The Marcos and Adina Katz
YUTORAH IN PRINT
Bamidbar 5783

Law and Order

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered June 1, 1968)

The world-wide student unrest which we are now experiencing, which is responsible for much wider social and political havoc, and the reaction of many more conservative elements to these demonstrations, generally revolve about the words "law and order." Some have treated the concept represented by these words with contempt, as if it were nothing more than a hypocritical shield for the entrenched establishment, and therefore something which must be abolished and overcome in order to institute a more just form of life. Others have, indeed, used "law and order" as a convenient excuse to cut down criticism and avoid necessary changes in the social order.

What is the Jewish view towards law and order in this period of social and political upheaval? A detailed exposition cannot be given within the confines of a brief talk, but we can attempt to adumbrate several general ideas.

Our Sidra begins and ends with a statement advocating law and order. At the beginning of today's reading, we are told of the commandment to the Children of Israel, concerning the *diglei midbar,* the flags or standards about which the tribes are to gather and according to which they are to march in a prescribed order. The peregrinations of the Israelites through the great desert of Sinai was not to be a helter-skelter rush of an unruly mob; it was to be an orderly march of the hosts of the Lord who follow His direction in the prescribed manner. So impressed were the Rabbis by the ability of these former slaves to gather about their standards in an orderly fashion, that they maintained that even the ministering angels were envious of this capacity of the Israelites to follow the *diglei midbar*!

This same Sidra ends with a commandment concerning the family of the Kohathites, of the tribe of Levi. We read: "And the Lord spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron saying, "Cut ye not off the tribe of the families of the Kohathites from among the Levites; but thus do unto them, that they may live and not die, when they approach unto the most holy things: Aaron and his sons shall go in, and appoint them every one to his service and to his burden; but they shall not go in and see the holy things as they are being covered, lest they die" (Bam. 4:17-20). What this command meant, according to the interpretation of Seforno, was that the Kohathites who were charged with the assembly of the Tabernacle itself would naturally rush to see and serve at the Holy of Holies, and their exhilaration would cause them to compete with each other for the honor and the glory of service. But such unruliness is intolerable in the presence of God. Even inspired passion and commendable curiosity are death to the spirit when it results in pushing someone else aside. Therefore, Aaron and his children were commanded to assign each and every one of the Kohathites his specific task, that there be no panic, no riot, no disorder, as they approached their sacred duties. Again, we find an emphasis on law and order.

What the Torah tells us, therefore, throughout this Sidra of Be'midbar, is that we have clear alternatives: law or chaos, order or midbar, a regulated life in society or the kind of confusion that produces a wilderness and a wasteland.

Our Sages expressed this belief of the need for law and order as opposed to anarchy in a famous statement in Avot. The author of the statement is the great R. Haninah, who lived in the closing days of the Second Temple, and who was known as Segan ha-Kohanim, the assistant to the High Priests, for he remained in his office under the administration of several High Priests. He said, hevei mitpallel bi'shelomah shel malkhut she'ilmalei moraah ish et re'ehu hayyim bela'o – "pray for the peace of the kingdom, for if not for its fear (i.e., the fear of people for governmental authority), each man would swallow his neighbor alive." There has got to be either respect for authority or a destructive anarchy which few can survive.

We should not imagine that R. Haninah lived at a time of particularly benevolent governments which inspired him to make this statement of approval for political authority. On the contrary, he flourished in an era when the most corrupt of kings ruled over Israel and brought on its downfall. Nevertheless, he preferred even unprincipled authority over no authority at all; better a poor government that complete anarchy.

But does this mean that the Bible and the Rabbis were committed to a rigid political conservatism? Must Judaism always favor the entrenched establishment?

By no means! Moses was certainly in favor of law and order -- he was Moses the Lawgiver; yet he began as Moses the Revolutionary, the man who brought the whole empire of Egypt to its knees. The prophet Samuel, who is considered second only to Moses, opposed the institution of monarchy and tried to resist the establishment of a human king. When he finally conceded, it was only that -- a concession to human frailty, the desire of the Israelites to mimic others. In fact, R. Haninah himself (in Avot de'R. Nathan) criticizes the people of Judea *al she'himlikhu alehem basar va-dam*, for establishing over themselves a king of flesh and blood. The intention of R. Haninah is therefore clear enough: bad government should be made better, and if necessary replaced by more decent government. But even a poor government with law and order is better than anarchy with all its promises of complete freedom.

Permit me to commend to you a marvelous interpretation of this Mishnah of R. Haninah by one of the greatest of Hasidic saints, R. Mosheh Leib Sassower, who approaches this statement with a mixture of scepticism and idealism. He maintains that the word moraah, "its fear," does not refer to the fear imposed on citizens by governmental authority in order to ensure the public weal, but rather to the fear of government authorities for their own survival. He reads the Mishnah thus: pray for the peace of the government, for if not for its fear for its own survival it would permit every man to swallow his neighbor alive. Politicians, all those in authority, do not care for anything more than their own welfare, the survival of the establishment of which they part. They could not care less if society as such would fall into total disarray, one man swallowing the other alive. It is just that this anarchy and chaos would jeopardize the government itself, and that is why they are interested in "law and order." Nevertheless, better a selfish government, whose only motivation is perpetuation of its own political rule, than the wild chaos of anarchy. That is why Judaism has ordained: hevei mitpallel bi'shelomah shel malkhut, pray for the peace of the government.

What we find, therefore, is a tension between two opposite tendencies. On the one hand, we are to support the idea of authority and "pray for the peace of the kingdom." In Jewish law, when members of the Sanhedrin have come to a decision, all members are obliged to support that majority rule, and if some elders refuse to accept the decision of their colleagues, they are considered mamrim, rebellious elders, and may even be put to death for defying the duly constituted authority. Similarly, the Halakhah enjoins Jews living under non-Jewish rule who abide by the laws of their various governments: dina de'malkhuta dina, the laws of the government are considered by Jews as valid laws. On the other hand, we find a revolutionary spirit, a desire to change for the better, a challenge to all human authority by the word of God which transcends human rulers. It may be true that "the law of the government is considered law," but this is not true when such human law defies the law of God, when it is anti-moral. The major burden of the Prophets of Israel was to oppose established authority by speaking the word of God. All of Judaism is imbued with the spirit of resistance against *malkhut ha-reshaah* (the evil kingdom, i.e., immoral and corrupt human government) by the ideals of *malkhut Shaddai,* the kingdom of God. All of Halakhah strives to create the kind of society which can transcend the limitations of the present and proceed on to greater and better human relations.

Both these opposing elements, therefore, the respect for authority and the desire for improvement, must be maintained. There must always be an equilibrium between law and freedom, between system and spontaneity, between order and liberty, between rigidity and fluidity. But at no times must we ever submit to either of the extremes: tyranny on the one hand, or anarchy on the other.

It is from this point of view that we ought to judge the stormy events of our days.

In most cases, we find not one but many causes joined together to bring about the recent upheavals throughout the world. Students have many legitimate complaints, combined with characteristic youthful restlessness, and ignited by small but shrewd anarchist cells, no doubt influenced here and there by the colorful characters of Castroite communism and possibly an occasional instigation by Maoist sources.

Certainly any fair-minded person ought to concede

that all is not well in academe, that our universities are not paragons of virtue. Certain university administrations are monarchical and authoritarian in their ways. They are inflexible in their rigid attitudes, recognizing neither the personality of the individual students nor the opinions of the faculty nor the interests of the community at large in which they exist. Some of them have apparently subordinated their educational goals to their big business, and especially real estate interests.

At the same time, the student reaction is complex. People often ask: what do the students want? The answer is: everything – and nothing!

There are amongst them those who want everything. There are students who desire nothing less than overturning all of society, all of authority, all law and order. They strive for total anarchy, in the dim and vague hope that somehow out of all this will emerge something better. And there are those who want nothing, except an outlet for their penchant for excitement and exhilaration, the normal youthful thrill-seeking turned to rowdyism.

And in between these two groups, there are some idealistic young people who genuinely protest the excesses of the academic establishment, who are dissatisfied with a hypocritical and war-oriented and bigoted society, but who do not wish to destroy aimlessly.

It is well to remember that young people are always anxious for a change and are always somewhat revolutionary -- and that is all to the good. That is as it should be. Jews do not expect others or themselves to accept authority blindly. Today's Orthodox young people are not immune to youthful restlessness – nor should they be. Even at the classical yeshivot there were – and there still are in our day – occasional student rebellions. We need only mention the historically famous student strike at Volozhin. But in all these cases, the issues were real, they were matters of ultimate commitment, and they were constructive.

Adults are sometimes impatient with youthful extremism. But if they are – they are wrong. Young men and young women should be extremely idealistic, should be unhappy with the status quo, should be dissatisfied with what their parents accomplished. Time and nature together will combine for the natural, normal attrition of idealism. If they are not excessively idealistic now, then there will be nothing left later on but a hollow core in which only cynicism can grow. If they go to the extremes of idealism now, then when they are adults at least some core of decency will survive.

To a great extent it is part of the Jewish heritage to be restless and revolutionary, the Jewish heritage of challenging all ensconced authority and never allowing any individual or any institution to become an end in itself, for then it is transformed into an idol.

It is interesting that the anarchist leaders of student revolt throughout the world today are, for a large part, alienated Jews, such as Marks Rudd in Columbia, and Daniel Cohn-Bendit in Paris. Fortunately they have learned something from the Jewish tradition; unfortunately they have not learned enough. They have absorbed, unconsciously, from our tradition the principle of sur me'ra, of departing from evil, of overturning that which is corrupt. What they have failed to learn is the end of that verse in Psalms: aseh tov, do good. Their rejection of society is not a revolution but a rebellion, it is only a desire to overturn the old but is not accompanied by plans to build something new in its stead. It is plain anarchy, which may issue from noble sources, but can come to no good end.

Justice Fortas was right. Our democracy allows for protest against corrupt laws. The very fact that it permits such protest to be made in a legal manner means that the illegal ways of expressing protest are illegitimate. And if our democracy is to survive, if we ourselves are to survive, then we must restrict the protest to the legitimate and the legal means. Society cannot tolerate a complete breakdown of law and order. Otherwise, ish et re'ehu hayyim bela'o, it is the end of all civilized existence. And anarchy must be stopped before that occurs.

The only alternative to law and order remains the midbar, the desert, the wasteland, the wilderness.

On this eve of mattan Torah, as we are about to celebrate the giving of the Torah, we recall the famous statement of the Sages who play on the word harut – that the laws of the Ten Commandments were harut, engraved, on the Tablets – and substitute for it the word herut, freedom. The law of Torah, the order of Jewish society, is not enslaving but liberating, not crushing but emancipating.

Out of the very midbar, out of the very desert, Torah helps us to raise our degalim, our standards of fairness, our ramparts of justice, our flags of respect and a fair chance for all individuals.

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Navigating Uncertainty

Dr. Erica Brown

To be a pioneer – as Jews know from our history – you have to be prepared to spend a long time in the wilderness," wrote Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his "Covenant and Conversation" essay on parshat Noah. This was the way he described the early Zionists who founded the State of Israel and the sacrifices they made to do so. We think of them with gratitude as we celebrate Israel's 75th year of existence. We can also travel back in time to those who made the perilous forty-year journey from Egypt to Canaan or further still to Abraham, our first wilderness pioneer.

This embrace of uncertainty is stamped all over the book of Bamidbar, or Numbers, that we open this week to read the Torah portion that carries the same name. The Israelites spent a long time in a state of unknowing. They had no first-hand knowledge of where they were going. They did not believe, given the harsh conditions of the desert, that they would get there. They questioned the character and competence of their leaders, uncertain they could trust them in this wilderness, and unsure of God's intentions. That's a lot of uncertainty to carry.

According to *Desert and Shepherd in Our Biblical Heritage,* Nogah Hareuveni uses "*midbar*" to refer to arid places with very little rainfall and also, and ironically, as places to graze animals on the margins of human habitation. We also recognize the root word as *D-V-R* as a thing or word. Some biblical scholars point out that *D-V-R* can mean that which comes after or that which comes about as a result of something else. It can signify both being and becoming.

The wilderness is often characterized by silence, but our wilderness trek was filled with noise. We complained. We threatened. We cried. We challenged. In the wilderness, a donkey spoke while some leaders were silenced. An enemy gave us a blessing. Someone recently asked me why there is not one recorded circumcision in the book of Numbers. I responded simply that there are no births recorded in this book. There are only deaths. There is a steep price to pay when you travel in the wilderness. It's a place you cross. You cannot stay there. The *midbar* is a provisional bridge between points of stability that can untether us if we stay too long.

No doubt, the Israelites also looked around them and up above them and murmured their wonder and gratitude at their very existence. This vulnerability of uncertainty may have allowed them the space, clarity and willingness to receive the Ten Commandments in a desert and not in our homeland; the ten *dibrot* – utterances that share a root with *midbar* - came to us where we least expected them. By giving them to us at Sinai rather than in Jerusalem, we could carry them wherever we went. Their wisdom had no geographic boundaries.

The *midbar* is a perfect metaphor for leadership. Good leaders escort us through uncertainty. They provide the direction forward and offer their reassurances to keep going when we get stuck. In their *Harvard Business Review* article, 6 Strategies for Leading Through Uncertainty (April 26, 2021), Rebecca Zucker and Darin Rowell invite leaders to embrace the discomfort of not knowing and relinquish the need to be right or be certain. They distinguish between leadership problems that are complicated and those that are complex. A complicated problem may be a technical one, where something must be broken down, often by experts, into its constituent parts in order to solve. A complex problem, however, is different. It may "contain many interdependent elements, some of which may be unknown and may change over time in unpredictable ways." This may precipitate lots of confusion and opinions without obvious solutions. "As a result, solutions to complex challenges typically emerge through trial and error and require the willingness, humility, and ability to act, learn, and adapt."

Zucker and Rowell ask leaders to let go of perfectionism, resist over-simplification and avoid drawing quick conclusions to remove oneself from uncertainty. They encourage leaders to find partners in the work of uncertainty and zoom out because being too close to a problem can vitiate the capacity to see it for what it is. Creating distance "provides you with a broader perspective and a systemic view of the issues and can shine a light on unexamined assumptions that would otherwise not be visible." Take an aerial view, and the issues looks different. So can possible solutions.

God helped us navigate the wilderness by commanding Moses to place the Mishkan, our portable sanctuary, at the heart of every encampment, as if to say, know that in a place of uncertainty, what you stand for – your values – is stable and centered. It is, on some level, that which can never be truly in transition. In our parsha, we are given a protocol for

moving the Mishkan: "When the Tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the Tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up…" (Num. 1:51). Rashi there explains: "Whenever they were about to set out on a journey in the wilderness from one station to another, they took the structure apart and carried it to the place where the clouds of glory rested, and there they encamped and erected it." The terrain may be different, but the core of the nation is always the same.

What core values provide you with stability during times of uncertainty?

I Love To Count

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

Parshas Bamidbar is always read on the Shabbos before Shavuos. According to one opinion in Tosafos in Megillah, this is in order to make a separation between the reading of the section of tochecha, or rebuke, in Bechukosai, and the holiday of Shavuos. Other opinions, however, seem to indicate that there is an intrinsic connection between parshas Bamidbar and Shavuos. Moreover, the Zohar tells us that, in general, the blessings of each week depend on the Torah reading of the preceding Shabbos. What, then, is the connection between parshas Bamidbar and the holiday of Shavuos ? While many answers have been given, connecting various parts of the parsha with the different themes of Shavuos, I would like to focus on the very beginning of the parsha, which relates God's command to Moshe to count the people. What, then, does counting have to do with Shavuos ?

In connection with the receiving of the Torah, the midrash tells us that when God said," I am the Lord your God," he was speaking to each person individually. Each person, according to this midrash, has his own, personal relationship with God. There are other midrashim and Talmudic passages which indicate that each person has his own portion in Torah, a certain part of Torah that is revealed to him and that he must teach to the Jewish people. According to Rav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik, this is the meaning of the Talmudic passage in Niddah 30, that an angel teaches the entire Torah to the fetus in its mother's womb. The commentary Megaleh Amukos sees a hint to this teaching in the word Yisroel, whose letters he understands to indicate ' yeish shishim ribo osios beTorah,' or, there are six hundred thousand letters in the Torah. In order for the Jewish people to fully understand the Torah, they must be willing to learn from each other, because each Jew has some part of Torah within him that only he can teach. The Ramban, in his commentary to parshas Bamidbar, says that the reason each person is numbered is in order to give him importance, by showing him that he is worthy of being singled out. This is a message that has general significance, teaching us that we, too, need to show an appreciation for the importance of each Jew we encounter. In terms of receiving the Torah, however, this recognition of importance takes on added significance, because,in order to fully receive the Torah, we must recognize the need to learn from every person, as we are taught in Pirkei Avos.

Perhaps another aspect of the importance of counting can be seen in the fact that we end the process of Sefiras ha-Omer, or counting forty-nine days from the date of the bringing of the Omer-offering, in the week between reading Bamidbar and the holiday of Shavuos. Counting each day drives home the significance of each day,and the need to try to grow daily in some way. The book of Bamidbar is actually permeated by the idea of the importance of each day, as it 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 may 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, since the people were dependent on God's directives in determining their schedule. We have suggested, in the past, that the reason the book of Bamidbar begins out of chronological sequence is to indicate that the people's sense of time during their years in the wilderness was subject to God's decisions of when to call on them to travel. Because they were constantly subject to God's decision in this regard, each day took on added significance, as the schedule of events could not be taken for granted. In this way, perhaps, they were better able

to fulfill the directive to view the Torah, which embodies God's will, as being given anew every day. By going through the process of Sefiras HaOmer, we are, in a small way, able to experience, in a small way, what the generation that left Egypt experienced through its constant subjection to God's will in respect to their very place of abode each day.

These aspects of the significance of counting for receiving the Torah that we have suggested also have relevance to parshas Bamidbar itself. Ramban, in his introduction to his commentary to Bamidbar, writes that the order of the various tribal encampments around the mishkan that is described in the parsha constitutes a reconstruction of the scene that occurred around Mt. Sinai when the Torah was given. This comment is a brief review of his more detailed comments in the beginning of parshas Terumah, to the effect that the encampment mishkan served to perpetuate the experience that the people had at Mt.Sinai during the revelation, when God's holy presence dwelled among them. Therefore, just as each tribe was assigned a certain place to stand in proximity to the mountain, so, too, when the nation encamped around the mishkan, each tribe was assigned its appropriate place. Thus, parshas Bamidbar, according to the Ramban, is a description of the way in which the experience of receiving the Torah was perpetuated throughout the nation's sojourn in the wilderness. Moreover, the midrash, as cited by Rashi, teaches us that the people were being readied for their entry into Eretz Yisroel. Had they not sinned when they reacted to the evil report of the spies, they would have entered the land at that time. As the Ramban has taught us, the main place for the fulfillment of the Torah is in Eretz Yisroel. Rav Kook writes that the Torah's charge for us to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation entails demonstrating holiness, as taught in the torah, within the setting of a nation, which must deal with all aspects of life, including the political, economic and social aspects necessary for the proper running of a nation. Thus, in parshas Bamidbar, the people, besides arranging themselves around the mishkan in order to perpetuate the Sinaitic experience,were also being readied for the fulfillment of the Torah in its widest sense. In this context, the messages for Shavuos that we have mentioned as being implied in the process of counting applied equally, if not more, to the people in the wilderness whose encampment is described in our parsha.

The Secret of the Spiritual Battlefield

Rabbi Hershel Reichman

The bulk of this parsha deals with the count of the Jewish People in the desert. On a simple level, the people were counted for the army. On a deeper level, rather than understanding this count as referring to soldiers battling on a physical front with weapons of war, the Zohar understands that the Torah is talking about a battle on a spiritual front, about warriors fighting the battle of the Torah and Mishkan. What are these two fronts? What does the Zohar mean that the tzivos Hashem fight the battles of the Torah and the Mishkan?

Counting Names

The Shem Mishmuel starts his explanation with a point that the Seforno also notes. The Torah mentions two major censuses of the Jewish People, one in Parshas Bamidbar and one in Parshas Pinchas. Both counts are according to the tribes, the princes of which are each mentioned specifically as well. In Bamidbar, at the beginning of the forty years in the desert, Hashem commanded an additional aspect to the counting. The pasuk there says to count the number of names, "*b'mispar sheimos...l'gulgelosam*" (Bamidbar 1:2).

In Pinchas however, the Torah does not include the phrase *"b'mispar sheimos l'gulgelosam"* in the commandment to count. There, the people are counted but names are not. The Ramban explains this difference as follows. In the count in Parshas Bamidbar, each Jew brought a half-shekel coin and put it into a box. Afterwards, all of the coins were counted. When they brought their shekalim, each Jew would announce his name to Moshe and to the prince of his tribe, as the Torah commands, "*b'mispar sheimos*." In Pinchas, the people simply gave a half-shekel coin but did not announce their names.

Why the change? The Seforno says that the count in Bamidbar was of the Jews who left Egypt, accepted the Torah, and built the Mishkan. Every Jew was so precious because he participated in these momentous, fundamental experiences. The next generation, which was counted in Parshas Pinchas, had not experienced these events, so their individual names weren't as important. The Shem Mishmuel suggests another approach.

Collective Name and Individual Names

In his Chassidic explanation, the Shem Mishmuel cites a Midrash that he refers to often. There are two verses that relate to God's relationship to the stars in the sky. One is, "*L'chulam b'sheim yikra.* God calls [all the stars] by name" (Yeshaya 40:26). The word *sheim*—name—is in singular form in this verse. The second pasuk is, "*L'chulam sheimos yikra.* God calls [each star] by its own name" (Tehillim 147:4). When God wants to address all the stars together, He uses their single collective name. When He wants to talk to a specific star, He calls that star by its individual name.

This is symbolic of the Jewish People. We each have a dual role. We are part of the collective of Am Yisrael and, in that sense, we have one shared name: Bnei Yisrael, the Children of Israel. Within this shared identity, we also have personal roles. Each person has his own individuality and unique experiences. Each person has his own individual name. According to Chassidus, the name a person receives is really God-given. Even though children are normally named by their parents, the parents receive a sort of prophecy, as the name they give defines the character of the child.

Every Jew functions both as an individual on the level of *prat,* and as part of the collective on the level of *klal*. We have many mitzvos that we perform on our own. We put on tefillin, eat matza, and light Shabbos candles. There are also mitzvos that we do as a nation. In the Beis Hamikdash, the sacrifices were national mitzvos. These included the korbanos tamid and the musaf offerings. Settling the Land of Israel and appointing a Jewish king are also national mitzvos.

Three Pillars

The Mishna says, "*Al shlosha d'varim ha'olam omeid: al haTorah, al ha'avoda, v'al gemilus chasadim.* The world rests on three things: on the Torah, on the service of Hashem, and on doing kindness" (Avos 1:2). Torah study is primarily an individual mitzva. I sit and study the Torah. Even if we are learning together as a group, in a shiur, each person still has his own Torah experience, understanding it with his mind in his own way.

This is one of the surprising things for me as a teacher. Sometimes, when I hear my students repeat things I have taught, they don't say exactly what I intended. The students add or subtract things, and sometimes they say something else entirely! Learning Torah is an individual experience. Each person learns in his own way and grasps Torah in his own way, and this is the way it should be. Chazal say, "*k'sheim she'partzufeihem shonim, kach dei'oseihem shonos.* Just as no two people look exactly the same, so too are people's minds different" (Yerushalmi Brachos 9:1). No two people think exactly the same way. Even identical twins are not completely identical. The human personality is remarkable in that each personality is truly different. When we use our minds to study the Torah, we certainly have an individual experience.

Prayer, the Mitzva of the Congregation

The second pillar of the world, *avoda*, is primarily a public, collective mitzva. For hundreds of years, we had a Mishkan or one of the two Batei Mikdash. Each one lasted for approximately 400 years. The main mitzva there was the *korbanos tzibur,* which consisted of the *temidim*, the daily offerings, and the *musafim*—additional offerings on special days. The nation as a whole was the prime body that performed the *avoda*—the sacrificial service to Hashem.

This also applies to *tefila*, prayer. Davening with ten Jews is much more powerful and important than an individual davening alone. The Gemara says, "*Ein tefilaso shel adam nishma'as ela b'tzibur.* A person's prayers are heard only as part of the congregation" (Brachos 6a). The Gemara also says, "*Ein Hakadosh Baruch Hu mo'eis b'tefilasan shel rabim.* Hashem does not reject the prayers of the many" (Brachos 8a). The prayer of the group of Am Yisrael is the main prayer. I once heard an interesting thought about this from my Rebbe, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt"l. Every Jew turns towards Yerushalayim to recite the Shemoneh Esrei. When Shlomo dedicated the Beis Hamikdash, he said that everyone will pray in the direction of this holy house. What is the idea of everyone facing towards the same place when they pray?

The idea is that all the prayers from around the world gather in Yerushalayim as a national prayer. When I am praying alone in New York, and someone else in Australia also prays towards Yerushalayim, all of our prayers unite in Yerushalayim. The power of that national prayer is the real power of prayer. Therefore, we see that tefila is mainly expressed at the national, collective level, at the level of the tzibur.

The Shem Mishmuel says that, in Parshas Bamidbar, Moshe counted the people who left Mitzrayim, received the Torah, and then built the Mishkan. In this count, the names of the people and their families are mentioned. Their personal names emphasize their importance as individuals. On the other hand, their family and tribe represent them as a group. Thus, the count was dual in nature.

This duality was emphasized because that generation

received the Torah as individuals and also built the Mishkan together as a community. The count in Pinchas, however, was of the next generation. Their main accomplishment was when they entered Eretz Yisrael as a nation. Therefore, in that count, only their collective nature is emphasized.

The third pillar, *gemilus chasadim*, is a combination of the individual and the group. Individuals do chesed, and so does the community as a whole. There are acts of kindness that exceed the abilities and means of any one person. At the same time, chesed requires the personal touch of an individual, which organizations are incapable of providing.

Hashem's Unique Connection to Each Jew

Let us further analyze the first count. The Jewish People were originally counted on a dual level. Each individual person was so precious that he deserved to be counted with his own name. Then there was the communal count of tribal groups and families.

As individuals, they heard the Ten Commandments at Sinai, which were directed to each person individually. Each person was told by God Himself, "*Anochi Hashem Elokecha.* I am Hashem, your God." "*Anochi*," said Rav Soloveitchik, is different than "*ani*," the regular word for "I." Ani is an impersonal "I." If you wanted to say, "I went to the store" or "I went to work," then you would use the word *ani*. *Anochi*, though, refers to me, the individual, as opposed to anyone else. "I, *Anochi*, am calling you on the phone, and I, *Anochi*, am talking to you." Hashem said to each Jew, "*Anochi*, I, and no other, am your God. You and I have our own private, personal relationship."

After Matan Torah, Am Yisrael took up the national project of the Mishkan. This was a mitzva of the tzibur. This count, then, was actually the culminating count following the Exodus. Rashi says this was the third count since they left Egypt. When Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, the Torah tells us how many Jews left, even though it doesn't mention the process of counting. When the Jews donated half-shekalim to build the Mishkan, the Torah mentions their number again and then relates this count, which is celebrated in great detail as the final and ultimate count of the Jews who left Egypt. This count was the culmination of their experience and helped them to look back on their achievements as a generation. This count was a celebration of their achievements as individuals, primarily at Matan Torah, and then what they achieved as a group in building the Mishkan.

The Zohar mentions two groups, soldiers of Torah and soldiers of the Mishkan. There are strong Jews who struggle with the Torah and conquer it; they know the Torah as individuals. Then there are soldiers of the Mishkan, who together as the collective of Am Yisrael, build a holy place for Hashem to dwell in.

Individual Shabbos and Communal Shabbos

The Shem Mishmuel relates the concept of *tzibur* and *yachid* to Shabbos. Shabbos has two commandments, as we read in the two versions of the Ten Commandments. In Parshas Yisro, the Torah uses the word *zachor*, and in Parshas Va'eschanan, the Torah commands us using the word *shamor*. Chazal say that Hashem used both words simultaneously when He spoke at Har Sinai.

The night of Shabbos relates to *shamor*, and the day of Shabbos relates to *zachor*. *Shamor* is a passive concept—don't desecrate the Shabbos. Keep the Shabbos and stop the work of the week. A "*Shomer Shabbos*" is someone who doesn't desecrate the Shabbos. *Zachor*, then, means keep the Shabbos in a positive way. Celebrate the Shabbos, honor the Shabbos, enjoy the Shabbos.

The Shem Mishmuel says that refraining from desecrating the Shabbos during the night is an expression of the group concept of Am Yisrael. None of us would do a *melacha* on Shabbos, God forbid. The Shulchan Aruch teaches us the things that we cannot do. No cooking, no lighting fires, no driving a car, no turning on lights, etc. We are all the same in our observance of the baseline halacha of Shabbos. This begins on the night of Shabbos, as we refrain from regular weekday activities.

In fulfilling *zachor*, however, each Jew experiences Shabbos in his own individual way. In this experience, no two Jews are the same. My Shabbos experience and yours may be similar, but they are not the same. We each celebrate it differently. You sing your songs and I sing mine, and we say different kinds of divrei Torah. We go to our own shuls and we do different activities on Shabbos. Some people take walks, some people spend time with their children, some go to the beis midrash. Shabbos observance can take different personal forms. This is *zachor*.

Shabbos has an Am Yisrael aspect, *shamor*, and the complementary *zachor* aspect, the celebration of Shabbos by the individual.

Transition from Pesach to Shavuos

This is the transition between Pesach and Shavuos. Pesach is the Yom Tov of the *klal*. The Jewish People marched out of Mitzrayim as a group. They suffered together, and they were redeemed together. The Korban Pesach is a group mitzva,

"*seh l'veis avos*" (Shemos 12:3). It has status of a k*orban tzibur* (see Yoma 51a and Tosfos Yoma 6b s.v. Amar). It can be brought on Shabbos and when people are *tamei*. The Jewish nation became a people on Pesach. This is the holiday of Am Yisrael as a whole.

During the Omer, we count days and weeks towards Shavuos. We prepare for Shavuos by improving our character, particularly in the area of *ahavas Yisrael.* We each work to improve ourselves in order to prepare for matan Torah. Am Yisrael in the desert also prepared themselves to receive the Torah. This was an individual preparation. Ma'amad Har Sinai was also an individual experience. Each person had his or her own special place to stand depending on their spiritual level. Moshe stood alone at the top of the mountain. Aharon had his own spot, as did Yehoshua, Nadav, and Avihu. It was a personal experience. Every Jew had to be there because of his preciousness as an individual.

Chassidim like to say that the word *Yisrael* is roshei teivos for "*Yeish shishim ribo osiyos laTorah*. There are 600,000 letters in the Torah." The number 600,000 is the mystical number of the Jewish People, their approximate number in all of the censuses in the desert. Incidentally, when the State of Israel was founded in 1948, there were also about 600,000 Jews there.

Six hundred thousand is not the exact number of letters in the Torah, but that is the Torah's mystical number. In a sefer Torah, if a single letter is missing, the entire sefer is invalid for use. Similarly, each Jewish person has a unique and necessary individuality. If one is missing, the entire collective will miss his contribution.

Every Jew counts. Every Jew brings something unique to the study, observance, and spread of Torah. If we understand how precious each Jew is, we can have true ahavas Yisrael. This means that we can love the group, the nation of Israel, as well as each individual Jew.

Bravery on the Battlefield of Our Personal Lives

Let us further discuss the special place of each individual. The Shem Mishmuel explains that each individual person is tested by the challenges of life. Avraham had ten major challenges. Life is a series of challenges. You should look at life as a spiritual battlefield on which we must wage war against the evil side that is trying to defeat us. In this battle, we know that courage and bravery are critically important. Before a battle, a special kohen would speak to the Jewish soldiers. He would tell them, "Don't let your hearts become weak" (Devarim 20:3). In battle, you must be strong in your mind and convinced of your might, right, and ability to win.

Someone who is fainthearted and afraid will be easily defeated, as Chazal say, "*techilas nisa nefila,* once you start running away, you have already lost the war" (Sota 44b).

This holds true regarding the spiritual battle that we all fight. We must be confident that we will defeat our spiritual enemy, the yeitzer hara. In order for a person to have this level of bravery and courage, he has to feel that he is important and strong. If he feels he is weak, then he won't be able to do it. Chazal say a person should feel that the whole world hangs in the balance between condemnation and salvation (Kiddushin 40b). I am also in balance.

If I do one good deed, I will save the world and myself from condemnation and bring salvation to the whole world. This is both a huge responsibility and a great opportunity. It is very important for every person to think of himself in this way, to believe that he has the strength to affect the whole world in such a dramatic fashion.

"*Se'u es rosh Bnei Yisrael. Raise up the heads of the Jewish People*" (Bamidbar 1:2). This is the phrase the Torah uses to express the counting. The intended meaning is to conduct a head count. However, the literal meaning of the words is also true—to lift them up, to give them a sense of pride. The Midrash says that there is a hidden and paradoxical message hinted to in this phrase.

"*Se'u es rosh*" means to lift up their heads, to give each person a good feeling and recognize him. But this very phrase can also mean to hang someone, to kill him. What does that mean? The Midrash says that pride hides a great danger. A person should lift up his head to do good things, but he should not get hanged from his head and executed. Jewish pride is precious and important. We are doing the right things and should continue to do so. We have the strength to do it. But pride can make a person haughty, vain, and spoiled. This is a sensitive point. The Torah has tremendous respect and value for each individual, each of whom is supposed to feel that pride and use the ensuing sense of selfworth for good things. You are supposed to say, "*Bishvili nivra ha'olam,* The world was created for me" (Sanhedrin 37a), to take the whole world and use it. But we shouldn't let this go to our heads. Each of us needs this sense of self-worth to win the battle against evil. But the danger is that it can lead to the false pride of ga'ava—vanity and egoism. There are terrible consequences of the sin of vanity. When people pursue honor, they may destroy others in order to attain that honor.

The Secret of the Spiritual Battlefield

What is the solution to achieving the proper balance between selfworth and vanity? The Shem Mishmuel explains that I should recognize that I am God's messenger. I am important because God made me important. When I think of Hashem and of myself, then I will have a sense of bitul hayeish, the annulment of self, which will create the proper balance.

When I face the daily challenges of the world, I need to know that I am something, that I am a *yeish*. I can fight the yeitzer hara; I am powerful enough to fight and defeat him. In relation to Hashem, though, I am insignificant.

This combination is the secret to winning the spiritual battles. This is how everyone can become a soldier in tzivos Hashem in the battle to bring the light of Torah and mitzvos into the world.

This brings to mind the famous statement of the Maggid of Mezritch. When describing the experience of matan Torah, Moshe said, "*Anochi omeid bein Hashem u'veiniechem.* I stood between you and Hashem at Sinai" (Devarim 5:5). The Maggid said that the concept of "*anochi*"—too much pride—stands between us and Hashem.

We must be confident and brave in our battle against evil. We must be stubborn and steadfast to defeat evil all the way to the very end, and simultaneously be cognizant of our total insignificance in relation to Hashem. When we keep both of these in mind, we can be victorious in this great battlefield called life.

The Desert & Matan Torah

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

With this week's sedra, Bamidbar, we open up the fourth book of Torah, sefer Bamidbar. Bamidbar is also known as Sefer ha'Pekudim, the Book of Counting, and in our parsha, Hashem commands Moshe to take a census of the nation, all males between the ages of twenty and sixty, able bodied and ready to go out to battle (at this point, the nation believes it is journeying directly into the Holy Land, where it will battle against the Canaanite nations, the inhabitants of the land).

Famously, and for many reasons, Bamidbar is always read the Shabbos before Shavuos, zman matan Tora'sainu. Why do we read this sedra before the yomtov where we celebrate the giving of the Torah?

The Medrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7) teaches:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי (במדבר א, א), לָמָּה בְּמִדְבָּר סִינַי, מִכָּאן שָׁנוּ חֲכָמִים בִּשְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים נִתְּנָה הַתּוֹרָה, בָּאֵשׁ, וּבַמַּיִם, וּבַמִּדְבָּר. בָּאֵשׁ מִנַּיִן (שמות יט, יח): וְהַר סִינַי עָשַׁן כֻּלּוֹ וגו'. וּבַמַּיִם מִנַּיִן, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שופטים ה, ד): גַּם שָׁמַיִם נָטָפוּ גַּם עָבִים נָטְפוּ מָיִם. וּבַמִּדְבָּר מִנַּיִן וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינָי, וְלָמָּה נִתְּנָה בִּשְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הַלָּלוּ, אֶלָּא מָה אִלּוּ חִנָּם לְכָל בָּאֵי הָעוֹלָם כָּךְ דִּבְרֵי תוֹרָה חִנָּם הֵם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ישעיה נה, א): הוֹי כָּל צָמֵא לְכוּ לַמַּיִם

And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai (Bamidbar 1:1). Why does the verse state 'in the wilderness of Sinai'? From here the Sages learn that the Torah was given through three mediums: through fire (Shemos 19:18), through water (Shoftim 5:4), and through/in the desert (Bamidbar 1:1). And why was the Torah given through these three things? To teach you that just as these three mediums (fire, water and desert) are free to all, so too, the words of Torah are free (i.e.: accessible) to all (who want to learn Torah and live by her wisdom and commandments).

Bamidbar is always read before Shavuos to remind, exhort and encourage us to become receptacles ready to receive the Torah. Just like one can access fire, water and air (the desert), so too, for whoever so desires, the Torah is always accessible to each and every Jew, no matter their age, stage, or prior Torah knowledge. לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם, הִוא - *the Torah is not in the heavens that we need an astronaut to go up and get it for us!* וְלֹא-מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם, הִוא, *it is not across the seas on a remote island that we need sailors to sail the seas and retrieve it for us;* כִּי-קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר, מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ, לַעֲשֹׂתוֹ - *for it is very very close to us, in our mouths and in our hearts to learn and to do* (Devarim 30:11-14).

For those who want to learn, and want to do, the Torah is our greatest treasure. As the tanna Rabbi Akiva teaches us (Pirkei Avos 3:14): חֲבִיבִין יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁנִּתַּן לָהֶם כְּלִי חֶמְדָּה. חִבָּה יְתֵרָה נוֹדַעַת לָהֶם שֶׁנִּתַּן לָהֶם כְּלִי חֶמְדָּה שֶׁבּוֹ נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: כִּי לֶקַח טוֹב נָתַתִּי לָכֶם, תּוֹרָתִי אַל תַּעֲזֹבוּ - *Beloved is Israel that a precious vessel was given to them; especially beloved are they for it was made known to them that the desirable instrument, with which the world had been created, was given to them, as the verse states: A good instruction I give to you, my Torah do not abandon* (Mishlei 4:2)

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z'l fascinatingly records an incident that occurred in England almost four hundred years ago. "One of the most amusing scenes in Anglo-Jewish history occurred on October 14, 1663. A mere seven years

had passed since Oliver Cromwell had found no legal bar to Jews living in England (hence the so-called 'return' of 1656). A small synagogue was opened in Creechurch Land in the City of London, forerunner of Bevis Marks (1701), the oldest still-extant place of Jewish worship in Britain.

"The famous diarist Samuel Pepys decided to pay a visit to this new curiosity to see how Jews conducted themselves at prayer. What he saw amazed and scandalised him. As chance, or providence, would have it, the day of his visit turned out to be Simchat Torah. This is how he described what he saw:

'And anon their Laws that they take out of the press [i.e., the Ark] are carried by several men, four or five several burthens in all, and they do relieve one another; and whether it is that every one desires to have the carrying of it, I cannot tell, thus they carried it round about the room while such a service is singing… But, Lord! to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true G-d, would make a man foreswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this' [The Diary of Samuel Pepys, 2003].

"This was not the kind of behaviour he was used to in a house of worship. There is something unique about the relationship of the Jews to the Torah, the way we stand in its presence as if it were a king, dance with it as if it were a bride, listen to it telling our story and study it as, as we say in our prayers, 'our life and the length of our days'. There are few more poignant lines of prayer than the one contained in a poem said at Ne'ila, at the end of Yom Kippur: ein shiur rak ha'Torah hazot - 'nothing remains' after the destruction of the Temple and the loss of the land, 'but this Torah.' A book, a scroll, was all that stood between Jews and despair…

"The desert became the birthplace of a wholly new relationship between G-d and our people, a relationship built on covenant, speech and love as concretised in the Torah. Distant from the great centres of civilisation, a people found themselves alone with G-d and there consummated a bond that neither exile nor tragedy could break. That is the truth at the beating heart of our faith: that it is not power or politics that link us to G-d, but love" (Essays on Ethics, p.215-216, 219-220).

May we learn the lessons of 'Bamidbar' as we prepare to once again accept the Torah this Shavuos, and make room for her in our hearts, in our minds and in our lives..

Everyone Counts

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Parshas Bamidbar begins with the census that was taken of Benei Yisrael at Mount Sinai. The Ramban (1:45) addresses the question as to the need to know the number of people in the nation. Why was it important to count all the members of Benei Yisrael?

The Ramban first suggests that the census might have been required להודיעם חסדו עליהם, כי בשבעים נפש ירדו אבותיהם מצרימה ועתה הם כחול הים – to show God's kindness, turning the family of seventy people into a large nation. Benei Yisrael were counted so that they would appreciate the fact that they grew into such a large multitude from humble beginnings.

But the Ramban then presents a second answer:

הבא לפני אב הנביאים ואחיו קדוש ה', והוא נודע אליהם בשמו, יהיה לו בדבר הזה זכות וחיים, כי בא בסוד העם ובכתב בני ישראל...לכולם זכות במספר שימנו לפני משה ואהרון, כי ישימו עליהם עינם לטובה, יבקשו עליהם רחמים...

The Ramban explains that there was immense benefit for every member of the nation to come before Moshe and Aharon, tell them his name, and receive their blessing. By coming before Moshe and Aharon to be counted, the person sensed that בא בסוד העם ובכתב בני ישראל, he is an important member of the nation. Moshe and Aharon looked upon him and gave him a blessing, conveying the critical message that he counts, that he matters, that he's important, that he can make a difference and have an impact.

Hashem could have very easily just told Moshe the number of people in the nation. But the goal wasn't this information – the goal was the process, the exercise of each person coming before Moshe and Aharon and being told that he counts, that he is an indispensable part of Am Yisrael.

Rav Shlomo Wolbe suggests that this might be the reason why Parshas Bamidbar is always read on the Shabbos before Shavuos. Before we can receive the Torah, we must recognize our value and worth, that we matter, that we have something to accomplish. It is only when we understand that we count, that we are needed, that we have an important contribution to make as part of Am Yisrael, that we can

accept the Torah and take on our mission.

The Gemara in Maseches Shabbos tells that when Moshe Rabbeinu ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, the angels in the heavens tried to interfere, arguing that the Torah should not be given to mortals. Hashem instructed Moshe to respond to the angels and explain to them why Benei Yisrael deserved the Torah. Rav Yechezkel Weinfeld shelit"a notes that although it was Hashem's decision to give us the Torah, He wanted Moshe to refute the angels' arguments. We would have expected that Hashem, who was giving the Torah to Am Yisrael, would be the one to explain why He felt they were deserving of the Torah. But instead, He specifically told Moshe to respond to the angels. The reason, Rav Weinfeld explains, is because we need to confidently believe that we deserve the Torah in order to receive it. We must believe that we count, that we have potential, that we have the ability to study and practice the Torah and live according to its precepts. This is a critical prerequisite for accepting the Torah. Therefore, it was Moshe, and not God, who had to respond to the angels and clearly explain why we are worthy of receiving the Torah.

A Story of Darkness and Light

Rabbi Jonathan Ziring

And there was light" - this corresponds to the Book of Shemot, in which Israel came from darkness to light. "And G-d saw that the light was good" corresponds to the Book of Vayikra which is full of many laws. "And G-d separated the light from the darkness" corresponds to the Book of Bamidbar which makes a distinction between those who left Egypt and those who came into the Land. "And G-d called the light, Day" corresponds to the Book of Devarim, which is full of many laws. (Bereishit Rabbah 3)

This midrash cryptically finds hints to all five books of the Torah in the verses about creation. Besides for Bereishit, the books are all alluded to in the creation of light and its separation from darkness. What is the message of this midrash? Several insights emerge. For example, the birth of the Jewish people is seen as a fulfillment of G-d's goals for the entire world. However, for the purpose of understanding Bamidbar, another detail offers perspective.

The book of Shemot describes the origin story of the Jewish nation. (In Bereishit, the Jews are only a family, the literal children of Israel.) The path from slavery to freedom, from idolatry (see Yechezkel 20) to worship of G-d, is aptly described as the journey from darkness to light. Indeed Mishlei (6:23) refers to Torah as light. In English, the Jews became "enlightened." Vayikra, in which the Jews are given many laws, gains the approbation of G-d, "and the light was good." Bamidbar divides between those who left Egypt and died in the desert and those who merited entering into the land of Israel. The former are referred to as darkness while the latter are light.

However, upon further reflection, this is shocking. The Jewish people who in Bamidbar are described as darkness because they sinned and thus were not allowed to enter Israel are presumably the same Jews who left Egypt and were thus described in Shemot as journeying to light. Thus, the midrash is harshly reminding the reader that spiritual gains can be completely lost and reversed. The Jews who left Egypt did not just sin – despite having the Torah, it is as if they went back in time. Thus, the midrashic description of the second, surviving generation of light takes on a different meaning. They continued the legacy of their parents, despite their parents failing in that very task.

The Netziv (Introduction to Bamidbar) understands the "light" and "dark" of this midrash as two sides of a debate: whether G-d's providence is visibly supernatural or more subtle, functioning within nature. The beginning of Bamidbar still reflects the more miraculous journey begun during the Exodus, while the latter half, after the Jews sinned, reflects the more naturalistic. This implies that the second generation, despite meriting to enter Israel, was in darkness, while the first generation mostly experienced light. Presumably, hidden

providence must have benefits, such as enabling the Jews to become self-reliant. Otherwise, this would seem to be unjust, as the second generation suffers more than the first who brought the situation about. [See Yirmiyahu 31:28-29.]

In Havdalah, we bless G-d for separating light from darkness, and the Jews from the nations of the world. Considering the above, however, the unique status of the Jews, to be light and not dark, is a responsibility that must be earned and maintained, not an automatic privilege.

This midrash thus establishes several insights that should guide us through reading the book of Bamidbar:

- We can never rest on our laurels. Whatever is gained can be lost if we are not careful.
- We all have the potential for darkness, even after we have seen the light. Even then, however, there is hope to come back.
- G-d is in our lives, but in different ways, and the different ways we find G-d calling us towards different religious postures.

Bamidbar, is thus not just the journey of the first and second generation of Jews, those who left Egypt and those who entered Israel, but it is the story of every Jew's potential for greatness or its opposite.

Surviving the Wilderness

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Bamidbar, the Israelites enter the wilderness of Sinai and begin their journey to the land of Canaan. Unfortunately, the journey to the land of "milk and honey" that normally takes only a few weeks, endured for 40 years because of the sin of the scouts/spies, (Numbers 13-14), resulting in the decree of G-d that no man who was above the age of 20 at that time, may enter into the land of Israel.

In parashat Bamidbar the Torah informs us (Numbers 1:1), that G-d speaks to Moses בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי, in the wilderness of Sinai,בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשֵּׁנִית, לְצֵאתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, *on the first day of the second month in the second year after the Exodus from the land of Egypt.* The people of Israel were so close to the land of Israel, but never made it into the Promised Land, at least not the men of that generation.

If we take a long look at Jewish history, we see the theme of "unfulfilled dreams" repeating itself throughout the millennia of Jewish life. We have been so close so often to the goal of reaching the land of Israel, but only few Jews ever merited to reach the land, and even fewer succeed in dwelling on the land. These unfulfilled desires account for the fact that, for the most part, Jewish history is a record of the travels of the Jewish people through the wilderness of galut, exile and diaspora.

But while this sad destiny of the ancient Israelites and their fate to wander for 40 years in the wilderness is certainly unfortunate, the lessons learned in the wilderness and explicated in this week's parasha, are lessons that have empowered the Jewish people to survive and thrive, through the many centuries of dispersion.

The primary message of parashat Bamidbar is then, that survival in the "wilderness" is intimately linked to the Jewish people's commitment to G-d, and to the efficacy of Jewish societal structure.

In parsahat Bamidbar, the Torah incorporates both these themes. First, the people of Israel are counted and are told exactly where to camp. Through this, the Torah boldly teaches that Jewish survival is no accident. If the home is strong, if the family is strong, if the tribe and its dwelling is secure, then the people of Israel are strong. And, although the Torah describes in great detail which tribes encamp on the north, which on the south, which on the east, and which on the west, what is most important is that at the epicenter is always the camp of G-d. The center of Jewish life that is encompassed by the People, is the camp of G-d. The Tabernacle and the families of Levi that service the Tabernacle and minister to the people, are the core of Jewish life.

For more than 3300 years, the Jewish people have endured, while other great and more powerful civilizations have vanished from the face of the earth. Undoubtedly, the secret lessons of the "wilderness" have kept the people intact: Keep the families strong and secure. Make sure that the extended families–parents, grandparents, grandchildren, are close by. Make certain to live within walking distance of the "sanctuary"–the local synagogue, the Bet Midrash, the house of study, and the Yeshiva. Choose your place of residence by its proximity to Torah. Commit yourself to the practice of Jewish rituals and Jewish observance, which become so much easier to observe when done collectively, together with brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles.

It is therefore no coincidence that the fourth book of the bible is called Bamidbar–in the wilderness, because the wilderness has embodied so much of our history. But, while the wilderness experience provides important clues to Jewish survival, the wilderness, of course, can also lead to oblivion, annihilation and self-destruction.

Therefore, it is crucial for the people of Israel to master the secrets of survival that are to be found in the wilderness experiences. If the Jewish people are to endure and flourish in the future, those secrets, found in this week's parasha, must be rigorously studied and imbibed by all.