



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Bamidbar 5781

Banners In The Desert

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered May 20, 1961)

In our Sidra of this morning, the first of the Fourth Book of Moses, we read of the peregrinations of Israel in the desert. The people was to be divided according to its tribe and to march through the wilderness in a set pattern and order. Each tribe, in addition, was to have its own banner, or flag. This banner or degel was to differentiate it from all the other tribes of Israel.

What is the origin of this interesting commandment? Our sacred tradition gives us an amazing answer. That is, that G-d did not command the Israelites concerning the degalim on His own initiative. Rather, he merely acceded to the request of the Jews who insisted upon the banners in the desert. *Nitavu Yisrael she-yihu lahem degalim k'malekhei ha-sharet*--the Israelites desired that they have banners just like the ministering angels.

What a remarkable statement! Are we to imagine that the Israelites conceived of the angels as tin soldiers--and envied them? Do angels really parade as if they were in an elementary school play?

In order to understand the profound symbol of the banners in the desert and their relation to angels, we must understand that there are two words for a banner or flag in Hebrew, and each has a different connotation. Those words are *degel* and *nes*. *Nes* is an external symbol, a sign to others; it is meant for outsiders. Thus, Isaiah speaks of the Messiah's function towards the rest of the world at the end of the day; *ve'nissa nes la-goyim me'rachok*--"He shall raise a nes for the nations from the distance." The *nes* is meant for other nations; it is for the distant, for the outsider. *Degel* on the other hand is a symbol of the fulfillment of one's own purpose, his own destiny, the meaning of his own life for himself.

Nes implies a communication with others; you identify yourself thereby to others. *Degel* implies communion with yourself; you identify yourself to yourself--it is a symbol of self-identity.

Nes will cause people to rally. *Degel* will rally people to a cause. *Nes* is appropriate to the *harim*--the mountains, with which it is often associated in the Bible. For you are on top of the mountain when you preach down to others. The *degel* is generally associated with *midbar*, the desert. When you are in a wasteland, there you must first find yourself and discover who you are and what you stand for.

In Jewish tradition, an angel is created for one single purpose, for one solitary *shelichut*. The angel knows what it is he was created for, and he proceeds to do it. Therefore, the *degel* is indeed symbolic of the *malakh*. The *degel* symbolizes a single-minded purpose--and an angel lives for just that. Hence, *nitavu Yisrael she-yihu lahem degalim k'malakhei ha-sharet* means that the Israelites wanted, like the angels, to know the great purpose for which each of them was brought into the world. Every Jew wanted to know what he stands for, what function he is to serve in the grand drama of creation.

Purpose does not mean only a career, a profession, a matter of occupation ambitions. One does not have a noble purpose in life by selling real estate, or securities or textiles, or diamonds. These are only the means to an end. And the end, the goal, the purpose--that is the *degel*.

Like the ministering angel, each of us must consider life as a mission, a *shelichut*. Each of us must consider himself an ambassador of G-d who must report back to the Almighty at the end of his earthly pilgrimage, who will then judge whether or not we have carried out our task faithfully.

Of course it is difficult for everyone to know what single great purpose he is to serve in life. Some people, perhaps the greatest number, are helplessly lost, with no idea of what they are doing in the world. They are like driftwood on the wild waves of a stormy ocean. These are people who lack identity, who seemingly have no purpose, no *degel*. It is about such people that the Russian theologian, Nicholas

Berdyayev, said that they have not only lost the way, but they have also lost the address. They do not know where they are going, and in fact they do not know if one is supposed to go any place at all in life. They live in a vast midbar without the benefit of degalim.

Many areas of modern life are such bannerless deserts. Television is one such notable example. It was most refreshing to hear Mr. Newton Minnow, who was recently appointed as the Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, lecture the broadcasters about their responsibilities. It was a speech which will long be remembered by thoughtful people. He reproached them for having no purpose other than that of exploiting the airwaves for financial gain. The words he used to describe the present situation are most appropriate: “a vast wasteland.” In Hebrew, that is--midbar! What Mr. Minnow was trying to do--vainly, I fear--was to give them degalim, banners, a sense of purpose, a set of high goals, in this wasteland. It will be a real pity if the vested interests of industry and politics manage to destroy his plan and return the control of the TV airwaves to those who regard it as nothing more than another source of income.

Most of us, however, and most decent people, are not in that category of those who are completely lost. We know in general where we belong, what our general goals are, what camp we belong to. However, we do not know, each of us, his individual purpose in life. We know that as human beings it is our duty to reflect the Divine Image in which we were created, by being decent, compassionate, kind. We know that as Jews, more specifically, we are obligated to the prophetic challenge: *atem edai, ne'um ha-Shem*, “Ye are my witnesses, are the words of the Lord.” Our task as Jews is to be the witness to the presence of G-d in human history. And, as the sainted author of the Sefat Emet, put it, how are we witness?--By living according to “the words of the Lord,” that is, Torah. But if you ask such a person: what specifically is your task, your purpose in life, your specific function in the Divine economy of creation, he does not know.

Some individuals, a minority, are truly blessed. They have matured spiritually, and have discovered what it is exactly for which they were created; they know their purpose in life. How fortunate they are!

These last two types--those who know the general trend of their being, and those who know the specific purpose for which they were brought into the world, are represented in our Sidra by the words *ish al machnehu*

v'ish al diglo, “every man according to his camp, and every man according to his banner.” These represent the two types we have mentioned. (See Sefat Emet.)

Ish al machnehu represents those who know the general camp with which they are identified. They have identified themselves with a group. *Ish al diglo* are those who know specifically their *degel* or purpose in life. They have identified themselves also within the group. *Ish al machnehu* may be in the right camp, but he tends to fritter away his energies and his resources on the wrong task, sometimes on trivialities. Such a person is in the right *machaneh*, the right group and the right environment, but he has never managed to find himself.

The story is told of the sainted Chafetz Chayim who, in a time of great and grave community crisis, noticed one of the wealthiest men in the town staying long after the hour of services in order to recite the Psalms. The gentile and saintly Chafetz Chayim approached him with the following rebuke. He told him that he had no right to spend his time reciting the Psalms when G-d had blessed him with the wherewithal to alleviate the grave crisis which had struck the community. “Your business,” he said, “is to organize campaigns for charity and disburse it yourself, not to spend all your time in reciting the Tehillim.” And he told him the following parable, “in the army of Czar Nicholas there are many divisions. If a soldier who has been trained for the cavalry and is serving there at present, were one fine day to decide that he is going to join the artillery, he may be serving the same Czar and fighting for the same cause, and meaning well all along. But what probably will happen is that his superiors will court martial him and put him against the wall to face the firing squad. His purpose was determined by the Czar to be cavalry, not artillery. You cannot mix purposes by yourself.” *Ish al machnehu* is not sufficient. We must strive for *ish al diglo*.

This latter class, those who know what their place and purpose is in life, they have indeed achieved the angelic distinction of *degel*. In the Song of Songs we read: *diglo alai ahava*, “His banner above me is love.” The word *ahava*, love, is numerically equivalent to *echad*--“one” (See Sefat Emet). The only way to discover the *degel* of *echad*, the single-minded application to a great cause, your single greatest purpose in life, that for which you were created, is to experiment with every noble purpose, every sacred task, every lofty cause, until you discover that which you can do best and that with which you can fall in love. You must have a deep loyalty and a profound affection for what you

recognize as your purpose in life. The banner of echad must participate in ahavah.

Is there any need to enumerate the hundreds of great purposes which beckon to each and every one of us? There is Israel, education--both your own scholarship and assisting others, there is rescue work, there is cancer, there is heart work, there is Hebrah Kadisha, there is Shabbat, there is Free Loan Society, there is the ability to make others happy through word or song, there is helping the retarded children...there is indeed no lack of degalim!

About eight hundred years ago Rabbi Judah, the author of Sefer Chassidim told us that the truly pious man will never neglect any one of the 613 mitzvot. Indeed, to have a great cause never means to renege or to be negligent of any of the obligations to which all Jews are committed. However, the truly pious man will choose one mitzvah above all others which will become his symbol, his purpose, his degel. Perhaps that is why we refer to a young man who has attained religious maturity as a bar mitzvah; by right, we should call him a bar mitzvot, since on this thirteenth birthday he becomes responsible for

After the Fall

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

In a speech to the pro-Israel lobby, American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), President Bush, speaking of the friendship between America and Israel, said that both countries are "founded on certain basic beliefs: that God watches over the affairs of men, and values every life." Although one may argue over whether or not Mr. Bush's assessment of the founding principles of the two countries is accurate, the beliefs he mentioned are certainly included in this week's Torah reading, parshas Bamidbar. The parsha begins with God commanding that the entire nation be counted, thus emphasizing the importance of each individual, as Ramban points out, and proceeds to describe the encampment of the nation in the wilderness, focused around the center, the mishkan, in which the aron - the holy ark - containing the tablets with the Ten Commandments - the word of God - was housed. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Lunshitz, in his commentary Keli Yakar points out that being encamped around the mishkan and the aron was indicative of the fact that they were being led by God during their time in the wilderness. Both of these beliefs need to be understood in light of the changed situation of the nation after the incident of

the observance of all the commandments. But on this day we tell him that with his assumption of responsibility for all the commandments, he is at the same time urged to find one area of virtue, or goodness, of religious creativity which will define his own purpose in creation.

It is significant that we read the portion of degalim on the Saturday before Shabuot. On Shabuot we each realize what is our machaneh, our camp. It is that of Torah, but the Sidra of degalim reminds us: that it is not enough merely to be a man of Torah. We must also each know our individual purpose, we are each challenged to find and execute his shelichut. The Sidra addresses each of us: What do you stand for? Where and what is your banner in the desert of life?

Happy is the man who can answer clearly and lucidly. Blessed is his life for his mission, his shelichut is triumphant. His existence is meaningful and worthy. In the words of King David: neran'nah bi-yeshuatekha u-veshem Elokenu nidgol-- "We shall sing over Thy victory and raise our banners in the name of our G-d." Yemalei ha-Shem kol mishaletekha, "May G-d fulfill all your requests."

Read more at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

the golden calf, whose repercussions are reflected in this week's parsha in connection with the tribe of Levi. To better understand how these beliefs are brought out in our parsha, we need to look back at the end of last week's parsha, Bechukosai.

Parshas Bechukosai ends with the verse, "These are the mitzvos that God commanded Moshe to the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai" (Vayikra 27:34). However, in the preceding verse, we are told of the prohibition of exchanging one consecrated animal for another. Rabbi Yitzchok Karo, in his commentary Toldos Yitzchok, cites a midrash which says that this prohibition is followed by the counting in the beginning of Bamidbar to indicate that God will not exchange the Jewish people for another nation. One may ask, however, why the Jewish people would need to be reassured in this way. I believe the answer to this question can be found in the symbolism behind the mitzvoh immediately preceding the prohibition of exchanging one animal for another, namely the mitzvoh of tithing one's cattle and sheep, or ma'asar beheimah.

The procedure followed in the mitzvoh of ma'asar beheimah is to count one's sheep as they pass through a

small door, and to mark the tenth one with a red pigment, and consecrate it. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes that parshas Bamidbar follows close after this mitzvoh to show that just as the farmer counts his flock, so too does God count His flock, the Jewish nation. However, I believe that there is more to this imagery than Rabbi Hirsch's explanation. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, z"l, explained the wording of one of the first kinos, or elegies that we recite on Tisha B'Av morning, Eicha Atzta, on the basis of the mitzvoh of tithing one's flock. In that kinah, the Jewish people is referred to as '*telaicha*' - Your (God's) sheep. Rav Soloveitchik z"l explained that although, in the process of tithing animals, only the tenth is declared holy, if the first nine animals would not be counted, the tenth could not be counted, either. Thus, all ten animals participate in the process of sanctification. Similarly, although the Jewish nation has within it the tribe of Levi, which is considered holy, that tribe is a product of the entire Jewish nation, and, therefore, the entire nation is referred to as God's flock.

Following Rav Soloveitchik's explanation of the symbolism of the mitzvoh of maa'sar beheimah, perhaps we can say that when the midrash portrays God as saying that he will not exchange the Jews for any other nation, it was reacting to the change that took place when the service of God in the mishkan was transferred from the firstborn to the tribe of Levi. God was saying, in the image of the midrash, that the people should not think that just as He exchanged the firstborn for the Levites, perhaps He will also exchange the entire nation for another. Therefore, immediately following these two laws, the book of Bamidbar begins, with a count of the Jewish nation, projecting the message that God will never exchange His nation for another, and that each person in the nation, no matter which tribe he is in, has a unique role to play, and has a special status in God's eyes

Interestingly, when God tells Moshe to count the people (Bamidbar 1:2), He says "*seu es rosh kol adas bnei Yisroel*," which means, literally, 'lift up the heads of the entire assembly of the children of Israel.' The word "*seu*," - literally, lift up - has a dual connotation, according to the midrash in Bamidbar Rabbah (1:9). The midrash mentions that we find a similar expression used in regard to Yosef's interpretations of the dreams of the chief of the cupbearers and the chief of the bakers (Bereishis 40:13 and 19). In connection with the chief of the cupbearers, however, it meant to lift his head in a positive sense - to be elevated - while in the case of the chief of the bakers, it was used in a

negative sense - meaning that his head would be removed. God is telling the people, explains the midrash, that if they merit it and follow in God's ways, they will be elevated, and if they do not merit it, and rebel against God, they will be punished. Rabbi Avrohom Binyomin Sofer, author of the commentary Kesav Sofer, explains that this was said in the wake of the incident of the eigel, or the golden calf. The people felt that they were not worthy of God's attention as a result of that sin. Therefore, God told them that each of them has special status in His eyes, and because of that status, they have to act properly and actualize their potential. Perhaps here, too, this message was needed because the tribe of Levi was about to be counted separately and exchanged for the firstborn. Perhaps the people felt a loss of status because of this. Therefore, they had to be reassured that each of them was still special in God's eyes.

Rabbi Shimon Malka, in his commentary Istakel BeOraisa to parshas Bamidbar, writes that the entire order of encampment, as set out in this parsha, reflects a process of atonement for the incident of the golden calf. He notes that according to one rabbinic source, each tribe had an emblem on its flag, portraying one of the animals engraved on the divine chariot, a vision of which they had seen when they crossed the Yam Suf. Each of these animals is characterized by a certain trait, which reflects a power in the universe. The point of the vision was to indicate that God was in control of these forces. When the people asked for a golden calf to be made, however, they were, in effect, beginning to attribute powers symbolized by these animals to forces outside of God's control. By forming four major degolim, one on each direction of the compass, each with a symbol of a different animal portrayed on its flag, and encamping around the central point of the aron, the tribes were indicating that the powers reflected in the animals thus portrayed are ultimately under God's control. In effect, they were acknowledging God's control of the world, and His role in the events that occur in it, and, in this way, rectifying the mistake they made when asking for the eigel.

Although Rabbi Malka does not say this, I believe that the traits characterized by the animals portrayed on the flags also constituted traits which each tribe personified. By displaying these emblems, the tribes were indicating their understanding that despite the replacement of the firstborn by the tribe of Levi, each of them had their own special traits, and each was special in God's eyes. At the same time, by encamping around the aron, they were acknowledging that these traits needed to be channeled in the direction

that fulfilled God's mandate for them. The message of the double-edged sword of the counting that took place at this time, indicating each person's special value, and the need

to live up to that potential, through a constant awareness of God's presence in their lives, serves as the starting point of the book of Bamidbar.

Meaning of Real Achdus

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from a shiur originally entitled "Different Hashkafos Within Klal Yisrael," given in the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on June 2, 2016)

The pasuk in Parshas Bamidbar says, *Ish al diglo be-osos le-beis avosam yachanu Bnei Yisroel mineged saviv le-ohel moed yachanu*. Hashem commanded that Jews be encamped according to their proper place and subdivision—*al diglo be-osos*—under a flag. There were different flags—each Shevet and each place had their own. And the Medrash says that these flags were a big deal. It says: *ve-diglo alai ahava*—Hashem showed his love to Am Yisroel by giving them flags. At Har Sinai, Jews saw in a revelation that all the malachim were encamped according to their flags. And the Jews very much wanted to have flags like the malachim. And, finally, in this week's Parsha, they got their wish—Hashem gave them their own flags. But what's the big deal with flags? It's fancy to have flags, and it looks nice. You get to fly something around, and it's a lot of fun. But is that being like the malachim? Is that what the Jews wanted to be like the malachim—some fancy flags on poles, waving in the wind? What is going on here? What's the amkus of the flags?

It is interesting how from a Chasidish perspective, there is no Chasidus. There are different Chasidios. Each chasid has his own Rebbe, with his own Chasidus, with his own derech of doing things, with slightly different hashkafos. One of their challenges is—if you really believe in Torah, why should you have your Rebbe while he has his Rebbe? Why should there be different drachim? Is it really valid to have many different Rebbes if there is One Hashem and we are all trying to worship him together through one Torah? This is what early Chasidim were struggling with.

Me'or Va-Shemesh, a chasidische sefer says—this is exactly the idea of the degalim. Even though we are supposed to have achdus—as the pasuk says about Matan Torah—*vayichan sham Yisroel neged ha-Har*, which means ke-ish echad, be-lev echad. And Parshas Bamidbar generally comes out right before Shavuos because we want to emphasize the theme of achdus. Nevertheless, he says, achdus doesn't mean that all of us need to be exactly the same. Achdus can't mean that we should have a cookie-cutter and stamp everyone into the same size and shape. What did the Jews see when they beheld

the malachim? They realized that no malach has two shlichuyot. Every malach has a distinct job to do—as Rashi quotes from Chazal. Obviously, the malachim don't have bechira hafshis—they are pure robots of avodas Hashem. Nonetheless, they are not all the same. Each malach has a different job than every other malach. And no malach thinks that it's a problem that he has to acknowledge the job of another malach, or that he wishes that he had a different job—neither does he think that his job is better than the other malach's job. They know that everyone has their own job, and that's great because all of us are being oved Hashem, and that's the end goal. That was the degalim! That is exactly what the Jews desired so much. And that's exactly what Hashem gave them in this week's Parsha. Yes—we are all one people. Yes—there is achdus. Yes—we should be ke-ish echad, be-lev echad. But that doesn't mean that everyone must have the same derech. It means everyone has their own degel. When you display a flag, it shows pride in your derech, and you should take pride in doing things your way. We don't have to do things in exactly the same way. We can all have our own community and derech, our own hashkafa. We can join with the like-minded people who have similar ideas and similar derech in Avodas Hashem. And we can be proud of how we are oved Hashem, without disqualifying and denigrating—all while leaving room for others to practice their approaches in Avodas Hashem. Each Shevet had their degel, and each took pride in that, without saying that their Shevet's Avoda was the only way that Klal Yisroel should serve Hashem. That is exactly the vision they had of the malachim at Har Sinai. And that is what they wanted to achieve—to recognize the uniqueness of each person, of each community, of each derech—*Ish al diglo be-osos*. And yet, despite our individual degalim, we are on the same team, all working together towards shmiras hamitzvos, the glory of Torah, and Avodas Hashem in our machaneh. And we should proudly fly those flags in one machaneh, together, next to each other. And if we do that, then we will be camped as Am Yisroel, the way Hashem wants us to be encamped.

Celebrating Shavuot and Discovering the Power Within

Rabbi Dr. David Shabtai

Hazal arranged the ritual calendar in such a way that Parshat BaMidbar is usually read on the Shabbat before Shavuot. The reason given is that it serves as a buffer between the curses / rebuke of Parshat BeHukotai and Shavuot. However, the Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar no. 684) finds a deeper connection.

It describes a strange conversation between Hashem and the nations of the world justifying His giving the Torah to the Jewish people specifically because of our heritage. To support this idea, the Midrash quotes from Parshat BaMidbar when in counting Bnei Yisrael, each person displays their שטר יוחסין (lineage documents) to justify their inclusion in the national census.

While seemingly odd, the greatest challenge to this idea is a Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (2:12) that encourages each person to extend significant effort to learn Torah, since after all, אינה ירושה לך — it's not an inheritance to you. Which one is it — are we entitled to the Torah because of our sacred lineage or is it something that we each need to aspire to reach on our own?

Answering this question may depend on answering a different difficulty regarding Shavuot. The Rama MiFano points out that on the one hand, the Gemara describes that Bnei Yisrael left Egypt on a Thursday — meaning that fifty days later, when they received the Torah, should be a Friday — but Hazal also have a Tradition that the Torah was given on Shabbat — which would be the fifty-first day. Effectively, the Magen Avraham explains that this works out that we received the Torah on the seventh of Sivan, whereas we celebrate Shavuot and describe it as זמן מתן תורתנו on the sixth of Sivan. How does this make sense?

The Kedushat Levi points to another Gemara that when Hashem told Moshe to tell Bnei Yisrael to prepare for Matan Torah, that Moshe added an additional day (הוסיף יום אחד מדעתו). Effectively, Hashem was ready to give the Torah on the sixth of Sivan, but because Moshe added an additional preparation day, the Torah wasn't actually given until the seventh of Sivan.

He explains that on the sixth of Sivan Bnei Yisrael were spiritually prepared to receive the Torah and their neshamot were purified in anticipation. Practically speaking however, since we exist as neshamot wrapped in a physical human form, we were only able to receive the

Torah the next day after an additional day of preparation.

Rav Hayyim Vital explains that just like Hazal tell us that the human body has 248 limbs and 365 sinews that cannot exist without food and sustenance, so too the spiritual essence of a person has 248 spiritual limbs that are nourished through Torah and mitzvot. In much the same way that a person doesn't need to be taught that eating is the necessary means to physically survive, so too, a person's neshamah 'knows' that it needs Torah and mitzvot to survive, without the need for a specific instruction or teaching.

This is indeed how Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov were able to fulfill Torah mitzvot even before the Torah was explicitly given. Because of their holiness, they were able to transcend their physical bodies and attain a higher spiritual essence and thereby intuit what Torah and mitzvot mean, even without an explicit instruction to do so.

Indeed, the Gemara describes that Bnei Yisrael reached a similarly high spiritual level at Har Sinai (פסקה זוהמתן), on the sixth of Sivan. They were able to tap into an elevated spiritual intuition such that they could reach the highest levels of Torah and mitzvot, even before Hashem formally gave them the Torah on the next day. Perhaps this is what we mean in the Haggadah when we say אילו קרבנו לפני הר סיני ולא נתן לנו את התורה דיינו — even before the formally receiving the Torah, just being at Har Sinai enabled them to reach the highest of spiritual planes.

However, because Bnei Yisrael would not always exist on such a spiritually elevated level, Hashem did formally give us the Torah the next day, on the seventh of Sivan. In the end, human beings are a combination of Heaven and earth, spiritual and physical and we don't and perhaps cannot exist on a purely spiritual level forever.

Historically speaking, we were indeed worthy of intuiting the Torah on the sixth of Sivan, specifically because of our sacred heritage. Being part of the Tradition and lineage of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov, enabled us to reach levels that were otherwise impossible. But realizing that we wouldn't always live at that level, Hashem nonetheless gave us the Torah on the next day, so that even when we live on a more physical level, we will be able to reach the highest levels of Torah and mitzvot.

When we celebrate Shavuot on the sixth of Sivan,

we are essentially reminding ourselves that we have the potential hidden within us, each and every one of us, to spiritually intuit Torah and mitzvot. Even when we might find difficulty in fulfilling mitzvot and even when learning

Torah seems somewhat distant, our celebration of Shavuot specifically on the sixth of Sivan should remind us that hidden within each of us, is the potential to reach the more sublime spiritual levels imaginable.

How the Princes Restored Their Yud

Ezer Diena

Bamidbar 1:5-15 lists the nesi'im, the princes of each tribe, who were to stand beside Moshe and Aharon as they took a census of the Jewish People. Both before and after the commandment to select these people to oversee the counting process, these leaders receive tremendous praise in the Torah itself, and are referred to as "head of the house" (1:4; all translations from alhatorah.org), "the called of the congregation", "princes" and "heads of the thousands of Israel". (1:16) Not only that, but the Torah names each of them, and then explicitly calls attention to the fact that they were each called by name! (1:17)

Many commentators continue to extol their virtues. Rabbi Yitzchak ben Yehudah haLevi (Peneiach Raza to 1:16) contrasts the spelling of the word "called", or keriei, found in the title here (1:16), with its spelling in Bamidbar 16:2, referring to Korach's band of men, where the same word lacks a yud. He explains that this additional yud hints that these princes were fitting to have received the Ten Commandments [ten is the numerical value of the letter yud]. Even though the entire nation alive at that time received the Torah from Hashem, this indicates that they were on a very high spiritual level.

Yet, if one looks back to Shemot 35:26, we have another case of a missing yud as it relates to the princes – but rather than highlight their virtues, it does the opposite. While detailing the contributions of the princes to the Mishkan, the word vehanesim is spelled without a second yud. Rashi (ad loc.) cites the midrashic view (Bamidbar Rabbah 12:16) that this was a punishment of sorts for the lack of initiative shown by the princes in donating to the Mishkan. Rather than immediately offer a nice donation, they simply told the collectors that they would fill in anything lacking.

Rabbi Shlomo Luntschitz, in his K'li Yakar to Shemot 35:26 and 25:1, is bothered – what is the meaning of the letter yud specifically being removed from this word as a punishment? He explains that yud is one of the letters of Hashem's Name, and Hashem represents humility. When

the nesi'im proclaimed that they would provide anything missing from the Mishkan, they acted in a haughty manner. Thus, Hashem removed one of the letters of His Name, to show that they lacked that which He stood for – humility.

In particular, we can suggest that part of the arrogance in their statement about the Mishkan collection was that they separated themselves from the rest of the Jewish People; they viewed their constituents as below their level. No doubt it was a humbling experience for the nesi'im when those same people donated so much to the Mishkan that the princes barely had any room to give!

Returning to Bamidbar, Hashem instructs Moshe and Aharon to gather these same leaders and have them present during the counting, but not to count their tribes (see Rashi and commentaries to Bamidbar 1:4). This may have been a special message to the nesi'im: Hashem intended that they stand by and watch as every individual from among the Jewish People was counted and equally valued. No one was more important or greater than any other, even if they were wealthier or more learned. Together with their experience of missing out on the important donations to the Mishkan, this allowed the nesi'im to internalize the lesson of humility that they were lacking before.

Since they demonstrated their humility through their actions at this time, the Torah now not only lists them each by name, but also takes the opportunity to speak about how special they really were. What is really extraordinary, however, is that through the contrast with the spelling of keriei elsewhere, we see that Hashem returned His "yud" to them, not just to show that they were worthy of the Ten Commandments, as Rabbi haLevi suggests, but to show that they had indeed atoned for their earlier sin, and were now acting with the Divine trait of humility.