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Bamidbar 5784

Power and Peace

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered June 6, 1970)

The Sidra of Bamidbar tells us of the census that Moses conducted, under Divine command, of men of military age: מִבְּנֵי עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמֵעַלָּה כָּל יִצְאָל צָבָא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל. He counted all men capable of serving in the army, men of the age of twenty and over. There was one exception to this rule, and that was the tribe of Levi: אַךְ לֵוִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא תִפְקֵד בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, *"But the tribe of Levi you shall not count, and their sum you shall not take amongst the children of Israel."* Levi was not included in the general count, but was numbered in a special census.

Why this exception? The Midrash gives us one answer: כְּדָאֵי הוּא לְגִיּוֹן שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ לְהִיּוֹת נִמְנָה לְבָדוֹ; *the private legion of the King is of such dignity that it ought to be counted separately.*

That is a good answer, but it does not account for a major difference between the general census and that of Levi. All other Israelites were numbered from the age of twenty years, whereas the Levites were numbered from the age of thirty days.

A contemporary Israeli Rabbi (Rabbi Ben Zion Firer) offers an answer that is full of insight. Levi, he maintains, was excluded from both military census and service precisely because this tribe was most prone to fight, most anxious to take to the sword!

This was an ingrained characteristic of the Levites inherited from the founder of the tribe, Levi himself. When his sister Dinah was ravished by Shechem, it was Levi together with Simeon who avenged their sister's honor by destroying Shechem and his entire tribe, much to the displeasure of their father Jacob. And later on, when the children of Israel danced about the Golden Calf and Moses wanted to turn to those who were loyal to God to cut down the idol worshippers, he immediately addressed the tribe of Levi: וְהָרְגוּ אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ וְאִישׁ אֶת קְרוֹבוֹ, *kill each man his brother and his friend and his relative.* Levi was perfectly suited to this task. This was the tribe that was courageous and strong, precipitous and determined.

What the Torah, therefore, meant by the exclusion of Levi from military service was this: in the Jewish conception an army, when it is necessary, must serve a higher and nobler end; it must never become an end in itself. Put a sword in the hands of Levi on a sustained basis, and you have moved beyond the military to – militarism!

Momentary zeal, passion for a righteous cause, moral indignation, the use of armed might to achieve idealistic ends, all this is sometimes necessary and excusable. But as a general policy – never! אַךְ אֵת מִטָּה לֹא תִפְקֵד וְאֵת רֵאשִׁם לֹא תִשָּׂא בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

That is why Phineas, who slew those who defiantly and publicly broke the moral code of Israel, was acknowledged by God to have done a marvelous thing. But when God gave him a special covenant as a result, the Torah says: וְנָתַתִּי לוֹ אֶת בְּרִיתִי שְׁלוֹם, *"I will give him my covenant of peace."* I will give him peace – the opportunity to express his idealism and his zeal, not in a one-time, bloody fashion, but on a sustained and peaceful basis.

Therefore, the rest of Israel, the יִצְאֵי צָבָא, those who entered the army and dedicated themselves to fight, were numbered from the age of twenty years. But the tribe of Levi, dedicated to the Tabernacle, to teaching and to the ideals of peace, were numbered from the age of thirty days. Man must learn to temper his martial spirit with the pursuit of peace, and this lesson must begin from the cradle itself.

The State of Israel today has been forced by circumstances to live by the sword. This is not natural or normal for the children of Jacob; the sword is more characteristic of Esau and his descendants. So this is a new phenomenon in Jewish history, almost unknown in the last 2,000 years of our people and its traditions.

In many ways, this is a positive development. Jews have determined that never again will they allow themselves to be led like sheep to the slaughter, and that they will, if

necessary, defend themselves individually and collectively. Thank God for that! We are willing to dispense with the world's pity, and prefer their respect. We have nothing to be ashamed of in Israel's military accomplishments which have attracted the world's admiration. It was David, the same David who is the author of the Psalms, who declared the necessity קשת בני יהודה קשת, to teach the children of Judea the art of the bow and arrow. Theologically, this has signified the re-emergence of power as an element in Judaism, and has added a new dimension to the collective Jewish personality. How we use this new-found power will reflect on our whole tradition, our whole past, our whole history.

But in truth, and no one knows this better than the leaders of the State of Israel themselves, we must constantly beware of a creeping militarism, especially in the sense of a military mentality. We now have a generation of youngsters in Israel who have been born into a situation of military stress, of feeling surrounded and beleaguered. It is very easy for them to grow up with the feeling that the bomb, the bomber, the grenade, are all a normal part of life. This military mentality is but one step away from militarism.

Let me make it absolutely clear. We ought to be extremely proud that despite all these distressing and depressing conditions, such military mentality and such militarism have not yet reared their ugly heads. The typical Israeli soldier, even if he is a professional officer, is a different breed of army man. He is someone of whom the Jewish tradition and Jewish people can be proud. Three and a half thousand years of Jewish history have gone into making him the particular kind of human being that he is. And we can be even more proud at the national sensitivity of Israel that it is worried specifically about the possibility of militarism. Of how many nations can this be said? But the worry is there, and it is justified.

American Jews are not fully aware of the intense debate that is taking place in Israel concerning the "occupied territories," and whether or not to permit hitnabalut, the settlement of such areas as Hebron. Almost no one in Israel admits to being either completely a dove or completely a hawk, but that in essence is the polarity that has gripped the country. The doves prefer peace to justice. In their extremes, they are willing to dissolve the State of Israel as it now exists, and to substitute for it a bi-national state. The hawks come in two kinds. There are those who want to settle the occupied territories for religious reasons, because of mitzvot yishuv Eretz Yisrael, the commandment to settle the Holy Land. And then there is the group that is

known as the movement for Eretz Yisrael Ha-shelemah, the Greater Israel Movement. Here a nationalist mystique is at work, an attempt for psychological reasons, as it were, to restore the historic boundaries of ancient Israel.

Now, I do not want to enter into a political debate. As one who is reluctant to become involved in the politics of this country, although sometimes unsuccessfully, I certainly do not want to take it upon myself to utter judgment about the inner political controversies in Israel. However, this I will say: we must all beware of ideology. Now is not the time for ideology to influence the military and diplomatic policy of the State. Ideals – yes; ideology – no. Now is the time for pragmatic wisdom, aimed exclusively at the honorable survival of the State of Israel.

I fear the way-out liberals who have become the professional doves of the State of Israel. I do not trust them. They must be reminded of a diplomat who, several decades ago, announced that a new era of peace was at hand because he was willing to give up that which did not belong to him. I refer, of course, to Chamberlain at Munich. Some of the doves are willing – after all these years of our experience with the United Nations! – to reentrust the fate and destiny of the State of Israel to the U.N. and the Security Council and U Thant. This, to any sensible person, should be utterly unthinkable.

I have no sympathy with the religious expansionists. It is true that there is a commandment to settle the Holy Land. But it is one amongst 613 commandments, and, as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik has pointed out, just as the principle of pikuah nefesh, danger to life, overrides all but three of the commandments for an individual, the same is true of our national life. If the leaders of the State should decide that keeping the occupied territories may endanger the survival of Israel, then unquestionably the Torah would demand of us that we suspend the specific mitzvah of settling certain parts of the Holy Land in order that we retain the rest of it and continue as a people and nation.

But most of all I am concerned about the Greater Israel Movement. I confess that emotionally I identify with them. But intellectually I fear them – almost, though not quite as much, as the radical New Left doves. I am afraid of militant nationalism which tends to become militaristic jingoism. And when you wed arms to ideology, you have placed a sword in the hands of Levi!

אך את מטה לוי לא תפקד ואת ראשם לא תשא בתוך בני ישראל.

Passion, anger, zeal, must be subordinated to the service of peace, not that of conquest. To be proud of our military, yes. To be proud of their great achievements, certainly. But

never militarism; of that we should be embarrassed should it ever come to pass.

Perhaps the best way to avoid an incipient militarism and military mentality in the State of Israel, is the way the Torah did. That means, not by writing articles for the New York Times or The Village Voice, not by handwringing of breast-beating, but by head-filling, by educating the most vibrant and zealous and dynamic element of Israel – its youth – in the ways of Torah. Levi was set aside, precisely because of its great emotion and passion and courage, to the service of the mishkan and to the teaching of Torah; and, in our tradition, both mishkan and Torah are symbols of shalom, peace.

Israel can avoid militarism by encouraging its youth a new openness to the study of Torah, a new receptivity to the word of the Lord, by reorienting its present form of life from that of an insidious agnosticism to a recovery of its ancient roots in Torah.

Perhaps this is the greatest contribution that we

Another Extra Mile

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z”l

Parshas Bamidbar begins with a census of the entire Jewish people, with the exception of the tribe of Levi, which God told Moshe to count separately. After recording the results of the census of the people, the Torah begins the section concerning Levi with the statement, “ These are the offspring of t and Moshe on the day that God spoke with Moshe at Sinai. “ (Bamidbar, 3:1). However, the Torah goes on to mention only the sons of Aharon. Rashi, noting this, cites the Talmud (Sanhedrin 19b) which explains that since Moshe taught Torah to the sons of Aharon, it is considered as if he gave birth to them. Rabbi Moshe Tzvi Neriah, in his LaMaor, cites this Rashi, and mentions the question of the Maharal of Prague in his commentary to Rashi, Gur Aryeh. He asks, didn’t Moshe teach Torah to all of the Jewish people? Why, then, are the sons of Aharon singled out as being the children of Moshe? Shouldn’t the whole Jewish people be referred to in this way?

Maharal answers that the sons of were different in that Moshe spent more time learning with them than he did with the rest of the nation. The Maharal does not explain what his source for this difference is. However, the gemara in Eruvin (54a) actually tells us that Moshe first taught Aharon, then his sons, then the elders, and then the entire nation. Each group remained at Moshe’s side after learning the Torah the first time,so that the sons of Aharon learned

can make, as religious Jews, in addition to our normal contribution to the State of Israel simply as Jews amongst other Jews. We must learn to build bridges to the non-religious segment of Israeli society, so that together we can restore the harmony of Israel, and lead it back to recover its ancient eminence as a people of God who lives in this world – fearlessly, but peacefully.

An ancient and famous Agadah teaches us: סייף וספר ירדו כרוכים מן השמים. *The sword and the book came down wrapped together from Heaven.*

The *sefer* (book) cannot survive without occasional recourse to the *sayaf* (sword). But the sword can be dangerous without the restraints imposed by the book, the Book of Books.

ה' עוז לעמו יתן ה' יברך את עמו בשלום

The Lord will give strength – both spiritual and physical (אין עוז אלא תורה) to His people. The Lord will bless His people with peace.

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the Torah from Moshe three times, while most of the nation learned it from him only once. Although each group t did teach the next one, so that , in the end, everyone was taught four times, Moshe himself tayght Aharon’s sons three times, rather than the one time that he taught the Jewish people as a whole. Rav Neriah goes on to say that the mark of a good teacher is just that, that he is willing to spend extra time with a student to make sure that he understands his lesson. This idea is also implicit in another passage in the Talmud (Eruvin 54b)which says that Rav Preida merited long life because he reviewed his Torah lessons with a student four hundred times, until he finally understood them. I would like to suggest that beyond the dedication to his student that a teacher shows when he puts in extra time, there is another element involved, that carries a lesson for us as we approach the holiday of Shavuot.

The Talmud in Chagigah (9B) tells us that one cannot compare a person who reviews his Torah lesson one hundred times to one who reviews it one hundred and one times. In fact, says the gemara, one who reviews his lesson one hundred times is considered as to have served God, while one who reviews it only one hundred times is considered to be someone who has not served him. Rav Chaim of Volozhin, in his Nefesh HaChaim, explains that in the yeshivos of Babylonia, there were students of varying

abilities, and some took longer than others to grasp what they had been taught. Even the weakest sudden, however, was able to grasp his lesson after reviewing it one hundred times. Therefore, there was a requirement for every student to review one hundred times, in order not to embarrass those students who needed to review that many times. Thus, it was a requirement of the yeshiva to review one hundred times, and whoever did so was fulfilling his requirement. Only one who goes beyond his requirement demonstrates his love for the Torah, and, in effect, his love for God, who gave us the Torah. The teacher, then, who devotes extra time to learning with his student exhibits his love for Torah and for God, and transmits this to his student, as well. By helping to forge this loving relationship with God, he is considered as if he gave birth to the student.

The notion of doing more than the strict requirements is brought out by the prophet Yeshaya as well. In Yeshaya, 29:13, the prophet castigates the people, saying that their fear of God was like rote learning of human commands.” The commentator Rav Dovid Kimchi, acronymically known as the Radak, explains that the people were being rebuked for doing the bare minimum of the mitzvah, not going beyond the requirement. Someone who only does the bare requirement, without adding anything on his own, demonstrates that he really does not really want to do it. When one truly loves and desires to carry out His will, he will go beyond the minimum requirements (provided,

of course, that he does it in a way that does not violate the prohibition of adding to the mitzvos¹).

There is, perhaps, another idea behind the significance of doing more than the requirements demand. The Ritva, in his commentary to the Talmud in Rosh HaShanah 15 that the device of ‘*asmachta*,’ of attaching a Biblical verse to a rabbinic expansion of a Biblical law, actually has Biblical status itself, because the rabbis detected, in these cases, that the Torah itself made safeguards around that particular law, and therefore added safeguards of their own. Rashi on parshas Kedoshim tells us that kedusha, holiness, involves making safeguards around prohibitions related to sexual matters, and Ramban there says that holiness entails going beyond the bare requirements of the law. Holiness, then involves making safeguards around the mitzvos of the Torah.

Although God, at Sinai, told Moshe to prepare the people for two days, Moshe told them to prepare for three days, and God agreed with him. Moshe understood that in preparation for the holy encounter that the people would have with God they would need an extra day. Our practice of learning all night on the evening of Shavuos reflects this need for preparation and safeguards, as well, we were charged, before the revelation at Sinai, to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, and there is a need to make safeguards in order to achieve these goals? May we all strive to carry out this charge as we prepare to celebrate Shavuos this coming week.

You Are Beloved

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed by TurboScribe.ai and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally presented at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on May 18, 2018)

Most of this week’s Parsha describes the census of B’nei Yisrael. And it’s not just our Parsha. A lot of space in the Torah is devoted to various countings of B’nei Yisrael. Rashi gives one reason: *Mitoch chibasam lefanav, moneh osam kol sha’a*. Because of His chiba—how much Hashem loves B’nei Yisrael—He counts them all the time. *Ke-she-yatz’u mi-Mitzrayim mena’an*—when they left Mitzrayim, He counted them. *U-ke-she-naf’lu ba-Eigel mana ha-nosarim*—when they were plagued after the Chet ha-Eigel, He counted how many were left. And *ke-she-ba le-hashros shechinato aleihem mena’am*—when Hashem wants to rest his Shechina on them in the machaneh, in this week’s Parsha, He counts them again. Of the three countings Rashi mentions, the two longest in the Torah are around the time of Chet ha-Eigel and now, when He wants to rest His Shechinah on Klal Yisroel.

So, I heard a very nice vort from a family friend, Rabbi Israel Poleyeff, the son of the *Ba’al Orech Meisharim*, one of the great gedolim from the previous generations in YU. Rabbi Poleyeff asked: What does chiba mean? It’s quite easy to love the Jewish people as long as they’re good and do the right thing. That’s no chidush. But Rashi here brings two examples of this chiba. *Ke-she-ba le-hashros Shechina aleihem*—when they are on the level of hashra’as ha-Shechina. Hashem counts the Jews who are so precious when He rests His Shechinah on them. And *Ke-she-naf’lu ba-Eigel*—when they sinned by building a Golden Calf—an act of idol worship—Hashem counted them to see how many precious Jews were left. Real chiba means having chiba both at the good times—hashra’as ha-Shechina—and in the tough times—like the ma’ase eigel, when they’re not behaving properly. Chiba is not just counting again

and again. It means that I love the Jewish people because they're my people, no matter what they do. I hope they behave well, but if they worship an idol, instead of having the Shechinah amongst them, I'll still have chiba for them.

And not only that, it's interesting that Hashem displays His chiba not only by counting but also by the order in Sefer Bamidbar. It starts with the first pasuk of the Sefer: *Ba-echad la-chodesh ha-sheni ba-shanah ha-shenis*—on the first of the second month, Iyar, in the second year. And what's strange is that later, in Parshas Beha'aloscha (פרק ט), it says: *Va-yidaber Hashem el Moshe be-midbar Sinai ba-shanah ha-sheinis ba-chodesh ha-rishon lei-mor*. So that, suddenly, eight prakim later, we get back to Nissan—totally out of order. And all the Mefarshim struggle to explain why. So Rashi says in Beha'aloscha: Why is Iyar mentioned before Nissan? Hashem didn't want to start with Nissan because that's when they brought Korban Pesach—a fundamentally wonderful thing and a big mitzvah that we hope we'll all merit to fulfill soon. But, due to a range of factors, they only brought it once in all their years in the midbar. And since they didn't bring the Korban Pesach as they were supposed to, the Torah went a little out of order and stuck it in the middle here—not to give this omission any prominence. But isn't Toras Hashem Temima? The Torah is supposed to be perfect. Obviously, that would include putting things in the correct order. And yet, Hashem was willing to take scissors (*kaveyachol*), cut and paste, and move some events in the Torah out of order to start Sefer Bamidbar with hashra'as ha-Shechina. In Hashem's newspaper, the headline reads Hashra'as Ha-Shechina Among Klal Yisroel. And then, on page B15, in the bottom-left corner, Hashem put in something about how they messed up and didn't do the Korban Pesach properly “two weeks ago.” And that's chiba. You could

look at Klal Yisrael in different ways. You could say: Here are the people who messed up, who didn't keep the Torah properly. They indeed had hashra'as ha-Shechina for a while, but they're really just a bunch of avaryanim. Or you could say: Here is the Holy Nation of hashra'as ha-Shechina. But they also had their share of ups and downs and challenges. But what's the defining framework, and what are the details? Hashem wants to make it clear. The core nature of Am Yisroel is hashra'as ha-Shechina. We are the machaneh Hashem. And even if some details are negative, that's not the defining perspective. And that's Hashem's expression of chiba for Klal Yisrael.

Obviously, we're not like Hashem, but we try to emulate His midos. When we look at Klal Yisrael, it's very easy to see good. And yet, it's also easy to see a lot of bad. However, it's important to keep in perspective that we're all human beings, and the world is complicated. To really have chiba, a real *ve-ahavata le-re'echa kamocho* and ahavas Yisrael—to really be a Jew—means having chiba in the good times and the bad times. Chiba for the Jews is not on condition that they only behave a certain way—just like Hashem's chiba is not conditional. To really love the Jewish people means to love them, whether right now they're in the middle of hashra'as ha-Shechina, or unfortunately, in the middle of Cheit ha-Eigel. When we look at our kids, our talmidim, our communities, and at Klal Yisrael, we should look from this Torah perspective. Yes, there are some failures, but put those on the bottom of page B15, after the Metro Digest. But our top headline must be: This is the Am ha-Nivchar. This is the hashra'as ha-Shechina. This is the Am that Hashem counted one by one. And if we have this perspective, im yirtze Hashem, we will be able to have the right influence on the Jewish people and bring it to a greater and greater hashra'as ha-Shechina.

Order and Disorder

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

Parshat Bamidbar begins with a comprehensive counting of the Israelites. This is followed by a detailed description of their encampments, their traveling formation, and how each part of the Tabernacle was transported by specific families. The tenor of the verses, writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “is all about creating a sense of order within the camp.” Social order is essential for a functioning society.

Personal growth also requires the character trait of order: seder. Rabbi Aharon Kotler looks at the beginning

of Bamidbar as a paradigmatic framework for future generations; divine service and holy pursuits require establishing personal order. Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv likens all of a person's positive qualities to precious pearls. A clasp is required to hold and display the pearls. Ennobled character traits require the “clasp” of seder to hold them together. Without internal or external order, all other virtues could haphazardly scatter.

Social psychologist Kathleen Vohs and her collaborators summarize research on the impact of order, writing that

“environmental disorder impels bad or even destructive behavior, whereas cleanliness supports normatively good and moral outcomes.” In their own studies, they found that people who make decisions in well-organized rooms tended to choose healthier snacks and donated more to charity, in contrast to those in cluttered and messy rooms.

When establishing order amongst disparate groups, our need for external structure is insufficient. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler suggests that social, spiritual pursuits are enhanced by order that revolves around a unified goal. There needs to be a teleological purpose, a superordinate goal that inspires the group.

This higher calling is emblematic of the Israelites in the desert. Despite their separate tribal banners and individualized strengths, they rallied around the ultimate goal of pursuing sheleimut - personal, communal, and national wholeness. In Rabbi Sacks’ formulation, the modeling of order in Parshat Bamidbar demonstrated to the Israelites that, “Each person has his or her place within the family, the tribe and the nation. Everyone has been counted and each person counts. Preserve and protect this order, for without it you cannot enter the land, fight its battles and create a just society.”

Later in Sefer Bamidbar we read about the wandering sojourns of the Israelites in the wilderness. They journeyed based on the movement of the Clouds of Glory. They

did not know whether the encampment would be for a day, a few days, a month, or even a year. That lack of predictability, writes Nahmanides, could be physically and psychologically taxing. The ability to function amidst the chaos, adds Rabbi Dessler, was an essential trait for the Israelites to inculcate. The value of flourishing through order needs to be counterbalanced with the skill of being resilient when confronting chaos. Vohs points to research that suggests that those who are at more ease with disorder can better tolerate ambiguity. Additionally, exposure to clutter can lead to creativity.

In his book *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz*, professor of management and jazz musician, Frank J. Barrett uses the unstructured dynamics of jazz to demonstrate the benefits and beauty that can emerge from the disorganized aspects of life. Yet even jazz requires some structure. Based on the notion of complex adaptive systems he suggests that “systems are most creative when they operate with a combination of order and chaos.”

Bamidbar proposes a balance between order and chaos, between structure and unpredictability, between social uniformity and individual differences. Capitalizing on the virtuous elements of these values enables us to flourish as individuals, and as a nation unified in pursuit of a higher-order goal to create a more spiritual and moral society.

Raiders of the Lost Ark?

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

I’ve never seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but I’ve heard it includes a scene in which people open the “Ark of the Covenant” and suffer terrible consequences. Indiana Jones closes his eyes and is spared. The end of our parshah may be the source for the idea that even looking upon the Aron, let alone in it, is dangerous.

As our parshah explains, the kohanim prepare the Mishkan before the Jews travel. They dismantle the sacred items, covering up the aforementioned Aron, the shulchan, the menorah, and the gold mizbeich. Elazar, son of Aharon, handles certain holy items himself. And then the Torah warns, “Don’t cut off the (Levite) family of Kehat! Let them live and not die when they come to the Holy of Holies. Have Aharon and his sons come assign them to their tasks. And they shall not come to see when the sacred is swallowed, lest they die.” (Bamidbar 4:5-20)

On its face, this passage seems to say that the family of Kehat would die if they were to see the Aron. Seeing

these holy items during their transition would be harmful; hence the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* scene. But why should seeing these items be dangerous? The list of sacred items includes the shulchan, menorah and gold mizbeich, which were seen regularly in the Mishkan, and later in the Beit HaMikdash! Further, a gemara (Yoma 54a) teaches that the entrance to the Holy of Holies was opened when the Jews came for aliyah laregel three times a year, and so everyone saw the Aron – and no one perished!

Ramban offers a mystical approach, accentuating Divine tzniut. The problem is not in seeing vessels, but rather in sensing Hashem’s presence. While the sacred space is intact, shielded by a curtain, Hashem is present. Entering while the preparations are underway would mean invading Hashem’s privacy. But once they would dismantle this area, Hashem would depart this plane, going to the spiritual Holy of Holies in the heavens. The “swallowing of the sacred” was Hashem’s disappearance from the site. [On the

other hand, aliyah laregel may be a time when that tzniut is formally suspended.]

The objects in the Mishkan, Indiana Jones notwithstanding, do not have the power of life and death. Rather, with this passage our parshah teaches us the

importance of recognizing boundaries, and honoring that which is exclusive. There is much to explore in this mystical concept – as Ramban concludes, “the insightful person will understand” – but may we learn to apply this respect for tzniut in all of our relationships.

Rav Soloveitchik on Bamidbar: Hoisting the Blue-and-White

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from *Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters* (Ktav, 2023))

Parashat Bemidbar introduces us to the flags that the twelve tribes used to organize their encampments and travel during their long sojourn in the wilderness (Numbers 1:52, 2:2). Their colors, images, and, in some cases, letters carried profound significance.¹ Little is known about later uses of flags in either of the Jewish Commonwealths, presumably because the fabric did not stand the test of time. Jewish signs and symbols have been preserved primarily as carvings in stone graves or monuments, castings on metal coinage or jewelry, and ink on bowls or parchment. This all changed with the establishment of the State of Israel, when a Jewish flag was flown once again. The colors of the nascent country became an inspiring symbol and rallying point for world Jewry, but also raised concerns for halachically observant Jews.

Flags in a Place of Prayer

American synagogues commonly display the flags of Israel and America in the sanctuary, often flanking the ark containing the Torah scrolls. As one of the preeminent halachic decisors of twentieth-century America, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein was asked about people who deemed this forbidden and wanted to break away from their synagogue to form their own minyan. Rabbi Feinstein could find no prohibition on the books that this violated, since the flags were not treated as some kind of holy object. Nevertheless, he felt that their placement there was a matter of foolishness (inyan hevel u-shetut), and encouraged their peaceable removal. If it is wrong to place flags in a synagogue, he reasoned, it would be much worse to create a dispute over it. He concluded his responsum by ruling that those desiring to leave were acting improperly, for it is a matter of “politics which comes from the evil inclination and Satan.”²

We see from this responsum that Rabbi Feinstein did not attribute any religious significance whatsoever to the Israeli flag, and even considered its placement in the sanctuary improper.

White, Blue, and Red

The assessment of the Israeli flag by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik differed considerably from that of Rabbi Feinstein, his eminent colleague and close relative. He posited that the flag is holy because it represents the martyrs who fell in defense of the Holy Land:

If you ask me, how do I, a talmudic Jew, look upon the flag of Israel, and has it any halachic value? I would answer plainly. I do not hold at all with the magical attraction of a flag or similar symbolic ceremonies. Judaism negates ritual connected with physical things.

It is here that the Rav identified a compelling source in Halachah which, in his eyes, should be applied to the halachic significance surrounding the flag of Israel:

Nonetheless, we must not lose sight of a law in Shulchan Aruch to the effect that: “One who has been killed by non-Jews is buried in his clothes, so that the blood may be seen and avenged, as it is written: ‘I will hold (the heathen) innocent, but not in regard to the blood which they have shed’ (Joel 4:21).” In other words, the clothes of the Jew acquire a certain sanctity when spattered with the blood of a martyr. How much more is this so of the blue and white flag, which has been immersed in the blood of thousands of young Jews who fell in the War of Independence defending the country and the population (religious and irreligious alike; the enemy did not differentiate between them). It has a spark of sanctity that flows from devotion and self-sacrifice. We are enjoined to honor the flag and treat it with respect.³

The Rav shared this unique perspective at a major address when serving as the leading figure in the Mizrachi movement. It is no wonder that many of his students who served as distinguished rabbis in the United States would often proudly display the Israeli flag near the ark.⁴

Banner of Redemption

In 1915, the precursor to the British Army’s Jewish Legion, the Zion Mule Corps, was formed. These Jewish soldiers participated in the Great War and had their own battle flag, a menorah set against a blue-and-white background.

In the years following the war, the flag was displayed in synagogues across England.⁵ On December 17, 1925, the flag was brought to Israel. A ceremony was arranged to officially greet the flag as it made its way into the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Yerushalayim, where it would be placed in the Hurva Synagogue. Among those in attendance was the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, who gave an important address to the assemblage.

The sermon begins by noting that the Torah commands the Israelites to form a camp with tribal flags, and then cites the Midrash which says that the Jewish people requested flags, to which God acceded, upon beholding thousands of angelic chariots descending on Mount Sinai bedecked with flags.⁶ Rav Kook locates the paradigm for the blue-and-white at the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the beginning of our nationhood. Its current iteration, he impassionedly declares, represents our march towards redemption and signifies the international unity behind the Zionist enterprise.⁷

In a prayer offered on the occasion, Rav Kook said: “we bear with us the exalted flag, a token of the mighty salvation of Your right hand.”⁸ He likely was alluding to episodes in Jewish history where flags accompanied salvation or redemption. When the Israelites left Egypt it says, “and the Children of Israel were going out with an upraised arm” (Exodus 14:8). The Ramban commented on this verse that the Jews left in song and with flags. This may be the very first source for a flag employed by Jews to identify their mission and to celebrate their salvation. The tribal flags again play a prominent role as the nation is about to enter the land, which represents the realization of their national mission and salvation from the harsh desert (Numbers 10:11-29).

Rav Kook saw fit to bring a Jewish flag within the confines of the synagogue. Although he died thirteen years before the establishment of the State of Israel, he clearly indicated that the modern Israeli flag has deep spiritual value.

Exploring the Rav’s Insight

In the Rav’s famous address Kol Dodi Dofek, he identified the State of Israel as a modern wonder. It offered a positive identity and source of pride to so many Jews, particularly for the younger, post-Holocaust generation. Had the state not been established when it was, the Jewish people

would have stood to lose so many of its members.⁹ In a similar vein, Rabbi Ari Shavit, in his important volume dedicated to the religious and halachic status of the Israeli flag, suggests that for the less-affiliated Jew, the flag and the national pride that it engenders have immense meaning. According to the Shem mi-Shemu’el, Rebbe Shmuel Bornsztain, the original tribal flags themselves were deployed in battle so that errant soldiers could find their way back to safety.¹⁰

The color and pattern of the Israeli flag are supposed to mimic the tallit with its techelet, the blue tzitzit. A Midrash lays out a string of visual associations: the techelet fringes resemble the sea, which resemble the sky, which in turn is reminiscent of the Throne of Glory. Rashi fills in the final step, that the seat above reminds us of the enthroned King.¹¹ The Rav asked a simple question: Why bother with the intermediate steps instead of cutting right to the chase, that the techelet draws our consciousness to God? He said that to remove those links would be to fail to see God’s hand in the world. Strikingly, the Rav identified six ways in which God could be seen orchestrating the establishment of the State of Israel.¹²

In sum, with enormous sensitivity and pride the Rav attached profound meaning to the flag of Israel. The flag symbolizes two of the Jewish people’s most remarkable traits: self-sacrifice and the deep yearning to return to the Land.

1. See further Parashat Bemidbar, “Serving God with Flying Colors.”
2. Igerot Moshe, Orach Chayim, 1:46.
3. Soloveitchik, The Rav Speaks, 139. Perhaps the Rav did not draw on the flags of the wilderness because he did not consider them a lasting model, or because he felt self-sacrifice to be more significant.
4. One example is the Young Israel of Kew Gardens Hills, which was led by Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld (1923–2020), a close disciple of the Rav.
5. Shavit, Leharim et ha-Degel, 172–173.
6. See further Parashat Bemidbar, “Serving God with Flying Colors.”
7. Shavit, Leharim et ha-Degel, 179–183.
8. Ibid., 184.
9. For the importance of pride in and a connection to the land, see Parashat Beshalach, “Venerable Bones.”
10. Shem mi-Shemu’el, Bemidbar 5670, s.v. להבין ענין הדגלים.
11. Menachot 43b, with Rashi ad loc., s.v. ורקיע לכסא הכבוד. Note that Talmud Yerushalmi, Berachot, 1:2, has further intermediaries, which supports the Rav’s point immediately below.
12. See Parashat Bechukotai, “The Rav and the Land.”

Don't Erase a Letter From the Torah!

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Parshas Bamidbar begins with Hashem commanding Moshe to conduct a census of Benei Yisrael. Rashi, based on the Midrash, notes that this marks the third time that Benei Yisrael were counted. The reason why God repeatedly counts them, Rashi explains, is because *שעה כל שעה מונה אותם* – His great love for them. People count whatever they deem special and precious. Some people check their portfolio several times a day. Others count their baseball cards, their stamps, or whatever else it is that they enjoy collecting. The fact that Hashem repeatedly counts Am Yisrael shows that this is what is most beloved to Him.

Rav Nachman of Breslav elaborates on this point, explaining that there is nothing in this world which Hashem loves more than a Jew, a member of Klal Yisrael. Of everything in the universe, the cosmos, the vast galaxies – a simple Jew is what Hashem loves the most. We must recognize that every person is priceless, a unique expression of Hashem in this world. We are each indispensable, irreplaceable, and cherished by God.

Rav Nachman teaches that if one wishes to succeed in Torah learning, in properly understanding the Torah and retaining his knowledge, an effective segula is to

ensure to never speak negatively about a fellow Jew. To achieve success in our Torah studies, we must avoid judgmentalism, try to never look critically upon other Jews, and instead see the greatness within each person. Rav Nachman explains this concept based on the famous kabbalistic notion that each letter of the Torah corresponds to a member of the Jewish People. (The source of this notion is a passage in the Megaleh Amukos, in Parshas Vaeschanan, stating that the Torah contains 600,000 letters, corresponding to the 600,000 Jewish souls.) Every Jew is like a letter in the Sefer Torah, and, as we know, a Sefer Torah that is missing even a single letter is pasul, disqualified for use. Hence, Rav Nachman writes, if we “erase” a “letter” in the Torah by disparaging a fellow Jew, by looking disdainfully upon a fellow Jew, by dismissing a fellow Jew, then the Torah we learn is inherently deficient. If we reject a fellow Jew, our Torah is deficient, incomplete. Therefore, to succeed in Torah learning, for our Torah to be complete, we must ensure not to “erase” any “letters,” to respect, love and cherish each and every one of our fellow Jews, recognizing that each Jew is a sacred soul, that each Jew has a crucial contribution to make, and that each Jew is Hashem’s most precious asset in all of existence.

Lessons from Traveling in the Wilderness

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week’s parasha, parashat Bamidbar, the people of Israel are counted, the structure of the tribal encampments is set, a census is taken of the Levites, and their duties are delineated.

Given the subject matter, parashat Bamidbar is, understandably, filled with an abundance of counting and numbers, tribal guidelines and traveling instructions, not the sort of stuff that generally inspires. But, then again, never sell the Torah short. In these seemingly mundane details, numbers and structures may lie valued and important lessons.

When announcing the camping arrangements for the people of Israel, G-d tells Moses and Aaron to instruct the people of Israel (Numbers 2:2): *אִישׁ עַל דָּגְלוֹ בְּאֶתֶר לְבָיִת*: *The children of Israel shall encamp, each man by his banner, according to the insignias of their father’s households, at a distance, surrounding the Tent of Meeting shall they encamp.* The Torah then details the names and locations of the tribes that encamped on the

east, south, west and north.

The tribe of Judah, together with Issachar and Zebulun, were to camp on the east. The tribe of Reuben, together with Simeon and Gad, were to camp on the south. The tribe of Ephraim, together with Menashe and Benjamin, were to camp on the west, and the tribe of Dan, together with Asher and Naphtali, were to camp on the north.

The Torah (Numbers 9:17 and 10:5) informs us that when the cloud, that constantly hovered over the Tabernacle, would suddenly rise, it was an indication that the people must travel. Aaron’s sons then sounded the trumpets and, as the people prepared to travel, the Levites began to dismantle the Tabernacle. In Numbers 2:17, the Torah declares, *כַּאֲשֶׁר יַחֲנוּ כֹּן יִסְעוּ, אִישׁ עַל יְדוֹ לְדָגְלֵיהֶם*, *as they encamp, so shall they journey, everyone at his place, according to their banners.* And so, according to most rabbinic opinions, the tribe of Judah and its accompanying tribes traveled first, Reuben and its accompanying tribes—second,

Ephraim and its accompanying tribes—third, and Dan and its accompanying tribes traveled last.

The Tabernacle, now disassembled, was transported by the Levites. In fact, the Torah specifically notes (Numbers 2:17): וַנִּסַּע אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד מִחֵינָה הַלַּיִם בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּחֲנֵה: *that the Tabernacle, together with the camp of the Levites, shall journey in the middle of the camps, after the insignias of Reuben and before the insignias of Ephraim.*

Perhaps these abundant details of the ancient Israelites' journey in the wilderness would be of interest to a professional tour guide. But what, pray tell, is there possibly of interest to us, and to contemporary Torah students? Obviously, the fact that the Torah provides such copious detail regarding the tribal encampments, points to the vital importance of the definitive social structure that is necessary for Jewish continuity (see parashat Bamidbar 5780-2020). But, certainly there is much more to learn from the experiences and travels of the Israelites in the wilderness.

The Torah, in Numbers 2:17, teaches, that “as they [the Israelites] encamp, so they shall journey.” It’s one thing to practice meticulous religiosity at home, in a strong Jewish

environment, with supportive friends and neighbors who are also observant. But, what is a Jew to do in the “wilderness,” on a business trip or on vacation? The Torah here, in effect, declares that Jews should not lower their standards when away from home, and that observance of the Jewish dietary laws, communal prayer and listening to Torah reading should be fulfilled while on the road as well. In fact, the same verse, Leviticus 2:17, that tells how the Israelites should journey, also tells us that the Tabernacle and the camp of the Levites journeyed in the middle of the camp. The centrality of the Tabernacle drives home emphatically that, particularly when away from home, Jews need to be especially fastidious about keeping the Torah at the center of their lives, to stay anchored, and, of course, to make certain to study Torah, even while on vacation.

As the saying goes, “G-d is in the details.”—details that are vitally important, not only for Jewish observance, but for Jewish continuity as well. The Torah not only provides the Jewish people with directions on how to live, it is, in essence, the lifeblood, the spiritual lifeblood, of our survival, and the survival of the Jewish people..

Torah vs. Cheesecake

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

Unlike the other two major Biblical festivals of Pesach and Sukkot, the upcoming holiday of Shavuot has no specific mitzvot designated for its celebration. No symbolic foods must be eaten, no huts built and no formal seder. Shavuot, from a straightforward reading of the Biblical verses, is a Yom Tov, a simple holiday devoid of any particular rituals. Even though Shavuot does not come with listed laws or rituals in the Torah, the Talmud in Masechet Pesachim (68b) points to one halakha which is unique to Shavuot. In delineating the rules of the holidays, the Torah at times refers to them as “holidays for you,” and at times as “holidays for God.” Picking up on this seeming inconsistency, the Talmud suggests that these two terms are in fact complementary, inasmuch as they indicate to us how we are meant to spend our holidays. R’ Eliezer claims that one should choose either to devote one’s time and energy over the holidays to the study of Torah (“holidays for God”) OR to focus on the eating, drinking, and festivities of the day (“holidays for you”). R’ Yehoshua, on the other hand, argues that time must be made for both activities, studying and feasting, over the course of every holiday. Following this argument, the Talmud states that regardless of the view one adopts

in the previous debate, it is universally accepted that on Shavuot one must make time for feasting, for Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah. This last halakhic ruling seems odd. Specifically on the day the Torah was given we are meant to make time for eating and drinking? Does that make eating cheesecake, marketed in bakeries all over Israel this time of year, a real mitzvah?! We would expect just the opposite: Of all the holidays on the calendar, Shavuot should have been designated to focus purely on Torah study. In fact, in Jewish communities around the world, there is a well-established custom to study Torah all night long! Rav Tzadok Hakohen (Pri Tzadik, Shavuot #12), offers an amazing interpretation of this ruling. Shavuot is, indeed, the time that we celebrate the giving of the Torah. But the Torah is not merely a text to be studied in the beit midrash, as meaningful as that is. The Torah is a way of life, the core and essence of how we live and breathe within the world. All of life, says Rav Tzadok, emanates from Torah and takes inspiration from it.

As such, there is no better day than Shavuot to eat and drink – with the express intent to sanctify our lives and our world through engaging with the physical. Not through relegating celebration through a special mitzvah, like matza

or lulav, do we mark the commemoration of the giving of the Torah, but through the act of engaging with the physical, like eating. This is how we recognize the place that the Torah holds in everything that we do. The Talmud's approach to how we celebrate Shavuot, as interpreted by Rav Tzadok, reflects a fundamental idea in our Jewish observance. The Torah is not restricted to the spiritual or the cerebral, or boxed off into the space in which we perform ritual commands. Rather, the Torah calls on us to find holiness in our every action – our meals, our work, our everyday interactions with others, and beyond. Every

Gazing at the Vessels

Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

After detailing the tasks of the B'nei Kehas (Children of Kehas) in transporting the Mishkan, the Torah concludes this week's parsha with a warning that the B'nei Kehas not gaze upon the most holy Keilim (Mishkan Vessels) which they carry when these Keilim are packed by the Kohanim before travel. (V. Rashi on Bamidbar 4:5 and 4:20.) The Keilim borne by the B'nei Kehas included the Aron, Menorah, Shulchan, Mizbechos (Altars) and their implements; only after being covered for travel could the B'nei Kehas approach these Keilim.

Why should the B'nei Kehas not gaze upon the Keilim as they are being packed? After all, the Mizbach Ha-Nechoshes (Copper Altar) was in public view in the Chazter (Courtyard) of the Mishkan at all times; why should B'nei Kehas not see something being packed which they can see exposed at any time?

It may be suggested that the issue here is not the viewing of the Keilim per se; rather, the sight of the Keilim being packed up, similar to luggage, is what the Torah enjoins. The Mishkan and its Vessels represent the manifestation of the Shechinah. It is for this reason that the Mishkan

The Ache and Pain of Numbers

Rabbi Johnny Solomon

The Hebrew name for the fourth book of the Torah which we will begin reading this week is Bemidbar (meaning, 'desert'), while its English name is Numbers. The reason why it is called Bemidbar is because this entire book is set in the barren Sinai desert where Bnei Yisrael were only able to survive due to miraculous food (manna), a miraculous well, and miraculous protective

part of life offers us the chance to fill the world with the splendor of Torah, by acting in accordance with its letter and with its spirit. The everyday, the mundane – these are not the opposite of holiness, but simply the open space that invites holiness in at every moment. It is about bringing holiness into the mundane and the recognition that without the mundane, holiness is unimportant. As we once again accept the Torah, let us take it upon ourselves to find new ways to infuse holiness into the routines that make up our daily lives, to feel the presence and the relevance of Torah wherever we may travel, in whatever we may do.

engenders extreme awe and reverence, and there are numerous halachos as to how one must comport himself in and near the Mikdash. For one to observe the awe-inspiring, most holy Keilim being packed up like luggage can do harm to his perception of the Mishkan. This is why the Torah commands that the B'nei Kehas stay away until the Keilim are fully covered.

We find a similar concept regarding the honor due to talmidei chachamim (Torah scholars) and the Melech (King). The halacha is that one may not enter a bathhouse with his rebbe, nor may he witness the King getting his hair cut. (V. Hil. Talmud Torah 2:3 and Hil. Melachim 5:6.) Again, although one's rebbe bathes and the King gets his hair cut as do all people, one's sense of reverence diminishes upon perceiving the rebbe and Melech in such a state.

With a deep understanding of people's inner reactions and attitudes, the Torah thus warns that B'nei Kehas need to remain out of sight as the most holy Keilim are packed and covered up, so that the crucial sense of reverence and encounter with the Shechinah which falls upon a person in the presence of these Keilim not be jeopardized.

clouds, while the reason why it is called Numbers is because it begins with a census (and which is therefore why our Rabbis also refer to this book as Sefer HaPekudim – 'The Book of Counting').

Still, the question I would like to consider is the relationship between these two names - Bemidbar and Numbers - and specifically, the possible reasons why some

of the numbers listed in our parasha are as they are.

Parshat Bemidbar begins by delineating the count of the 12 tribes of Israel, listing the number of males in each tribe aged 20 and older 'who were fit for service' (Bemidbar 1:3): Reuven (46,500), Shimon (59,300), Gad (46,650), Yehuda (74,600), Yissachar (54,400), Zevulun (57,400), Ephraim (40,500), Menashe (32,200), Binyamin (35,400), Dan (62,700), Asher (41,500), Naphtali (53,400).

As is clear from Bemidbar 1:3, this count was intended to evaluate the military capacity of Bnei Yisrael - which is why women were not counted as women did not generally go out to battle.

However, aside from the omission of women, a further group is also missing from this initial list - namely, the Levi'im. As the Torah proceeds to explain (see Bemidbar 1:47, 49), this omission was intentional because rather than being counted for military service, the Levi'im would be counted separately as their task was to carry and service the Mishkan (Tabernacle).

Of course, this was not God's initial plan. Instead, as our parsha explains (see Bemidbar 3:12-13), God had intended that all firstborns would be committed to serve Him. However, due to the involvement of the firstborns in the sin of the Egel HaZahav (Golden Calf) and given the choice of the tribe of Levi not to participate in that sin, God replaced the former with the latter.

Accordingly, we are then informed of two further numbers: 1) The number of male Levi'im aged from 1 month and upwards, and 2) The number of male firstborns aged from 1 month and upwards.

In terms of the Levi'im, the number recorded by the Torah (see Bemidbar 3:39) is 22,000, while the number of firstborns is 22,273 (ibid. 3:43). As should be clear, the point being made here is that these two groups are of almost exactly the same size, and thus, the Levi'im could - both quantitatively and qualitatively - replace the firstborns in their service (ibid. 3:45).

However, these two numbers raise two significant questions:

1. Given the size of all the other tribes (with the smallest, Menashe, numbering 32,200, and the largest, Yehuda, numbering 74,600), why is the tribe of Levi so small especially since the other tribes were counted aged 20 and older, while the tribe of Levi was counted from aged 1 month upwards?
2. Given the fact that the total number of the 12 tribes (aside from the tribe of Levi) was 603,550 (see Bemidbar 1:46), how can it possibly be that the total

number of firstborn males, aged 1 month and older, was 22,273? Surely, the number should have been something like 300,000?!

The Ramban (see his commentary to Bemidbar 3:14) answers this first question by explaining that because the tribe of Levi were not subjugated by the crushing labour in Egypt, they were also not the beneficiaries of the blessing of multiple births while Bnei Yisrael were in Egypt (see Shemot 1:12). Accordingly, while the rest of the tribes grew exponentially, the tribe of Levi, 'multiplied in the usual manner but did not proliferate exceedingly like the rest of the tribes.'

However, our second question is seemingly much harder to answer. How can it possibly be that the total number of firstborn males within Bnei Yisrael was just 22,273?

While Rabbi Avraham Bornstein suggests (in his Resisei Tal commentary to the Torah) that it must be that many firstborns were killed or died in a plague following the sin of the Golden Calf, the most obvious answer is suggested by Rabbi Yehuda Henkin (in his Chibah Yeteira Torah insights found at the end of Vol. 2 of his Responsa Bnei Banim), who explains that, 'the majority of women had miscarriages while in Egypt due to the enslavement and distress that they experienced, and this is why there were very few firstborns.'

Significantly, this high mortality rate for unborn children and for young babies is further implied by the fact that the firstborn count was of those who were one month and older. And why was this so? Because many of those who were born did not survive more than 30 days (see Shabbat 135b). What this tells us is that the majority of the women in Bnei Yisrael suffered a miscarriage, stillbirth, or the early death of their firstborn either while they were in Egypt or between then and this point (just over a year after the Exodus).

As we may imagine, the counting of the firstborn, which would have highlighted the huge dissonance between the size of Bnei Yisrael and the number of surviving firstborns would have stirred up many difficult memories and emotions, and this then brings me back to the two names of this book, Bemidbar and Numbers, because by being reminded of these numbers, the women and men of Bnei Yisrael were also being reminded of the tragic losses of so many firstborn (and likely subsequent) babies as a result of their hard labour. And what then is the connection between Bemidbar and Numbers? It is because by reflecting on these numbers, these women and men would have felt bereft of the fruit of their womb just like a desert struggles to grow fruit-bearing trees.

If you know someone who has unfortunately

experienced a loss at miscarriage, or a stillbirth, or the death of a younger or older child, you will know that discussing the number of children that they have is very hard and very painful. This is because no child is just a number to a parent, and the memory of an unborn or deceased child never goes away.

On this basis there is a deep connection between Bemidbar and Numbers with the lesson here being that whenever we meet people, we should be sensitive to the fact that they may well have experienced a loss. So rather than asking them questions about their ‘numbers’ (eg. How many children do you have?), take a moment to consider the fact that they may well have experienced a loss, and that your question may trigger them to become emotionally lost in their Midbar (Desert) of pain.

Before concluding I would like to add one final thought. It is customary to read Parshat Bemidbar before Shavuot, and on Shavuot we read Megillat Ruth which begins by describing the personal losses of Ruth, Orpah and Naomi. As we know, Orpah then returns to her home

country. However, Ruth insists on staying by Naomi’s side: ‘wherever you go, I will go’ (Ruth 1:16).

Sometimes we are hit with pain, hardship and loss. But knowing that there are other people around us means that while we live with pain, we are not alone in our pain - and it was this blessing and reassurance that Ruth provided to Naomi.

In the same vein, while Parshat Bemidbar lists the numbers of Bnei Yisrael, we are also told how Bnei Yisrael camped together. Yes, so many of our ancestors lost so many children through miscarriage, stillbirth, or the death of a younger or older child. Yet there is something very comforting in the image of the Machane Yisrael – the Israelite camp – which reminds us that while Bnei Yisrael were physically in the Midbar (Desert), and while the census may have stirred up their loss and their pain, they were not alone in their pain. Instead, just as they had journeyed to the Midbar together as a people, they knew that wherever they would go, they would not be alone.

Kohanim and Leviim

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

וְהָיוּ לִי הַקְּדוּשִׁים אֲנִי ה'.

The Leviim shall be Mine, I am Hashem (3:45)

The pesukim toward the end of perek 3 of Bamidbar discuss the role assigned to the Leviim as attendants to the Kohanim in their Avodah. The Meshech Chochmah analyses the respective statuses of these two groups by relating them to a parallel discussion in halachah.

Two Categories of Accessory to Kedushah

The Gemara (Megillah 26b) identifies two categories with reference to items associated with kedushah.

- *Tashmishei Kedushah*: “Accessories to kedushah.” These are objects which are in direct contact with a holy object, the cloth on a bimah, upon which a sefer Torah rests.
- *Tashmishei Tashmishei Kedushah*: “Accessories to accessories to kedushah.” These are objects which interact indirectly with a holy object, e.g., the bimah upon which the cloth rests.

The Gemara states that the items in the first category, which have direct contact with kedushah, themselves attain a level of kedushah, while the items in the second category, whose connection with kedushah is indirect, do not.

This distinction expresses itself, for example in the way

one treats such an object once it has become worn out. A direct accessory, having attained a measure of kedushah, would need to be buried (as does a sefer Torah), while an indirect accessory would not.

According to the Meshech Chochmah, the primary source for these two categories is actually to be found in our Parsha. When we consider the relative roles of Kohanim and Leviim, we will see that they reflect the two abovementioned types of accessory to kedushah:

- Kohanim, by virtue of their direct contact with the avodah, have the status of “direct accessories to kedushah,” and thereby themselves possess kedushah. Thus the pasuk states (Vayikra 21:6) regarding the Kohanim, קְדוּשִׁים יִהְיוּ, They shall be holy.
- Leviim, on the other hand, do not interact with the avodah itself, but rather are “given over to the Kohanim,” (Bamidbar 3:9) who are themselves accessories to kedushah. This puts the Leviim in the category of “indirect accessories to kedushah.”

This distinction expresses itself in a number of halachos that pertain to these two groups:

Terumah and Maaser

Both Kohanim and Leviim receive gifts from the Jewish

people – terumah for Kohanim and maser for Leviim. There is a fundamental distinction between the status of these two gifts and, accordingly, between their respective halachos:

- Terumah food possess kedushah and hence, may not be consumed when the Kohen is in a state of tumah. (Sanhedrin 83a)
- Maaser, on the other hand, does not enjoy kedushah status and the Levi may consume it even if he is tamei. (Yevamos 86b, Tosafos ibid. s.v. mi.)

The background to this difference is the distinction, mentioned above, between Kohanim and Leviim. A Kohen has kedushah status and hence the gifts that he receives partake of that kedushah. Since a Levi does not have special kedushah, his gifts likewise do not enjoy that status.

For this reason, the halachah states that a daughter of a Kohen who engages in znus (forbidden relationships) is thereby disqualified from eating terumah, as the state of kedushah that she originally enjoyed is profaned by her act. By contrast, a daughter of a Levi who engaged in znus may still eat maser.¹ Since her status is not that of kedushah, it is not profaned by her act and her eligibility is not forfeited.

Transporting the Mishkan

This indirect status is further reflected in the way the Mishkan and its vessels were transported by the Leviim, as outlined in Bamidbar perek 4:

- The items which comprised the structure of the Mishkan e.g. the beams and sockets were placed on wagons which were led by the Leviim. Hence, they did not transport the beams via direct interaction. Rather,

the wagons on which the beams were placed were the direct accessory to kedushah, while the Leviim who led the wagons were an indirect accessory.

- The vessels of the Mishkan were carried bodily on the shoulders of the family of Kehas. However, the vessels were first wrapped in special cloths, so that here too, the cloths had the status of direct accessory while the Leviim were indirect accessories.

A Name within a Name

This idea of the Leviim relating to kedushah through the means of a covering receives nuanced expression in our pasuk which states “וְהָיוּ לִי הַלְוִיִּם אֲנִי ה'” The Leviim shall be Mine, I am Hashem.” The word אֲנִי is actually a Name of Hashem² and is associated with the Name of Adnus (א-ד-ג-י). The sources further state that the Name of Adnus itself is considered to be a “cloak”, i.e. a covering, for the Shem Havaya (i.e. the name of ה-ו-ה-י). This is based on the pasuk (Chabakuk 2:20) which states “וְהָיָה שְׁמֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ הַזֶּה, Hashem (Shem Havaya) is in His holy Sanctuary.” The “holy Sanctuary” to which the pasuk refers is the Name of Adnus, which shares the numerical value of the word הִכָּל (65) and which serves as a “setting” for the Shem Havaya. Hence, in our pasuk, the Leviim’s indirect relationship with kedushah is reflected in our pasuk by their separation from Hashem’s name (ה') with the name that clothes it, אֲנִי.

1. See Bechoros 47a and Tosafos ibid. s.v. ela.
2. “אֲנִי וְהוּא הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא.” See Rashi Succah 45a s.v. ani, in explanation of the phrase.

Haftarat Bemidbar: The Imagined Return to the Land of Israel in Hoshea Chapter 2¹

Dr. Shawn Zelig Aster (From *From Within the Tent: The Haftarah, Essays on the Weekly Haftarah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, YU Press, 2011)

We are used to dividing prophecies into two categories: *Nevu'at Nechamah* (usually translated as “prophecies of consolation,” but more accurately rendered as “prophecies of restoration”) and *Nevu'at Pur'anut* (prophecies of destruction). How, then, to categorize the second chapter of Hoshea? On the one hand, it describes an exile of Jews from the Land of Israel to the desert, where God threatens to afflict them with thirst and exposure. On the other hand, it ends with the promise of a “betrothal” between God and Israel (2:21–23).

The truth is that the categories themselves are problematic, and do not accurately describe many

prophecies. Hoshea chapter 2 focuses on the concept of “salubrious destruction.” It foretells an exile and subsequent period of privation, meant to cleanse the Jewish people of materialism and idolatry, which will be followed by a renewed and triumphant entry into the Land of Israel.

It incorporates two central themes from the book of Hoshea:

- The sojourning of Israel in the land has not produced a positive relationship with God. Israel has been disloyal to God in two ways: by worshipping idols, viewing them as Israel’s benefactors, and by forming political alliances of vassalage to foreign powers, viewing them

as Israel's benefactors.

- God gives second chances: teshuvah (meaning “return to God,” as in 14:2, not “repentance”) is always an option.

The Departure from the Land: Verses 1–2

א וְהָיָה מִסְפַּר בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּחֹל הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִמָּד וְלֹא יִסְפָּר וְהָיָה
בְּמִקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־יֹאמְרוּ לָהֶם לֹא־עַמִּי אַתֶּם יֹאמְרוּ לָהֶם בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים:
ב וְנִקְבְּצוּ בְנֵי־יְהוּדָה וּבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל יַחְדָּו וְשָׁמוּ לָהֶם רֹאשׁ אֶחָד וְעָלוּ מִן־
הָאָרֶץ כִּי גָדוֹל יוֹם יִזְרְעֵאל:

(1) *The number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can neither be measured nor counted, and instead of it being said of them “You are not My people,” it shall be said of them “Children of the Living God.”* (2) *The Children of Judah and the Children of Israel will gather together and appoint over themselves one leader, and go up from the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel.*

These verses imply a wholesale rejection of the period of the Kingdom of Israel. It evokes imagery of the period of the Patriarchs (the promise of descendants as numerous as the sand on the sea), the period of the Judges (a single leader called a “rosh,” as in Shoftim 11:7–11) and the period of the United Monarchy (the union of Judah and Israel). While idealizing these earlier periods, the prophecy vitiates the present: it prophesies a departure of the united Israelites from the Land of Israel, and a destruction of the Israelite military headquarters at Jezreel.²

The Sojourn in the Desert: Verses 3–15

Once in the desert, the Israelites are told to call “their mother” to account (v. 4). The “mother” is a symbol for the nation of Israel as a whole, who is rejected by God for her “harlotries.” The “harlotry” of Israel is defined in verse 7 as her crediting her “lovers” for the provision of food, drink, and clothing. It is not idolatry per se that renders Israel guilty. It is the simple act of crediting any power other than God with providing Israel’s basic needs.³ Sometimes, Israel credits idols with providing her basic needs (as in vv. 10 and 15), while at other times, Israel gives this credit to foreign political powers (Hoshea 5:13 and 12:2). Both idolatry and crediting foreign polities with Israel’s survival are acts of “harlotry” according to Hoshea.

In the desert, God acts to strip Israel of her food, drink, and clothing – since Israel has not recognized that God provides these, she won’t have them at all (v. 11). God will “uncover Israel’s nakedness” (v. 12), terminate all her rejoicing (v. 13), and destroy her vines and fig trees (v. 15). This privation of Israel has both instrumental goals and a principled cause. By starving Israel, stripping her of her

clothing, and denying her celebrations, God forces Israel to re-think her commitment to idols as well as to foreign polities. Moreover, Israel has no right to receive benefits while refusing to acknowledge God as giver of these benefits. Stripped bare of all material goods, alone in the desert, Israel has no one to turn to, except for God.

The Renewed Courting: Verses 16–20

But God does not simply wait for Israel to seek Him out. He actively courts Israel in the desert. The words “*ve-dibbarti al libbah*” in verse 16 refer to courting, as in Bereishit 34:3. The courting is coupled in verse 17 with a promise of renewed benefit, a benefit made possible by the sojourn in the desert:

יז וְנָתַתִּי לָהּ אֶת־כַּרְמֶיהָ מִשֵּׁם וְאֶת־עֵמֶק עֲכוֹר לְפֶתַח תִּקְוָה וְעֵנָתָה
שָׁמָּה כִּי־מִי יַעֲוֶרְיָהּ וְכִי־וָעָלוּתָהּ מֵאֶרֶץ־מִצְרָיִם:

I will give her vineyards from there, and Emek Achor (“the valley of destruction”) will become Petach Tikvah (“the gateway of hope”), and there she will sing⁴ like in her youth, and like on the day of her coming up from the land of Egypt.

Hoshea intentionally references both the story of Achan in Yehoshua chapter 7 and Shirat Ha-Yam in Shemot chapter 15. The story of Achan tells how in Israel’s first foray into conquest and land-ownership (in the conquest of Jericho), the property of Jericho was considered Divine property, forbidden to Israel. The lure of property proved too much for Achan, who was stoned at the “Valley of Destruction.” In the future entry of Israel into the land, Hoshea envisions how Achan’s refusal to acknowledge God’s ownership of the conquest will be replaced by a new version of Shirat Ha-Yam, in which Israel will credit God with her deliverance and recognize His sovereignty and munificence.

Israel’s recognition of God results in a new relationship between Israel and God, from which idols are excluded (vv. 18–19). Not only are idols eliminated, but so too are the foreign polities with whom Israel previously maintained “protection treaties.” In the place of these treaties, God will provide His own treaty (v. 20), which will protect Israel against attacks by wild animals. God will not provide Israel with military force to overcome foreign invasions. On the contrary, He will eliminate “the bow, the sword, and war.” Israel will no longer need foreign protection, nor will it engage in military adventures to accumulate wealth.

The New Betrothal: Verses 21–22

Out of this recognition of God, a new form of betrothal emerges in verses 21–22. This betrothal between God and Israel is not based on specific benefits which God provides to Israel, but on a steadfast relationship.

כא וְאַרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי לְעוֹלָם וְאַרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי בְצִדְקָה וּבְמִשְׁפָּט וּבְחֶסֶד
וּבְרַחֲמִים: כב וְאַרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי בְאֱמוּנָה וְיִדְעַתְּ אֶת־ה':

(21) *I will betroth you to Me forever; I will betroth you to Me with righteousness and justice, with covenantal kindness, and with love. (22) I will betroth you to Me faithfully; You shall know God.*

The betrothal itself leads, in a somewhat circular fashion, to strengthening Israel's recognition of God. The words "you shall know God" imply a recognition of God as sovereign Master, as in Yeshayahu's messianic prophecy (11:9) and in Shemot 14:18. The betrothal involves God renewing His covenant with Israel, and Israel accepting God as its Sovereign.

Conclusion: The Re-entry and Bikkurim

But this betrothal does not conclude the prophecy. The prophecy began with the departure of the Israelites from the Land of Israel, and it must conclude with an explicit discussion of their future tenure in the land. This discussion appears in verses 23–25. In these verses, God promises to provide all of the necessary conditions for agricultural plenty in the Land of Israel. But besides these, God also promises "to plant Israel in the land." In verse 25, this promise is coupled with the renewed relationship of God and people.

וְיִרְעִתִּיךָ לִי בְאֶרֶץ וְרַחֲמַי אֶת־לֹא רַחֲמָה וְאָמַרְתִּי לְלֹא־עַמִּי עַמִּי
אֶתָּה וְהוּא יֹאמֵר אֶל־ה':

I will plant her for me in the land, and I will love Lo-ruchamah, and I will say to Lo-ami, "You are My people," and he will say "My God."

In this conclusion, the stability of Israel in the land is coupled with a relationship with God that is not only stable, but also loving and committed. It reverses the rejection of Israel implied in the names "Lo-ami" and "Lo-ruchamah" (in Hoshea 1:6–9), and replaces these with a relationship of genuine love of God for Israel, expressed by means of the land.

These verses provide a counterpoint to the harsh treatment Israel endured at God's hand in verses 4–15. God did not exile Israel from the land and punish her in the desert out of eternal rejection, but rather, in order to reach a state in which the gift of the land could be appreciated. God loves Israel and expresses this love by means of the land.

The land is a central vehicle for expressing the relationship between God and Israel, but it is only an effective one if Israel recognizes God as giver of the land and its fruits. Therefore, the whole process of exiling and impoverishing Israel was needed in order to re-create a

situation in which God could express His love and Israel can recognize it.

The imagery in this prophecy is strongly correlated to the imagery in Parashat Bikkurim (Devarim 26:1–11). The succession of verbs in Devarim 26:1–5 implies that immediately upon entry into the Land of Israel, the Israelites are to take the bikkurim, march directly to "the place God will choose," and declare their indebtedness to God by means of the Arami oved avi declaration: "My father was a wandering Aramean ... God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, I have brought the first fruits of the land that You have given me, God."

Parashat Bikkurim describes how recognition of God as "Land-Giver" is a central aspect not just of the Israelites' sojourn in the land, but of their very entry into the land. Of course, such an idealized entry into the land never occurred in history: both the descriptions in Yehoshua and that in Shoftim describe the Israelites as preoccupied with military problems. But Hoshea chapter 2 describes how such an idealized entry will occur, someday, in the historical, or meta-historical, future. Someday, Israel will recognize that the land is a means for God to express His love, and that their primary focus in dwelling in the land is to acknowledge Him. Perhaps because of its connection to Parashat Bikkurim, this haftarah is always read a week or two before Chag Ha-Bikkurim.

Hoshea chapter 2 is neither a prophecy of unconditional restoration, nor a prophecy of irreversible destruction. It is a sobering prophecy, describing an impending exile, and a subsequent re-entry into the land, once Israel has learned its lesson. And this lesson is the take-home point of the haftarah: The Land of Israel and its fruits are a Divine gift, which Israel must continually acknowledge.

1. For a fuller discussion of this chapter, including the relevant historical and archaeological background, see my article "The Function of the City of Jezreel and the Symbolism of Jezreel in Hosea 1–2" to appear in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 122 (Spring 2012).
2. I understand "ve-*alu min ha-aretz*" as a departure from the Land of Israel, following the Ibn Ezra and the simplest possible reading of the words. The phrase "yom Yizre'el" can only mean "the day of the destruction of Jezreel," like other Biblical phrases containing "yom" followed by the name of a place, as in Yeshayahu 9:3 and Tehillim 137:7.
3. The two peirushim cited in the Radak on 2:7 emphasize this point.
4. See Ibn Ezra.