss tells him to do, especially if the "worker" has no choice but to take the job given to him. This change is significant in a religious system that insists on the letter of the law being followed, as the service is more likely to be done the way G-d wants it to be done when the workers are "His" rather than having been grandfathered in from the old system. It is even more significant when we consider that their roles would shortly be taken away from them and given to the Priests and the Levites. Rather than the primary thrust of the "sanctification of the firstborn" being a means to give them additional religious responsibilities, making them "His" was a means to take their "inherited" religious responsibilities away from them. After all, if they "belong to G-d" because He saved them, He can tell them precisely what role he wants them to have, even if that role is diminished from what it previously was.

During Korach's rebellion, one of the main "groups" of rebels was comprised of the firstborn, upset that they had lost their status (see Chizkuni on Bamidbar 16:2). Although one of their arguments may have been that G-d couldn't have really taken the Temple service away from them since He had just designated them for it 13 months earlier, I would suggest that changing their status from "volunteer priests" to "G-d's official workers" made it much more easy for (most of) them to accept, or at least deal with, G-d changing the responsibilities of His personal workforce. [That the nation, including the firstborn, accepted this change is evidenced by their "doing what G-d commanded them" (Bamidbar 1:44 and 2:34, see Bamidbar Rabbah 1:12), even though "doing it" meant moving away from the Mishkan and allowing the Levi'im to form a protective barrier around it (1:53). It also meant allowing the Levi'im to become the Mishkan's caretakers (1:50-52). It is noteworthy this role was given to the Levi'im before the "transferring of sanctity" from the firstborn to the Levi'im took place.] Knowing that representing the people made the firstborn more susceptible to following the whims of the nation (which is what happened when they were asked to bring offerings to the golden calf-despite the "change in status" brought about via their sanctification having already occurred), G-d created an "out," a way to remove the firstborn from the priestly service if and when it became necessary. By making them "His," they would have to take on whatever role He insisted should be theirs, including having no more of a role than anyone else in the family.

This could help explain why/how, when they were first told of the sanctification of the firstborn, the nation was also instructed to "redeem [them]" (Sh'mos 13:13/15; see also 34:20), despite this being well before the sin of the golden calf (let alone before the transferring of sanctity from the firstborn to the Levi'im). Rashbam and Chizkuni tell us that this "redemption" refers to the redemption mentioned in our Parasha (Bamidbar 3:44-51), and Rashi (in Sh'mos) tells us that the "redemption" refers to the five shekalim discussed "elsewhere," i.e. Bamidbar 3:47 and 18:16. This would seem extremely strange, since this redemption transferred the status of the firstborn onto the Levi'im; why is the redemption of the firstborn from their sanctified status being referenced when this status is first being bestowed upon them? Although this redemption could be understood as the S'fornu explains it, i.e. allowing them to do mundane things too, these commentators obviously don't understand it that way. It is possible this is how it was understood until the actual redemption took place, a little over a year later, at which point its real meaning became apparent. Nevertheless, unless G-d meant that He would (or at least could) remove their sanctified status if/when it became necessary, the five-shekel redemption process that transferred the sanctification from the firstborn onto the Levi'im couldn't have been what G-d meant. If, on the other hand, the original sanctification process was meant to make it easier to remove that sanctification-and take away the religious responsibilities that had been there for generations with it, we can understand why (and how) the redemption from that sanctification was included from the very beginning. © 2012 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 strayed 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 rededicated 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. © 2012 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg

Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne

Bamidbar is called "Sefer Hapekudim" - the book of the census - because Bnei Yisrael are counted twice. Many reasons have been given to explain why a census was necessary, but the simplest one is

that is was needed in order to count "all those in Yisrael who will be part of the army" [Bamidbar 1:3]. The Ramban comments, "This just like any government when it prepares to go to war... It was necessary for Moshe and the leaders to know the number of soldiers in the war... The Torah would not depend on the miracle of having one soldier pursue a thousand... That is, the census was to prepare for the army." [Ramban, Bamidbar 1:45].

Today this seems to be very straightforward, but at the time this was a novel approach. This was the first time ever that an army of the people was established. It was not an army of hired soldiers, slaves, or volunteers, but an army made up of the people of the nation. The entire nation was fighting for its existence and for its country. It is not always necessary for every man to enlist, but even so there should be representatives from all the different sectors of the nation, such as in the case of the war against Midyan, when each tribe send a thousand people to fight.

The army of Yisrael fights not only for physical property, like the armies of other nations. It fights the war of G-d, a war to defend the desired purpose of all of creation. This is the mission of Yisrael, as the Ramban writes, "If the memory of Yisrael would be lost... the purpose of creating mankind would become null and void." [Torah portion of Haazinu]. The Ramban writes the same idea, "[The soldier] should be aware that he is fighting for the unity of G-d... as is written, 'For my master is fighting in the wars of G-d' [Shmuel I 25:28]" [Hilchot Melachim 1:15].

The camp of Yisrael was organized according to this principle. The Ark and the Shechina were at the center and the rest of the camp surrounded them. This showed that the Shechina, the holy presence, was the heart of the nation and the nation goes out to war because of it. This is as King David wrote, "For we have been killed for you all the time" [Tehillim 44:23].

Just as the nation of Yisrael fights to defend the honor of G-d, so is the attitude of the Holy One, Blessed be He, towards the enemies of Yisrael, treating the matter as something that is directly relevant to Him. "Arise, G-d, let Your enemies be dispersed, and let those who hate You flee from Your face" [Bamidbar 10:24]. "'I will avenge My enemies, and I will repay all those who hate Me' [Devarim 32:41] - All the evil is done to us because of hatred of G-d, the evil ones attack Him and hate Him, and He should take vengeance on them" [Ramban].

At the same time, when the entire nation participates in the army, some of the people are set aside for spiritual labor, specifically the tribe of Levi. However, this is not only the tribe of Levi, but "anybody whose spirit moves him and who understands on his own to separate himself and to stand before G-d to serve Him... becomes the holiest of holies" [Hilchot Shemita V'Yovel 13:13]. However, this is true only when "the victory of Yisrael does not depend on them," but

when Gentiles come to wage war on Yisrael, "If there is a need for them, they must come to the aid of their brethren" [Chazon Ish, Orach Chaim 112, 114].

Some people have the ability to remain in two realms, and as long as weapons continue to exist in the world they hold a book and a sword at the same time. In this way, they serve both "G-d and His nation Yisrael" [Divrei Hayamim II 31:8]. © 2012 Rabbi A. Bazak and Machon Zomet

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Bamidbar begins with the third official count of the Jewish nation. The term used in the Torah is that we should "count the heads" (1:2) of all the households, but the Hebrew word "Se-u" could also mean, "lift the heads". Why would the Torah use such ambiguous language? Also, why were they to be counted according to their households, which had never been done in the past? Rashi informs us that prior to the census each Jew was required to produce a book of their lineage. The Midrash adds that producing this book was also required to be able to receive the Torah. Why is receiving the Torah dependent upon having this book of lineage?

Rabbi Zweig explains that surpassing the expectations that have been defined by one's social upbringing is what gives a person a sense of accomplishment. If a person is able to identify their lineage, they might learn that their ancestors were people who took responsibility for themselves and had honorable standards. For the rest of the world, the very act of taking responsibility is in itself an elevating sense of accomplishment. However, behaving responsibly is not considered an accomplishment for G-d's chosen nation. Jews are EXPECTED to behave differently than animals, to act responsibly, for our forefathers have set a standard that makes anything less unacceptable. This explains why households were important enough to be counted. The Ramban (Nachmanides) enforces the lesson of our Parsha by explaining the use of the Torah's language: The alternative meaning of "lifting" of the heads can also be a positive, but only if the body and its actions are lifted with it. Our heads and minds can lift us to greatness, so long as we have our actions to take us there. © 2012 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Is there any significance to the Jewish people camping around about the Tabernacle during their wanderings in the desert? (Numbers 2:2)

An analysis of the similarities between Revelation at Sinai and the way the Jews traveled through the desert yields a response. When receiving the Torah the Jews encircled Sinai; in the desert the

Jews encircled the Tabernacle. At Sinai Jewish leadership ascended higher up the mountain than the larger community to hear the voice of God; in the desert an inner circle comprised of leaders of the Jewish nation camped around the Tabernacle encompassed in turn by a larger outer circle made up of the tribes of Israel. And, of course, the presence of God hovered over Sinai; in the Tabernacle, the spirit of God was similarly omnipresent. (See Ramban in his introduction to the Book of Numbers)

Could it be argued that when leaving Sinai the Jews felt disconnected from God? Therefore, it was necessary to create a kind of continuous Sinai experience. In the words of Benno Jacob, "the Tabernacle was a mobile Sinai in the midst of them [Jewish people]."

As we simulated Sinai in the desert so we do the same in contemporary times when the Torah is read in public. After all, the reader could be viewed as Moshe (Moses) speaking the word of God, surrounded by two gabbaim (helpers), much like Moshe was surrounded by helpers when the Torah was given at Sinai. Indeed, for many the custom is to stand during the public reading of the Torah, like we did at Sinai.

No wonder that this week's portion Bamidbar is always read on the Shabbat prior to Shavuot. Shavuot is the day when we recant that moment when Israel was wed to God. What better way to prepare for the reenactment of that great experience than to read how we as a people encircled the Tabernacle like we did at Sinai—symbolic of a bride walking around her groom, and a groom giving a ring to his bride as both declare, "may we be betrothed to each other for ever." © 1998 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 ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

TorahWeb

A Torah observant Jew is often referred to as a shomer Torah u'mitzvos. The requirement to be shomer mitzvot is repeated several times throughout the Torah. What is the significance of being shomer—literally guarding—the mitzvot and why does this define the essence of a Torah way of life?

We are taught in Parshas Bamidbar about the mitzvah of shmiras Hamikdash, i.e. the guarding the Mishkan and later the Beis Hamikdash that was performed by the Kohanim and Leviim. According to many meforshim in Maseches Tamid, this "guarding" was not to actually protect the Beis Hamikdash, but rather was to indicate the significance of what we are "watching over." Similarly, shmiras hamitzvos is not merely performing mitzvot, but rather a declaration of the supreme importance of mitzvot in our lives.

What does shmiras hamitzvos entail above and beyond the fulfillment of mitzvot? Chazal articulate

several times the dual obligation of "lishmor v'laasos—to watch over and to perform" the mitzvot, wherein lishmor refers to learning, and laasos addresses actual fulfillment. Learning Torah is the ultimate expression of shmira. If one truly views the mitzvot as the will of Hashem, one will spend all his time and effort to understand them. As such, the constant dedication to talmud Torah is the greatest acknowledgement of the significance of the mitzvot and thus the ultimate expression of shmiras hamitzvos.

Chazal relate that when one who learns Torah enters the next world, he is greeted with the words, "ashrei sheba l'kan v'talmudo b'yado—happy is the one who comes here with learning in his hand." This seems to be a strange way to describe one who learns; what is meant by the one whose learning is "in his hand"? The most precious of one's assets are not left for someone else to watch, but rather kept in one's own possession. Rashi comments that when Yaakov sent multiple gifts to Esav he also sent him previous jewels. Although not mentioned explicitly in the Torah, these jewels are alluded to by the pasuk that describes gifts sent from "the hand of" Yaakov, since what was in Yaakov's own hand must have been the most important. Perhaps this is the "learning in one's hand" that Chazal are referring to. It is not mere learning that warrants the special welcome in the world to come, but rather it is the acknowledgement of the significance of Torah and mitzvot that is demonstrated by a lifetime of talmud Torah that accompanies a person to the next world and merits such a welcome.

As we approach the yom tov of Shavuos we rededicate ourselves to shmiras haTorah v'hamitzvos. It is though the vehicle of talmud Torah that we demonstrate the significance of Torah in our lives. May we merit on this Shavuos not only to receive the Torah, but also to hold it in our hands as befits the precious gift Hashem has bestowed upon us. © 2012 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & the TorahWeb Foundation

