



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Bamidbar 5782

Beyond Mitzvot

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered May 21, 1966)

Our Haftorah for this morning, from the second chapter of Hosea, begins on a high optimistic note: "And the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered." For a people which chronically suffers the status of a minority, this prophecy comes as a cheerful source of encouragement.

The verse seems simple enough. Yet the Rabbis of the Talmud (Yoma 22b) detected in this statement an apparent contradiction. The first half of the verse says that the number of the Children of Israel will be very large — as great as the sand of the sea. That, indeed, is a large number, but it is not infinite. The second half of the verse speaks of the population of Israel being so great that it cannot be measured or numbered; this implies an even greater number of Israelites.

This is, of course, only an apparent contradiction, because the prophet wants to explain his metaphor and tells us that by the words "as the sand of the sea," he means that the people of Israel will be well nigh too many to count. But the question of the Rabbis, counterposing the idea of a finite with the idea of an infinite number, was meant merely to introduce the answer they offer: *kan bi'zeman she'osin retzono shel makom*, when Hosea speaks of the Children of Israel being beyond number he refers to a time when the Children of Israel will do the will of God; and *kan bi'zeman she'ein osin retzono shel makom*, when Hosea speaks of us being merely as many as the particles of sand on shore he refers to a time when we will not perform the will of God.

Now this is a strange answer. When one reads the beginning of our Haftorah, one finds himself in a mood which is favorable to our people who obviously are considered as deserving of divine reward. How, therefore, can the Rabbis maintain that the great promise that we will

be as many as the sand of the sea refers to a time when we do not do the will of God?

I should like to propose an answer, which, to my mind, touches the heart of the Jewish outlook on God and man, and contains an incisive and perceptive comment on the ethics of our Torah. The answer derives from a comment, in another context, by one of the most seminal of Hasidic thinkers, R. Zadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin. The Kohen, as he is called, distinguishes between two terms; *retzono shel makom* and *mitzvato shel makom*, the will of God and the commandment of God. All of the Halakhah, including the 613 Biblical commandments and the many more rabbinic commandments, represents God's *mitzvah*, His commandment, His directions, His demands upon us. These are the things that we must do in order to justify our existence before Him. But the mere performance of the divine commandment -- His *mitzvah* -- does not exhaust the relation of God and man. There is much that goes beyond *mitzvot*, an overplus of meaning, whole worlds that transcend the idea of *mitzvah* or commandment. This is the area of *retzono shel makom*, the will of God. God wants of us more than He commands us; His *ratzon* is far greater than His *mitzvah*. The divine *mitzvah* is something that every Jew can, with enough exertion, perform completely. But that extra something beyond the commandment, namely, the *ratzon*, is what each individual must strive to realize and actualize according to his own ability and talent.

For instance, the idea of *mitzvah* means that we are each of us commanded to be a decent member of the Jewish community and fulfill his obligations. But the will of God, the *ratzon*, is that we be far more than passive participants in the drama of Jewish life; it means that those of us who have any leadership ability must develop it and use it. The will of God is that we not only give by get, that we not only

belong but that we bring in others, that we not only react to others but that we act on our own.

One of the most obvious places where we may see the difference between commandment and will is the study of Torah. It is important to keep this in mind especially in contemporary times, when despite all our extravagant talk about intellectuals and sophistication, the study of Torah — the real intellectual content of Judaism -- is honored more in the breach than in the practice. The Talmud (Menahot 99b) had already told us that one can get away with a minimum if he so wishes: merely by reciting the Shema, which is a portion of the Torah itself, one can really fulfill the requirements of studying Torah by day and by night. It is easy enough to abide by the mitzvah of the Almighty. But the function of man is to go beyond this, and to try to live up to God's will, His ratzon. And in this case, the Jew must realize the verse of Joshua who, speaking of the Torah said, "ye'hagita bo yomam va-lailah," "you shall meditate therein by day and by night." The commandment of God may be confined to the recitation of two brief passages: the will of God is that we live in the study of Torah constantly, by day and by night, that every spare moment be devoted to the contemplation of the Torah.

Interestingly, both these interpretations found their way into the explanation of Rashi on the Mishnah in Avot which says aseih toratekha keva, that we must set aside regular times for the study of Torah. One comment in Rashi has it that we must study be'khol yom, every day; the other requires of us to study kol hayom, all day. The first is the commandment of God; the second is His will.

With this distinction between mitzvato shel Makom and retzono shel Makom, we may understand what the Talmud told us about our verse in the Haftarah. Both halves of this verse are set in the context of an Israel which is obedient to the Lord. In both cases, Israel accepts and performs the commandments, the mitzvah of the Almighty. The difference between these two halves is this: The first half, which speaks of Israel being rewarded by a large population, but not a very large one, refers to the time when Israel will perform only the commandments of God, but fail to live up to His will. Whereas the second half of the verse, which promises an extraordinarily large increase in Israel's citizenry, refers to the time when the Children of Israel will perform not only the commandments of God, but, even more, retzono shel Makom — His infinite will!

This distinction between mitzvah and ratzon affords

us a new insight in Judaism that is relevant to us and our times. For one thing, it means that none of us, no matter how observant we may be and no matter how Orthodox we consider ourselves, dare ever submit to the temptation of self-righteousness. It means that no matter how great our religious accomplishments may be vis-a-vis others, we must always bear and conduct ourselves with the utmost of humility. We must always remember that loyalty to the Halakhah is not at all an expression of maximal Judaism, but merely minimum Judaism! To observe every last iota of the Shulhan Arukh is to live up to the mitzvato shel Makom. And that, most certainly, is not enough! If we observe Kashruth, Shabbat, family purity, prayer, and all the other institutions of Judaism -- we have only reached the level of God's commandments. The real test of genuine piety and authentic Jewishness is when we can get beyond the mitzvah and reach out for the sublimity of God's ratzon! This will of God is far greater than His commandments not only quantitatively, but also measured by the standard of the kind of attitude we bring to the practice of Judaism. If we approach Judaism in the sense of mitzvah, then it becomes for us an ole ha-mitzvot, a yoke, a burden, an obstacle to our freedom.

But when we live the Jewish life with the feeling that we are blessed thereby, then this is what makes us happy — then we have gone beyond the commandments towards the will. The test therefore is: when we live Jewishly, do we feel deprived or privileged? Do we consider that the regiment of religion hampers us or hallows us?

Indeed, it is with reference to the study of Torah that our Rabbis (Midrash Shir ha-Shirim) tell us a remarkable story that illustrates our point. Ben Azzai was teaching Torah, when suddenly the people about him noticed a remarkable sight: a wall of fire enveloped him. They quickly came to R. Akiva and reported the incident to him. Whereupon R. Akiva hurried to Ben Azzai and asked him: Is it true what they say, that a wall of flame enveloped you while you were teaching Torah? Yes, answered the younger colleague of the great Tanna. Is it perhaps, asked R. Akiva, because you were studying the ma'aseh merkavah, the most mysterious portion of the Torah, that part which deals with the most divine secrets, and therefore it was the holiness of the subject matter which caused you to be enveloped in flame? No, answered Ben Azzai, it was nothing as remote and mysterious as that. I was simply studying Torah, Neviim, and Ketubim — just some Humash, some Haftarahs, and

perhaps reciting some Psalms. What, then, was so unusual about my study? It was neither the particular subject matter nor the amount of studying I did; rather, ha-devarim hayu semehim ke'yom netinatam mi-Sinai, v'arevim ke'ikkar netinatan -- it is just that I was so happy, so overjoyed, so enraptured with the Torah, as if this were the very day it was given from Sinai. The words were as sweet and as precious to me as when they were given.

Indeed so! The study of Torah must not be considered merely an obligation which one must dispose of by doing it however reluctantly. It must be considered at all times as a joyous fulfillment of the will of God, as a reenactment of the drama of Sinai, far and above what is demanded of me, but rather in the realm of what is wanted of me.

This distinction has special relevance to the great Jewish institution of charity or tzedakah. If a man gives, no matter the amount, he performs a mitzvah — and a very, very great one. But the will of God goes far beyond this. To give a coin to a poor man is to perform a commandment; to help him so that he does not become poor in the first place, that is the accomplishment of retzono shel Makom. To give by itself is a mitzvah; to live with love, with grace, with kindness and joy— that is the ratzon of the Almighty.

Mitzvah means that I give what I normally do; ratzon is achieved when I give more than I can. Mitzvah means that I give to any charity which approaches me without discrimination; ratzon means that I use my Jewish intelligence to discern which are more deserving and which less. Mitzvah means that I give, no matter what the amount, because I feel I must — whether because of reasons of conscience or social pressure or something I wish to achieve thereby. Ratzon means that I give unconditionally, without thought of personal benefit, and with full inner participation and love.

This difference between commandment and will with regards to philanthropy is beautifully reflected in a passage in the Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 4a: If one says I will give this coin to charity in order that my children may live, or in order that I may merit the life of the world-to-come, harei zeh tzaddik gamur, the man who gives in this manner is completely righteous. Such is the reading in our text of the Talmud. But it is a problematical one; can such selfish and egotistical giving be the work of a man who is termed a tzaddik gamur, a completely righteous individual? The commentaries on the Talmud struggle with that question. But an answer is provided by another reading of the same

text offered by the great Rabbeinu Hananel and Meiri. Their text reads harei zeh tzedakah gemurah, that this kind of philanthropy is considered complete philanthropy. In other words, it is a complete fulfillment of the mitzvah to give charity; but it does not at all characterize the one who gives in this manner as a tzaddik gamur. In terms of our own thought, this means that if one gives, but his giving is motivated by some selfish concern, then he has abided by the commandment of God but he is still very far from performing the will, the ratzon of God. The mitzvah was performed, the act was fully done in accordance with every particular of the law. But such giving is without compassion and without love, and therefore has failed to rise to the level of retzono shel Makom, for the will of God is to give without the expectation of any reward, even without a spiritual kick-back!

Now we may understand the words of our Rabbis in Pirkei Avot: aseh retzono ki'retzonekha, do His will as you would perform your own will, so that He will do your will as if it were His own will. Our will -- our demands of God - are never minimal. We ask not for material things which will keep us on the bare level of subsistence, but for the luxuries to which we are accustomed and for which we strive. We ask not that we be spared humiliation, but that we be accorded honor and dignity. We ask not that our children not abandon and revile us, but that they love and cherish us now and even after we have gone. We plead not that our children not intermarry, but that they marry well and Jewishly. We present God, as it were, not with a human mitzvah but with a human ratzon. We are not satisfied with the minimum; we strive for the maximum. Therefore the Tanna tells us that we must respond not only to the divine mitzvah but also to the divine ratzon! If our material desires are maximal, so must our spiritual endeavors be maximal. Only when our gesture to God is on the level of His will may we expect that He will consider our will.

All this is relevant to a beautiful and revered custom of The Jewish Center at this time of the year. Our synagogue is one of the founders of the Manhattan Day School; it is our very own Hebrew Day School. At this time of the year, before the festival of Shavuot, it is our tradition to appeal to our congregation for support of this great institution 66 Jewish learning for young children. It is one of the finest schools of its kind in the length and breadth of this land; as chairman of the Board of Education, I know intimately the extreme value of the kind of education, both secular and

religious, that the school is giving to its over 400 students. There are in our congregation young men and young women who have graduated from this school. There are more whose children now attend this school. The future of Orthodox Judaism in our community, depends upon the success of the Manhattan Day School. No school -- not even Harvard, Princeton, or Columbia -- can ever survive on tuition alone. Manhattan Day School certainly cannot. It must rely upon our munificence.

Our appeal, therefore, is: it is a mitzvah to give to Jewish education. But this year let us go beyond mitzvah. Let us outdo ourselves in an attempt to perform not only the commandment by the ratzon, the will of God. The school is about to embark upon great new adventures in the near future. It needs, desperately needs, our help in far greater

Out of Order

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

The book of Bamidbar begins with a census of the nation taken in the wilderness on the first day of the second month of the second year after their exodus from Egypt. Rashi in parshas Beha'aloscha (Bamidbar 9:1) points out that, chronologically, the events of this book really began earlier, in the first month of the second year, when God told Moshe to command the people to bring the Passover sacrifice, or the korban Pesach. However, the Torah did not want to begin with this event because it reflected badly on the nation, since that occasion was the only time that they brought it during their entire forty-year sojourn in the wilderness. Rashi evokes the principle of 'ein mukdam ume'uchar baTorah' - the events of the Torah are not necessarily presented in a chronological order - to explain how the Torah here deviated from the order of events in its recording of them. However, this explanation only tells us why the book of Bamidbar could not start with the section describing the bringing of the korban Pesach, but does not tell us the significance of beginning the book with a census of the nation. Moreover, even though this kind of deviation from the chronological sequence is in keeping with standard principles of Biblical composition, as Rashi notes, it is reasonable to assume that beginning a new book of the Torah out of sequence reflects on the message of the book, in general. What, then, is that message, and how is it underscored by beginning Bamidbar out of sequence?

proportion than ever before. If we want God to give us more than the minimum in the life we lead, we must give more than the minimum to His institutions. Even as we ask that He do our will, so must we now do His will — and His ratzon is far greater than merely the mitzvah of giving charity!

V'yihyu l'ratzon imrei fi vehegyon libi lefanekha Hashem tzuri ve-goali. May the words of our mouths, and the thoughts of our hearts — and, above all, our unstinting and un begrudging action of contributing to this great school of Torah — not only fulfill the mitzvah but also the realization of the ratzon, Thy will, our God who is our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen.

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

Rabbi Reuven Katz, in his commentary Degel Reuven to parshas Bamidbar, cites a passage from the Talmud (Yoma 22b), in which the rabbis note an apparent contradiction between two parts of a passage in the book of Hoshea (2:1) which serves as the beginning of the haftarah reading for parshas Bamidbar. The verse reads: “The number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which can neither be measured nor counted...” According to the opening words of this verse - ‘The number of the Children of Israel,’ there is a specific count to the Jewish people, while according to later words in the verse - ‘which can neither be measured nor counted’ - there is no specific number. The rabbis answer that the first half of the verse refers to times when the nation does not carry out God’s will, while the second part of the verse refers to times when they do carry out His will. Rabbi Katz explains that the task of the Jewish people in this world is to act as a unit in carrying out God’s will, with each individual finding his place within the nation, carrying out his specific calling as part of the wider calling of the nation. The census that is taken underscores, on the one hand, the importance of each individual, and, on the other hand, the need for national unity in order to accomplish what God demands of them. Rabbi Chaim Dov Rabinowitz, in his Da’as Sofrim, writes that the reason for setting up the traveling order of the nation, each tribe in its place, and each set of three tribes gathered around a common ‘degel’, or flag, was

to assure that each person know his place in the overall goal of the nation before they embarked on their march into the Holy Land, which was to be the location where they would best be able to fulfill their role as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Moshe, towards the end of his farewell blessings to the nation, says, “Thus Yisroel shall dwell securely, solitary, in the likeness of Ya’akov (‘eyn Ya’akov’).” (Devorim, 33:28). The term ‘eyn Ya’akov,’ or ‘in the likeness of Ya’akov,’ as explained by Rabbi Naftoli Zevi Yehudah Berlin - the Netziv - refers to the collective nature of the Jewish people, the overall ‘appearance’ that it projects on the observer when it is acting as it should. Thus, the meaning of the Talmudic passage we have seen is that when the Jewish nation performs God’s will, its individuals meld into the collective of the nation and the metaphysical nature that it is supposed to develop is what one sees when looking at it. Based on this understanding of the census which begins the book of Bamidbar, I believe that we can now return to our original question, and offer an explanation of why this book begins out of sequence.

The book of Bamidbar describes the wanderings of the Jewish people in the wilderness, which were typified by the verse in parshas Beha’aloscha, “According to the word of God they would encamp, and according to the

word of God they would journey” (Bamidbar 9:23).

This verse follows a description of the travel itinerary of the nation while in the wilderness, by which they might stay in one location for a day, and in another location for a month, a year, or even longer. Everything depended upon God’s instructions to them. Thus, the entire concept of planning their journey in a certain sequence did not exist. Their wilderness experience was one of setting their time schedules according to the word of God. Perhaps this is why the prophet Yirmiyahu (2:2) says that God remembers the chesed, the kindness, displayed by the nation in its youth, “ following after me in an unsown land.” The fact that the nation traveled continually, for forty years, on God’s time-schedule was proof of their loyalty to Him, and stood them in good stead during times of crisis that were to come in the future of its history. This surrender of time consciousness to the will of God was part of the nation’s fulfillment of their task as the bearers of God’s name in this world. Perhaps it is for this reason that the book of Bamidbar begins out of sequence, namely in order to emphasize from the very beginning of the book the manner in which the nation traveled in the wilderness, as a fulfillment of its wider task, as brought out by the census with which the book opens.

Names, Not Numbers

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from a shiur originally entitled “Different Hashkofos Within Klal Yisrael,” given in the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on May 25, 2017)

A large part of Parshas Bamidbar consists of Moshe’s census—the counting of Bnei Yisroel. And the gemora says in Yoma that it’s assur to count Bnei Yisroel. It quotes various pesukim, especially in the haftara, such as: *Ve-haya mispar Bnei Yisroel ke-chol ha-yam asher lo yimad ve-lo yisafer*—and the number of Bnei Yisroel will be like the sand of the sea which will not be measured and will not be counted. Therefore, it is considered a double lav for someone to count Bnei Yisroel. And the gemora explains that in the course of Jewish history no one ever counted Bnei Yisroel directly. In Parshas Ki Sisa the count was conducted with shekalim. And therefore, even in the later periods of Jewish history—in the days of Shaul ha-Melech, etc.—they counted sheep, pottery shards, and all kinds of various stand-ins. And in the Beis Ha-Mikdash they would count people’s fingers when they

did a lottery among the Kohanim—because we are not supposed to count Bnei Yisroel directly. And ad hayom ha-zeh, the minhag ha-olam is that when you check if there is a minyan, instead of counting people you count the words of the pasuk: Hoshia es amecha, etc. Or you could use some other means to avoid counting the people directly. And the question is, why is it assur to count Bnei Yisroel directly? A number of meforshim suggest that there is an ayin ha-ra involved when one counts the Jews. And therefore, in the census proscribed in Parshas Shekalim, we specifically gave the shekalim to protect us from that ayin ha-ra—because shekalim have a lot of spiritual power. But if I count pottery shards, how does that protect me against ayin ha-ra?? Therefore, Rav Gifter, the Rosh Yeshiva of Telz (Cleveland), once said that the reason it is assur to count Jews is because when you look at the Jewish people,

you cannot just treat them as a number. When you count people directly, you dehumanize them. Consider the following example: Ok, you are now number 385. How would that feel if that was you? We should not turn people into numbers. To the contrary, if you count the pottery shards that everyone gives, that makes the pottery shard just a number. Even when they counted fingers in the Mikdash, the fingers were considered numbers. But how can a person be just a number? Every person is an *olam maleh*—an entire world unto himself. And he can't just be the 998,604th in the census. And this ties into this week's Parsha. When Hashem tells Moshe to count the Jews, He says: *Be-mispar shemos, kol zachar le-gulgosam*—the counting of the number of the names. Of course, it was important to count the people. It is necessary, for military purposes—as many of the *meforshim* explain. But even when you must count, remember that you are counting their names. Each person has a name, *tafkid*,

and individuality. Yes, it is important to know the total of 603,550 to divide the *nachala*, and for military camps, etc. But each of those people is not just a number. Each person is a *shem*—an *olam maleh*. And therefore, I think, counting people is important in life, even if we don't work for the Census Bureau or *Bituach Leumi*, etc. But still, every time we look at *Klal Yisroel*, at a *kehila*, a classroom, a *shul*, etc., you need to have rational planning based on how many people there are. But nonetheless, a classroom is not just twenty-six kids. You do need to know that total to order supplies and make your schedule. But it's not a classroom of twenty-six. It's twenty-six individuals—each of whom is a world unto themselves. And therefore, every time we want to count them, and instead we count something else, we remind ourselves that a person cannot be reduced to just another number in a group. And we should respect their individuality and treat them as a world in and of themselves. *Shabbat Shalom*.

Lessons from Sinai

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

Parshas Bamidbar begins the fourth of the five books of Torah, and with its opening, the Children of Israel prepare to depart from Mt. Sinai. It was at Mt. Sinai that they witnessed the great Revelation, received the Torah and *mitzvos*, bound themselves by oath to do and listen to all that G-d shall command, built the *Mishkan*, and learned the relevant Levite laws for serving in the *Mishkan*. Now, a census of the nation is taken, encampment and marching formation is delineated, and the people are ready to go forth to the Holy Land.

Many reasons are given for the connection between Bamidbar and Shavuot, *zman matan Torasainu*. Rabbi Shmuel Goldin proposes a most thought-provoking and compelling link between the parsha and Chag Ha'Shavuot. R' Goldin writes that, "The calendar-created relationship between the opening of the book of Bamidbar and Shavuot is puzzling. The book of Bamidbar opens with G-d's detailed instructions to the Israelites preparatory to their departure from Sinai. Shavuot, on the other hand, marks the nation's arrival at Sinai and the onset of Revelation, all of which occurs two years earlier.

"Why do we read, each year, of our leaving Sinai specifically on the Shabbos before we arrive? What lessons can be gleaned from this phenomenon? More broadly,

with the opening of Bamidbar, the question could well be raised: What place does this book occupy within the eternal Torah text? Why are the time-bound details of Bamidbar significant enough to record for posterity? In what way is this text relevant for later generations?

"The connection between Bamidbar and Shavuot is a clear reminder of a fundamental truth: The most important moment of Revelation is the moment the Israelites leave. The instant of the nation's departure from Sinai determines the quality of all that has come before. If the Bnei Yisrael leave the site of Revelation changed by the experience, carrying the Torah with them and within them, then the dramatic events of Sinai will have achieved their purpose. If, however, upon leaving the site of Revelation, the people leave Sinai behind, then those miraculous proceedings will have been little more than a divinely orchestrated 'sound and lights show,' impressing the observers in transient fashion.

"As we open the book of Bamidbar each year on the Shabbos before Shavuot, as we read of our departure before we arrive, we proclaim our understanding that the years spent at Sinai achieve their significance in retrospect...

"On a temporal level [given the tragic narratives, sins

and rebellions that fill the parshios of Bamidbar], the departure from Sinai clearly leads to failure.

“On the other hand, in spite of the failure of the generation of the Exodus, when we move beyond the time-bound specificity of the narrative, eternal lessons begin to emerge. Revelation does successfully launch the majestic story of the Jewish people. Transcending the tragedies of the moment, a nation is forged at the foot of Sinai: a people that will be bound, across time and place, by the commandments and values of the Torah law. In a timeless, eternal dimension, the departure from Sinai leads to success...

“Properly understood, the journey from Sinai represents not only the passage of those present at that historic moment, but the launching of our national journey across the ages. G-d’s instructions to the nation prior to their departure from Sinai reveal the human elements He considers critical not only to the success of that generation’s mission, but to the success of the entire Jewish enterprise. Even the tragic shortcomings of our ancestors are powerfully relevant, revealing inherent flaws that threaten our own personal and communal achievements, as well. Finally, the Israelites’ forty years of wilderness wandering emerge as a critically formative period, cementing the relationship between G-d and His people and effecting essential changes in the developing nation’s psyche.

“With the departure from Sinai serving as the turning point, the momentous events towards which the first half of the book of Bamidbar leads and from which the second half descends, this book of the Torah emerges as blueprint for our journey across time. The ancient passage of our ancestors - bamidbar, in the wilderness - yields surprising

lessons that continue to shape our lives (today, and through the ages)” (Unlocking, Vayikra, p.3-6).

The moment the nation departs from Sinai is the moment their arrival at Sinai can be coined a success, or failure. If the lessons from Revelation remain with the people upon departure, then the arrival at Sinai has been a success. While the people did, indeed, fail in the short term - as the book of Bamidbar narrates - in the long term, with our march through the millennia as a people faithful to G-d - the lessons and messages from Sinai were a resounding success.

R’ Boruch Perton relates that, “When I was Mechina (in Yeshivas Ner Yisrael Baltimore), I had earned the rank of Eagle Scout with the Boy Scouts. I wanted an extra ‘out Shabos’ to attend the special celebration being held in my honor. I asked Rebbi (R’ Yosef Tendler z’l), who had never heard of an Eagle Scout, for permission to go. I explained what an Eagle Scout was, and he said, ‘You can go on one condition. I will write a dvar Torah that you will say at the event.’ And he did. It was about priorities and values, and stressed that the most important thing in this world is not being an Eagle Scout, but being a ben Torah.

I went, and I gave the dvar Torah. Without exaggeration, every time I spent Shabos with him for the next thirty years, he reminded me of that dvar Torah. In November 2010, I was spending a Shabos with Rebbi when his brother, R’ Shalom, was there. Once again, Rebbi reminded me of that dvar Torah, saying it over to his brother at the Shabos table” (I am Your Servant, Artscroll, p.246).

Indeed, *כל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע* - *all that G-d has spoken, we will do and we will listen* (Shemos 24:7); *כי הם חיינו ואורך ימינו - for Torah and mitzvos are our life and the length of our days.*

Taking Responsibility

Rabbi Efram Goldberg

Sefar Bamidbar is so named because in the opening pasuk of the parsha, the Torah makes a point of mentioning that God spoke to Moshe and issued His commands *סיני* - in the Sinai desert. Even though we are already well aware of the fact that this is where Benei Yisrael were encamped at that time, the Torah found it necessary to emphasize that the commands were given in the desert.

The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 1:7) explains that the

Torah emphasized this point to teach us that *כל מי שאינו עושה* - “whoever does not make himself ‘ownerless’ like a desert is unable to acquire wisdom and Torah.” In order to live a proper Torah life, we are to make ourselves “ownerless like a desert.”

The Kotzker Rebbe explains that when a person finds himself alone in a desert, he has nobody upon whom to rely. In a remote, unpopulated area, there are no shops, no volunteer services such as Hatzalah or Chaveirim, no

first responders, and no restaurants or grocery stores that will deliver. The person has no choice but to work hard to care for himself, doing whatever it takes, because there is nobody around to help him.

Such a reality, the Kotzker Rebbe taught, is the model the Midrash urges us to follow as we set out to live Torah lives. We must not make the mistake of trying to “outsource” our spirituality. Certainly, we need rabbis and teachers from whom to learn and gain inspiration. But ultimately, we have to take personal responsibility for our avodas Hashem. We need to live with a sense of אין בי הדבר תלוי אלא בי (Avoda Zara 17a), the awareness that our

success depends solely on our own hard work and effort.

It’s easy to make excuses, to feel, “If only I was raised differently,” “If only I had gone to a better yeshiva,” “If only my rabbi gave better derashos,” “If I only we had a good chazan,” or “If only I had a better group of friends.” But in a desert, excuses don’t matter; one has no choice but to fend for himself. And we are to approach spirituality the same way – with the realization that we cannot expect anybody to do the work for us. We have to stop pointing fingers, and to instead do the work ourselves and take ownership of our religious lives.

Seeing the Mishkan

Rabbi Jared Anstandig

Tucked into the last verse of our parshah is a prohibition that may not be wellknown. In Bamidbar 4:20, the Torah tells us that the Leviyim may not watch as the Kohanim package up the Mishkan and its vessels for transportation. More precisely, the Torah states, “They [the onlookers] should not come to see *k’vala* the sacred item, lest they die.” Commentators debate the proper understanding of this word, “*K’vala*.”

Approach 1: Swallowing

Rashi here offers that “*k’vala*,” literally meaning “swallow,” in this context means covering. That is to say that the Leviyim are forbidden from witnessing individual vessels being placed into their containers. Once they are in their containers, the Leviyim certainly may approach, as they are the ones to carry these vessels. However, before they are concealed, the Leviyim are prohibited from looking at them.

Rabbi Naftali Berlin (Netziv) offers a similar explanation, also understanding the word “*k’vala*” to mean “swallow.” Netziv suggests, however, that the term “*k’vala*” means, “in the time it takes to swallow.” In other words, an instant. In the Netziv’s words, “The text warns that they must not see the sacred vessels, even for an instant.” According to both understandings, this law has to do with the Leviyim’s exposure to the high level of sanctity of even the vessels of the Mishkan.

Approach 2: Dismantling

Rashbam and Rabbi Chizkiyah ben Manoach (Chizkuni) present a slightly different understanding.

Basing themselves on other biblical verses, they argue that “*k’vala*” in this context is better translated as “dismantled.” According to them the Torah is concerned that the Leviyim should not observe the various portions of the Mishkan as they are taken apart and packed up. This approach also reflects a concern about gazing at the usually unseen parts of the Mishkan.

But, what’s wrong with seeing?

Both of these explanations are understandable, especially in light of a story in I Shemuel 6, which describes the death of the people of Beit Shemesh because they looked at the Ark (see Journey through Tanach in Toronto Torah Vayetze 5780 for more details). It appears that gazing upon the Aron, and maybe all the vessels of the Mishkan, is inappropriate and punishable by death. But why is that the case? What is so wrong with the Leviyim seeing the inner portions of the Mishkan and its vessels?

To strengthen the question, the Talmud (Yoma 54a) tells us that on the festivals, when the masses of Israel ascended to Jerusalem and to the Temple, the Kohanim would roll back the curtains and show the Aron to everyone. Evidently, merely looking at the Aron and the Mishkan’s vessels is not always prohibited. Accordingly, what is the reason for the prohibition for the Leviyim in our parshah?

Rabbi Shraga Fish Pollack, in Tishbi, explains that the issue is not merely staring at the Aron and the vessels. He explains that when the Mishkan is fully set up, the Mishkan is inspirational and the paragon of beauty. However, when it is dismantled, much of the glory is lost, especially when

one sees all the small and seemingly valueless parts of the Mishkan. For this reason, the Torah chose to limit exposure of the Mishkan's innards and forbade even the Leviyim from observing them.

From the Mishkan to the People

This idea of not zooming too far into the Mishkan is applicable in other areas as well. For instance, when we dissect the Jewish people, we find flaws. After all, none

of us, as individuals, is perfect. However, when we zoom out, we see that we are much greater than the sum of our parts. Perhaps for this reason the Sages stress that when we received the Torah, we did so collectively, as one person with one heart (see Mechilta DeRabbi Yishmael 19:2). As individuals, we are severely limited. But, when we take a step back and come together as a community, we are able to truly receive the Torah.

The Role of the Levites, and the Service of Yeshiva Students in the Israeli Army

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In parashat Bamidbar, out of His great love for Israel, G-d instructs Moses to take a census of the Israelites, because every Jew is precious to G-d. The count records that the total number of Jewish men twenty years old and upward, who are of appropriate age to serve in the army of Israel, is 603,550.

One of the tribes of Israel, however, is not counted. In Numbers 2:33 we are informed: וְהַלְוִיִּים לֹא הִתְפַּקְדוּ בְּתוֹךְ הַבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, כִּי צִוָּה ה' אֶת מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר, *the tribe of Levi was not counted among the Children of Israel, as G-d had commanded Moses.* In Numbers 3:12, the Torah relates why the Levites were not counted for the army: וְאֲנִי הִנֵּה לְקַחְתִּי אֶת הַלְוִיִּים מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, תַּחַת כָּל בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְהָיוּ לִי הַלְוִיִּים, G-d declares that the Levites belong to Him, in place of the first born—*b'chorim*, the first born, who sinned with the Golden Calf and thus lost the privilege of ministering to the children of Israel, while the Levites remained faithful.

From early on, we notice that the Levites were significantly different from the other tribes of Israel: 1) As opposed to the rest of the Israelites who were counted from 20 years old and upward, the Levites were counted from 30 days old and upward 2) The Torah seems to indicate that G-d himself counted the Levites 3) We later learn, in Numbers 3:44-47, that 22,000 Levites were used to redeem 22,000 first born of the other 12 tribes. The remaining 300 first born of the other tribes were redeemed by paying five shekels, which is similar to the פְּדִיּוֹן הַבֶּן—*Pidyon Haben*, redemption of the first-born ceremony, that is practiced today.

It is interesting to note, that the tribe of Levi was, by far, the smallest tribe of Israel. The next smallest tribe in number, was Menashe, with 32,200, who were counted

from 20 years old and upwards, whereas the Levites who numbered 22,000, were counted from 30 days old and up. The Levites population was clearly significantly less. (Parenthetically, the largest tribe in Israel was Judah, who numbered 74,600 souls.)

A host of reasons are proffered for Levi's small population. First, tradition claims that since the Levites were not subject to slavery in Egypt and were not included in the peoples' suffering because of their special position as clergy, they were also excluded from the blessing of fertility. (Remember, according to the Midrash, the Israelite women gave birth to six children at a time.) In addition, the tribe of Levi was condemned by Jacob (Genesis 34:30), because of Levi's zealotry at the time of the rape of Dina, when Levi and Shimon killed the men of Sh'chem. A third reason for Levi's smallness is that, from a practical point of view, it would be too difficult for Israel to support a burgeoning clergy class. Whatever the reason for its smallness, we see clearly, that the tribe of Levi was "a breed apart" from the other tribes.

Even Levi's birth was special. At the birth and naming of all the other tribes, the Torah notes, וַתִּקְרָא—*"Va'tikra,"* "she," the mother, named the child. Whereas with Levi, the Torah says (Genesis 29:34), עַל כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמוֹ, לֵוִי, *that's why he called his name Levi.* Jewish tradition assumes that either Jacob himself gave Levi his name, or since the verse doesn't specifically say Jacob, it may be that the angel Gabriel gave the child his name.

Clearly, the tribe of Levi had a "calling." The Hebrew word Levi, means "to escort," indicating that Levi was destined to bring, to escort, many Jews closer to G-d. Yes, Levi was a zealot, but he was a balanced zealot—both

internally and externally. He was a zealot internally for his own family, for Dina, when he responded to her rape by attacking the men of Sh'chem. But he was also a zealot for G-d at the Golden Calf. It was there, when no one else responded, that the Levites stood up in response to Moses' call, (Exodus 32:26): מִי לַיהוָה אָלַי, "Whoever is for G-d, come join me!" While the b'chorim, the first born, were the first biologically, the Levites were the first spiritually.

The Levites also had a particular character trait that proved vital to them in their role as leaders. They were enablers, who brought out the best in others. They sang songs, but did not necessarily compose. They taught law, but did not write law. Enabling was truly a very special gift of the Levites.

Many of our readers are surely aware of the ongoing controversy concerning the large numbers of Chareidi (Ultra-Orthodox) Yeshiva students in Israel who do not serve in the army. Some reports claim that as many as 60,000 Yeshiva students are now exempt. A significant number of secularists, and even many moderates, feel that the situation has gotten dangerously out of hand. One prominent Israeli politician, Avigdor Lieberman, who strongly opposes the growing strength of the Chareidim, formed a protest political party, Yisrael Beiteinu, which plays a very powerful role in the current coalition government.

Those who oppose the draft of Yeshiva students in Israel often point to the Biblical text here in parashat Bamidbar, where the Levites are exempted from serving in Israel's army because they serve in G-d's army! Many religious Jews feel strongly that there must always be a cadre of the most excellent Yeshiva students who are exempt from military service because, they truly believe, that Yeshiva students serve as a spiritual defense force in the State of Israel, who protect Israel through the study of Torah. However, it is generally acknowledged that, unfortunately, there are significant numbers of Yeshiva students who abuse the system, avoiding service, despite not really being serious students.

Surely, the best and the brightest, (perhaps, determined by oral and written examinations) should be exempted. In addition to the issue of sharing in the national burden and the increased manpower, there are many who believe that having tens of thousands of Yeshiva students in the army would have a most meritorious effect on the army, the State of Israel, and its people. In fact, the Nachal Chareidi

corps that has been established is already widely acclaimed and admired. Despite the progress that has been made over the past few decades, it is still most disappointing that many Israelis never have a chance to really meet and get to know the Chareidim and the Yeshiva students, and are, consequently, very resentful of those whom they see as "parasites," not working, not serving, yet greatly benefitting from the Israeli's generous social system.

On the other hand, the Hesder Yeshiva boys, those who learn in Yeshiva and serve in the army at the same time, are among the most highly regarded in all of Israel. In fact, their units are considered among the best and the bravest, and, unfortunately, have suffered the highest casualties of any units in the Israel Defense Forces. It was reported in 2015, that more than to 50% of young officers in combat units of the Israeli army wear kipot. This transformation which has taken place in the army could be a most important factor in determining the future of Israel.

May these contemporary "Levites" lead us into a period of peace and tranquility for our people Israel.