

Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah
via the Internet

Sponsored by Arlene Pianko Groner
in memory of her grandparents, Sam and Ruth Pianko, z"l,
whose yahrzeits are on Sivan 10 and 14, respectively

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Shabbat Parashat Bemidbar [Shavuot Issue Attached]

5781 B"H

Covenant & Conversation: R. Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Leading a Nation of Individuals

The book of Bamidbar begins with a census of the Israelites. That is why this book is known in English as Numbers. This raises a number of questions: what is the significance of this act of counting? And why here at the beginning of the book? Besides which, there have already been two previous censuses of the people and this is the third within the space of a single year. Surely one would have been sufficient. Additionally, does counting have anything to do with leadership?

The place to begin is to note what appears to be a contradiction. On the one hand, Rashi says that the acts of counting in the Torah are gestures of love on the part of God:

Because they (the Children of Israel) are dear to Him, God counts them often. He counted them when they were about to leave Egypt. He counted them after the Golden Calf to establish how many were left. And now that He was about to cause His Presence to rest on them (with the inauguration of the Sanctuary), He counted them again.

When God initiates a census of the Israelites, it is to show that He loves them.

On the other hand, the Torah is explicit in saying that taking a census of the nation is fraught with risk:

Then God said to Moses, "When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each must give to God a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them."

When, centuries later, King David counted the people, there was Divine anger and seventy thousand people died. How can this be, if counting is an expression of love?

The answer lies in the phrase the Torah uses to describe the act of counting: *se'u et rosh*, literally, "lift the head." This is a strange, circumlocutory expression. Biblical Hebrew contains many verbs meaning "to count": *limnot*, *lifkod*, *lispor*, *lachshov*. Why does the Torah not use these simple words for the census, choosing instead the roundabout expression, "lift the heads" of the people?

The short answer is this: In any census, count or roll-call there is a tendency to focus on the total – the crowd, the multitude, the mass. Here is a nation of sixty million people, or a company with one hundred thousand employees, or a sports crowd of sixty thousand. Any total tends to value the group or nation as a whole. The larger the total, the stronger the army, the more popular the team, and the more successful the company.

Counting devalues the individual and tends to make him or her replaceable. If one soldier dies in battle, another will take their place. If one person leaves the organisation, someone else can be hired to do their job.

Notoriously, too, crowds have the effect of tending to make the individual lose their independent

judgment and follow what others are doing. We call this "herd behaviour," and it sometimes leads to collective madness. In 1841 Charles Mackay published his classic study, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, which tells of the South Sea Bubble that cost thousands of people their money in the 1720s, and the tulip mania in Holland when entire fortunes were spent on single tulip bulbs. The Great Crashes of 1929 and 2008 had the same crowd psychology.

Another great work, Gustav Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895) showed how crowds exercise a "magnetic influence" that transmutes the behaviour of individuals into a collective "group mind." As he put it, "An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will." People in a crowd become anonymous. Their conscience is silenced. They lose a sense of personal responsibility.

Crowds are peculiarly prone to regressive behaviour, primitive reactions and instinctual behaviour. They are easily led by figures who are demagogues, playing on people's fears and their sense of victimhood. Such leaders, Le Bon noted, are "especially recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous excitable half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness," a remarkable anticipation of Hitler. It is no accident that Le Bon's work was published in France at a time of rising antisemitism and the Dreyfus trial.

Hence the significance of one remarkable feature of Judaism: its principled insistence – like no other civilisation before – on the dignity and integrity of the individual. We believe that every human being was created in the image and likeness of God. The Sages said that every life is like an entire universe. Maimonides wrote that each of us should see ourselves as if our next act could change the fate of the world. Every dissenting view is carefully recorded in the Mishnah, even if the law is otherwise. Every verse of the Torah is capable, said the Sages, of seventy interpretations. No voice, no view, is silenced. Judaism never allows us to lose our individuality in the mass.

There is a wonderful blessing mentioned in the Talmud to be said on seeing six hundred thousand Israelites together in one place. It is: "Blessed are You, Lord... who discerns secrets." The Talmud explains that every person is different. We each have different attributes. We all think our own thoughts. Only God can enter the minds of each of us and know what we are thinking, and this is what the blessing refers to. In other words, even in a massive crowd where, to human eyes, faces blur into a mass, God still relates to us as individuals, not as members of a crowd.

That is the meaning of the phrase, "lift the head," used in the context of a census. God tells Moses that there is a danger, when counting a nation, that each individual will feel insignificant. "What am I? What difference can I make? I am only one of millions, a mere wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the sea-shore, dust on the surface of infinity."

Against that, God tells Moses to lift people's heads by showing that they each count; they matter as individuals. Indeed in Jewish law a *davar she-be-minyan*, something that is counted, sold individually rather than by weight, is never nullified even in a mixture of a thousand or a million others. In

Judaism, taking a census must always be done in such a way as to signal that we are valued as individuals. We each have unique gifts. There is a contribution only I can bring. To lift someone's head means to show them favour, to recognise them. It is a gesture of love.

There is, however, all the difference in the world between individuality and individualism. Individuality means that I am a unique and valued member of a team. Individualism means that I am not a team player at all. I am interested in myself alone, not the group. Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam gave this a famous name, noting that more people than ever in the United States are going ten-pin bowling, but fewer than ever are joining bowling teams. He called this phenomenon "Bowling alone." MIT professor Sherry Turkle calls our age of Twitter, Facebook, and electronic rather than face-to-face friendships, "Alone together." Judaism values individuality, not individualism. As Hillel said, "If I am only for myself, what am I?"

All this has implications for Jewish leadership. We are not in the business of counting numbers. The Jewish people always was small and yet achieved great things. Judaism has a profound mistrust of demagogic leaders who manipulate the emotions of crowds. Moses at the Burning Bush spoke of his inability to be eloquent. "I am not a man of words". He thought this was a deficiency in a leader. In fact, it was the opposite. Moses did not sway people by his oratory. Rather, he lifted them by his teaching.

A Jewish leader has to respect individuals. They must "lift their heads." If you seek to lead, however small or large the group you lead, you must always communicate the value you place on everyone, including those others exclude: the widow, the orphan and the stranger. You must never attempt to sway a crowd by appealing to the primitive emotions of fear or hate. You must never ride roughshod over the opinions of others.

It is hard to lead a nation of individuals, but this is the most challenging, empowering, inspiring leadership of all.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"...by their families, by their parents' houses." Early in the book of Numbers the Torah records the first census in the history of the Jewish people: "Count the heads of the entire witness community of the children of Israel, by their families, by their parents' houses". Certainly a census is a momentous event – not only as a profile of a nation's most important natural resource – its people – but also as a means of enhancing each national with a sense of pride in his newly acquired significance as a member of an important nation.

At the end of the day, when all the counts of the various tribes were added up, the total number of those twenty years and above was 603,550 (Numbers 1:46). The census tells us – in more ways than one – that each person counts. Again and again we encounter the phrase in connection with the census: "by their families [le'mishpehotam], by their parents' houses [le'veit avotam]."

This particular term is repeated with each of the tribes and families, except for two instances wherein

By the Friedman and Klahr families
on the occasion of the ninth yahrzeit of
their father, grandfather, and great grandfather,
Dr. Carl Klahr, a"h,
(Nosson Karpel ben Shmuel Zanvil Tzvi),
on the fifth of Sivan

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the phrase is inverted – in the case of the Levites, as well as the sons of Gershon. In these two instances, instead of the order of being “by their families” and “by their parents’ houses” we find “by their parents house and by their families” (Numbers 3:15).

In contrast, Levi’s other sons, Kehat and Merari numbers in a manner similar to the presentation of the rest of the tribes – first by their “families” and only afterwards by their “fathers’ houses.” Why should there be such a reversal in phraseology in the case of Levi and the children of Gershon?

In our last commentary, we rendered the phrase “lemishpehotam” to mean “by the family of their tribal forebears,” and “leleit avotam” to mean “by their immediate parental names,” in accordance with the interpretation of Rashi. However, the earlier Aramaic translation of these phrases, Targum Onkelos, which is generally placed alongside of the biblical text as a demonstration of its authoritative position, render “lemishpehotam” as “lezarayaton” – “by their seed, by their children.”

Thus the usual formulation, found no less than seventeen times in our passage, is rendered to mean that each individual is numbered by their children and by their parents’ house. The message of the Targum is clear: an individual is to be counted first by whom he or she has produced – by his or her children – and only afterwards and secondarily do we pay attention to his or her forebears, to the yihus which comes from one’s parents and the parental forebears; perhaps Targum would include the tribal background as well in “leleit avotam.”

From the perspective of this definition, we can also readily understand the reversal of the phrase regarding the tribe of Levi. Ordinarily individuals are defined first by whom and what they have produced – their children first. However, a kohen (priest) or Levite serves in the Temple and performs special ritual duties not by virtue of merit but only by virtue of ancestry: I am a kohen only because my father was a kohen. Hence in accordance with this reality, the Bible insists that their census is “by their parents’ house and by their children” – the parents coming first!

And in addition to special ritual functions, the care and maintenance of the Sanctuary (during the years of wandering in the desert) was divided among the three scions of the house of Levi. The duty of Gershon, as described in the previous portion, focused on the curtains, the hangings, the various coverings inside the Tabernacle. According to the midrash, this was the easiest job in the Sanctuary. It is therefore assumed that the children of Gershon were satisfied to rest on their laurels; they remained in essence Levites, dependent on their “parent’s house” for their status and function.

In contrast, the children of Kehat were in charge of the much heavier items, such as the Menora and the Ark. In Bamidbar Rabba (5:1), we read the following description: “When the Jews were traveling, two sparks of flame came out from the two poles of the Ark of the Tablets of Law.” The Kehatites volunteered to put their lives on the line and risk the fire in order to bear the Holy Ark. And their brothers the Merarites learned from their example, volunteering to transport the heaviest wood and metals. These children of Levi were anxious to be their own people, to establish their own yihus. As a result, the Torah counts them in accord with “their children and their parents’ house” – themselves and their children coming first!

What we’ve gathered from the overview is that a seemingly slight difference in word order may reveal a world of attitude and psychology. When each of us is counted and assessed when the Almighty conducts His census, the most important criterion in our judgment will not be who our parents were, but who and what we and our children have developed into.

All too often, the descendant has descended too far down! And when we ponder the question of “Who is a Jew?” as we so often do within the context of necessity for conversion and the “right of return,” it is important to note that at least from a sociological (rather than a halakhic) perspective, a Jew is defined more by his children than by his parents; indeed, I would argue that sociologically speaking, a Jew is he or she who has Jewish grandchildren!

Postscript - The Maggid of Mezritch (eighteenth century, Ukraine) was a great disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov, and heir to his leadership of the Hasidic movement. It is told that when the Maggid was still a child, a fire broke out in his family home. Although the family was rescued from the flames, his mother was weeping hysterically. When he asked her why she was so upset at the loss of mere physical objects, the mother explained that she was crying for the loss – not of the home or its furniture – but of the record of their family pedigree, which had been destroyed in the flames. This record had traced back their familial roots to King David himself! “You don’t have to cry over that,” said the young Maggid, comforting his mother. “I will begin a new record of our family pedigree; from me will begin a new yihus. Subsequent generations will trace their lineage back to me.”

The Person in the Parsha: R. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb **Transitions and Destinations**

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about transitions and destinations. Perhaps this is because of my childhood memories. Back then, at precisely this time of year, my friends and I relished the approach of the end of the school year and the beginning of summer vacation. For us, school was merely a seemingly endless passage toward our longed-for destination, the “lazy, hazy” days of summer.

Or, there might be a much more recent basis to my current preoccupation with transitions and destinations. Since this past Pesach, when we celebrated our freedom from slavery, we have counted the days until Matan Torah, the “giving of the Torah,” on Shavuot. Counting aloud each day, day by day and week by week, instilled in me a sense of going through a transition, a passage of seven weeks, leading to an ultimate destination.

That transitions and destinations are part of life is obvious. What is less obvious, but more fascinating, is that one person’s destination is often another person’s transition, and vice versa. How well do I remember my first days of employment after my years of graduate school. I experienced those years of toil as a necessary transition to the beginning of my career as a psychologist. My first day at work was the beginning of my destination.

It was on that day that I met a gentleman who was to become a close colleague over the ensuing several years. His name was George Jones, and while I was to be in charge of a small group of school psychologists, he headed a similarly small group of school social workers.

Soon after we first met, we discovered that we had much in common and so no longer confined our conversations to our professional tasks. We discussed our different religions, our family backgrounds, and our hopes and dreams.

We learned much from each other during those conversations. But most of all, we learned just how different our hopes and dreams were. For me, at that time in my life, my role as a trained mental health professional was my destination. It was what I had worked for and what I then anticipated would be my life’s work.

For George, on the other hand, his profession was but a transitional role towards his ultimate destination. Although both of us were exactly 30 years old at the time, his dream was retirement. Yes,

Likutei Divrei Torah

he knew that his destination was 20 or 25 years away, but he spoke about it almost daily, describing the property he bought on the Chesapeake Bay and the boat he would soon be able to afford. The job that was my destination was, for him, but a passage to a different destination entirely.

With this week’s Torah portion, Parshat Bamidbar, we begin a new Chumash, the fourth volume of the Pentateuch. Each of the five volumes of the Chumash is unique. My contention is that this fourth volume is unique in the following manner: It begins as a description of a transition, a passage, from the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai through a desert wilderness but towards the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey. But it soon becomes apparent that this desert wilderness will become a destination and, for many, a tragically final destination.

This book, which begins as a parade, a joyous and relatively brief journey to the Promised Land, is soon transformed into a book portraying an era of strife, rebellion, war, betrayal, and disillusionment, enduring for nearly forty years!

Transition, or destination? Was it Yogi Berra who said that it is hard to make predictions, especially about the future? Truth to tell, and we must face the truth, it is difficult to think of a moment in history at which there was greater uncertainty than at this moment.

In a certain sense, the distinction between transitions and destinations is an existential one. That is, the question can be asked, “Is our life in this world our final destination, or is it a transition, a prelude, into another world, another mode of existence?”

The answer to this question was proclaimed long ago by the Rabbis of the Mishnah: “Rabbi Jacob said: this world is like an antechamber before the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the antechamber so that you may enter the banquet hall.”

Our very lives, according to Rabbi Jacob, are but transitions into another destination, the World to Come. A very sobering teaching, indeed!

But our Rabbis inform us of something even more shocking. Even the World to Come is not a final destination. Even for the righteous, that celestial world is but a passage to a loftier destination.

“Said Rabbi Chiya bar Ashi in the name of Rav: Talmidei Chachamim [pious wise men] have no rest, neither in this world nor in the World to Come, as it is written, ‘They will go from strength to strength, and appear before the Almighty in Zion (Psalms 84:80).’”

One is tempted to assume that it is only the righteous who progress ever upward and know no final destination. But surely the wicked, whose destination is Gehenna, have reached “the end of the line.”

The Rabbis are quick to assure us, however, that even Gehenna is not the end of the line: “The sentence of the wicked to Gehenna is for but 12 months.”

Even Gehenna itself is but a transition, hopefully to a higher and nobler destination.

In conclusion, permit me to turn my attention to a happier topic. With this week’s Person in the Parasha column, I celebrate the first publication of this weekly series of columns, for Parshat Bamidbar, 2009. At that time, I had just concluded my tenure as Executive Vice President of the Orthodox Union, which, until then, had been my “destination.”

I began a new transition in my life which has thankfully continued until now. I already have some tentative notions as to the theme of “transitions and destinations” as it is to be found in this fascinating new book of the Chumash that I hope to share with you, with the help of the Almighty, in the weeks to come.

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Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

The Scroll of Ruth contains one of the most idyllic stories in the Bible, a tale of "autumnal love" between a widow (Ruth) and a widower (Boaz), within the backdrop of diaspora inter-marriage, conversion to Judaism, and the agricultural life in ancient Israel. The Rabbinic Sages ordained that we read this Scroll on Shavuos, the Festival of Weeks, the anniversary of the Torah Revelation at Sinai and the celebration of the first fruits brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. And since Shavuos is the climatic zenith of Passover, the development of a newly-freed group of slaves in the Sinai desert into a Torah-imbued nation firmly ensconced in their own homeland of Israel, the reasons for this special reading are many: Boaz and Ruth are the great-grandparents of David, the Psalm-singing military hero who united the tribes of Israel and first envisioned the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, Ruth the Moabite is Jew-by-choice whose commitment to Torah Judaism makes her worthy of being the great grand-mother of the prototype of the eventual Messiah-King, and the last three chapters of the story takes place between the beginning of the barley harvest (just before Passover) and the very end of the wheat harvest (not long after Shavuos). I would wish to ask three questions on the Scroll of Ruth, the answer to which I believe will provide an extra dimension of our understanding as to why we read this particular Scroll on Shavuos, the festival which serves as harbinger to redemption.

Firstly, from a narrative perspective: the first chapter spans the ten years the family of Naomi is in Moab, and the last three chapters describe the happenings of the three month period between the barley and wheat harvests. Why did the author give so much text space to such a small span of times?

Secondly, the midrash (Ruth Rabbah) tells us that Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem at the precise time of the funeral of Boaz's wife, and that Boaz died immediately after he impregnated Ruth; that is how the Rabbinic Sages account for the fact that Boaz is not mentioned in the last verses of the Scroll, which specifically deal with the birth of Oved, son to Boaz and Ruth as well as father to Jesse. Why do the Sages see fit to sandwich these joyous verses recounting such a significant love story between two seemingly tragic deaths – without the text itself mentioning those deaths explicitly or even hinting at a mournful mood? And finally, can we possibly glean from between the lines of the Scroll what precisely occurred between Boaz and Ruth during the night they spent together on the threshing floor. What did her mother-in-law Naomi suggest that she do – and what did she do in actuality?

If Shavuos is truly the Festival of Redemption – and redemption links humanity to the Eternal G-d of all eternity – the period which is eternally Sabbath – then the Scroll of Ruth must deal with the eternal

rather than the temporal. Israel is the eternal homeland of the Jewish people – and any diaspora experience can only be temporal at best and destructive at worst. The first chapter opens with a famine in Israel, and an important personage (Elimelech) who leaves Bethlehem (literally the house of bread) with his wife and sons to seek "greener pastures" in the idolatrous Moab. As happened with Father Abraham, Diaspora proved far more dangerous (Genesis 12:10-20), the two sons, Mahlon (lit. sickness) and Kilion (lit. destruction) marry Hittite wives – and since the children follow the religion of the mother, the Israelite line of Elimelech and Naomi – seems to have ended! The father and his sons all die in Moab – their earlier spiritual demise expressing itself physically; fortunately one daughter-in-law clings to her mother-in-law Naomi, converts to Judaism ("Where you will go" – to Israel – "there shall I go, where you will lodge, there shall I lodge," – maintaining the same sexual purity as you – "Your people shall be my people, your God my God"), and returns to Bethlehem. Only now – in Israel – can eternal history begin, and so the next three chapters, and the next three months, are far more significant than the previous ten years, which had almost destroyed the family line.

The midrash tells us that Boaz's wife has died just as Naomi and Ruth return – and that Boaz will die three months later. But death in itself is not tragic for Judaism: after all, every individual must die sooner or later. The only relevant question is to what extent the individual, when alive, participates in Jewish eternity. Naomi sends Ruth to glean the forgotten grain and harvest the produce in the corner of the field – agricultural provision which the Torah provides for the poor Israelites. Divine Providence sent Ruth to Boaz's field – and Boaz was a Kinsman of Elimelech. Boaz seems to be attracted to this comely proselyte – stranger and gives her his protection. Naomi understands that participation in Jewish eternity means having a child with Jewish parentage in Israel; she therefore instructs Ruth to wash and anoint herself, dress in special finery, visit the place on the threshing floor where Boaz will be spending the night at the height of the harvest season, and lie down at his feet. She also warns Ruth not to reveal who she is. In effect, she is suggesting that Ruth tempt Boaz as Tamar had tempted Boaz's forbear Judah generations earlier – and at least enter Jewish history by bearing his child.

Ruth senses that Boaz loves her – and so she holds out for higher stakes than a mere "one night stand." She tells him exactly who she is, and she asks that he "redeem" her by marriage and by restoring to her Elimelech's previously sold homestead in Israel. Ruth understands that true eternity means bearing a child on your own piece of land in Israel – not in the sly, but as a respected wife and householder. Boaz complies, and Oved, the grandfather of King David, is born. Ruth's commitment to Torah – the land of Torah, the laws of Torah, the loving-kindness of Torah, the modesty of Torah – catapults this convert into the center stage of Jewish eternity.

And this for a very important reason. According to the Midrash of R. Yishmael, the reason the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai – a desert galut – and not on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem, is because had the Torah

been given in Israel the Jews may have thought that the Gentiles have no place in Torah. The truth is the very opposite: Rav Shimon ben Elazar maintains that in the future (Days of the Messiah) the Gentiles will all convert, and Maimonides, at the very conclusion of his Mishneh Torah, rules that at the End of the Days "everyone will return to the true religion", which for him was certainly Judaism. The truth is that to a partial extent the issue is in dispute between two Prophets, Isaiah (chapter 2) maintaining that all the nations will rush to our Jerusalem Temple, declaring "Let us learn from the Jewish ways, let us walk in the Jewish paths, for from Zion will go forth Torah and the word of God from Jerusalem" (to the entire world), while the Prophet Micha quotes Isaiah's words almost verbatim, and then concluding, "each nation will walk in the Name of its (individual) god and we will walk in the name of the Living Lord our God forever" – ethical absolutism (in accordance with the Torah demands of ethical absolutism – compassionate righteousness, moral justice, universal peace) and ritual pluralism!

I am ready to accept either view, and according to everyone at least the Biblical ethic will reign supreme. And the truth is that God initially blessed Abraham with becoming a great nation through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed with peace and security – the Gentiles will certainly adopt our ethical outlook!

This is the vision of Shavuos and this is why we read about the righteous proselyte Ruth on Shavuos!

**The Person in the Parsha: R. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb
A Message for the Entire Team**

All beginning students of Torah face this obstacle: in their original, the primary texts of our Jewish tradition have no punctuation. There are neither commas nor periods in the Torah scroll, the Sefer Torah. There are no question marks, nor are there indications of where one paragraph ends and another begins in standard editions of the Talmud.

In recent years, publishers have included vowels and punctuation marks in the new editions of almost all basic Jewish texts. This innovation has facilitated the ability to study Torah unimpeded by the necessity to puzzle over the various quandaries with which students of previous generations had to cope.

However, before these innovations and throughout our history, there have been numerous disagreements as to how the unpunctuated texts should be read. Let me provide one example of such a text from the Torah portion which we will read in the synagogue on the first day of the upcoming festival of Shavuos. The text is to be found in the book of Exodus/ Shemot 19:5-6. Unpunctuated, and translated literally, it reads as follows:

And now if you listen will listen in My voice and keep My covenant and you will be for Me a treasure among all the nations for Mine is all the land and you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy people...

Many commentators struggle with the above verses. Permit me to introduce you to one of them. His name was Rabbi Naphtali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin,

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By the Friedman and Klahr families
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their father, grandfather, and great grandfather,
Dr. Carl Klahr, a"h,
(Nosson Karpel ben Shmuel Zanvil Tzvi),
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and he lived in the latter half of the nineteenth century. He was the dean, or Rosh Yeshiva, of the “mother of all yeshivos,” in the town of Volozhin in Lithuania. He is known as the Netziv, based upon the initials of his name. He wrote prolifically and gave daily lectures on each week’s Torah portion. Those lectures formed the basis of his profound and extremely insightful five-volume commentary, entitled Haamek Davar.

As one becomes familiar with his work, one begins to realize that the author uses certain basic themes, again and again, to resolve a wide variety of textual problems. One of these themes is the distinction between passages directed to an exclusive audience, versus passages which are addressed to all of the Jewish people, and occasionally to all mankind.

To put it bluntly, some messages are for the spiritual superstars, and others are for the entire team.

The Netziv suggests that our text can be punctuated in two different ways: one with a message for the elite, and another with a message for us all. In this column, I will confine myself to the message for the broader group and leave the message for the aristocracy to those willing to consult the Haamek Davar on their own.

Here is the Netziv’s suggested punctuation, with his interjected interpretive remarks, as addressed to the group he calls the hamon am, the “masses,” or as I prefer, the “entire team,” all who stood at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah.

And now if you listen well in My voice, and keep My covenant, then, and only then, will you be My treasure, among all nations, for people of all lands are Mine. You are qualified to serve as My kingdom of priests/servants, you are qualified to be a holy people...

The Netziv proceeds to elaborate upon the message: “From this moment forward, you must ‘listen to My voice.’ That is, you must ponder Torah and attempt to understand it precisely. ‘Listen in,’ rather than merely ‘listen to.’ This is a precondition for My divine support of your national interests, your political agenda, matters of war and peace.

“Then, you must ‘keep My covenant’, the covenant I made with Abraham regarding sacrificial worship, the Avodah, in the Holy Temple. This is a precondition for My divine sustenance, providing you with a fertile land, with abundant food and nourishment.

“But note,” continues the Netziv, “that reference is only made to Torah and Avodah, to Torah study and ritual observance! What about gemilut chesed? What about interpersonal relationships, charity, kindness, generosity, tolerance, compassion? I, the Almighty, expect those behaviors of all human beings, not just of you! Remember Sodom, totally destroyed because it neglected the poor and needy. Furthermore, I know that chesed/compassion comes naturally to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I need not stipulate that it is a precondition for My divine rewards.

“Beyond those two essentials, Torah and Avodah, without which there is no nation of Israel, you may elevate yourself yet higher by becoming exemplary in your relationships with others, by acting nobly in your dealings with others. But, when it comes to human relationships, much depends upon the special circumstances of time and place. In those matters, you must strive to discern My will, you must attempt to determine what the Almighty expects of you. For that, you must be a mamlechet kohanim, a ‘kingdom of priests.’

“And then, you must be a goy kadosh, ‘a holy people.’ You must be able to determine for yourselves what makes for holiness in new and unfamiliar contexts which are not explicitly regulated in My Torah. You must ask what I, the

Almighty, would want you to do in unprecedented and unanticipated new circumstances, which you are sure to encounter in your national and personal futures.”

What a powerful message these words have for us as we enter Z’man Matan Torateinu, the Festival of Shavuot, when we not only commemorate the Almighty’s revelation upon Mount Sinai, but when we relive it.

The Netziv reminds us of the fundamental requirements that we have as a people and as individuals: Torah study and ritual observance. He reminds us that we have responsibilities, not just as Jews, but as members of the human society. He urges us to go beyond those universal responsibilities and to excel morally and ethically.

I write these words in the midst of a terrible plague, a pandemic. We all find ourselves surrounded by uncertainty and confronted with difficult decisions at every turn.

It helps us to realize that a wise man, living more than a century ago, forewarned us that we will encounter drastically unpredictable dilemmas for which we must strive to ascertain the Almighty’s will by living our lives as His “kingdom of priests, a holy people.” [excerpted]

OTS Dvar Torah: Is Rut Really a Role Model? By Rabbanit Dena Freundlich [Excerpted]

The Question - About a year ago, a Midreshet Lindenbaum alumna (Sarah Cabot, ML 5778) posed a thought-provoking question to me over WhatsApp about the character of Rut. Her query unsettled me because it hit on a troubling issue which I didn’t know how to make sense of in a way that would satisfy her or myself. Sarah wrote that Rut left her feeling confused. She is extolled for her extreme acts of chesed and self-sacrifice, abandoning her home to cling to her penniless, bereft mother-in-law, selflessly devoting herself to provide sustenance for both of them, and humbly doing anything that might vouchsafe for them a secure future. However, as Sarah wrote to me, it seems as though Rut “is so committed to helping Naomi that her own identity is erased, and to me at least it seems to be contrary to the type of person that we’re supposed to strive to be.” In other words, Sarah was asking, Is Rut really a role model? Is she the type of character we should put on a pedestal for ourselves, our daughters, and our students to strive to emulate? Chesed, generosity, self-sacrifice, devotion, and commitment are all laudatory traits, but Rut seems to take them to extremes, perhaps even unhealthy extremes. The most disturbing scene in her short, 4-chapter scroll, is when Naomi bids her to wash and beautify herself, surreptitiously slip into Boaz’s threshing floor at night, lie down next to him, and submit herself to whatever Boaz will instruct her to do. Surely, Naomi and Rut must have desperately hoped and prayed for the fortunate ending that in fact transpires, but both of them must have been aware that the provocative scene could easily have ended very differently. Do we seek to become the types of people who would so lose our own sense of identity, dignity, and self-worth that we would meekly acquiesce to be a pawn in such a plot, as Rut does with her response “כל אשר תאמר אעשה” – whatever you say, I will do?

Following are several approaches to this question.

Approach #1: Rut is more self-effacing than we ought to be, yet she remains a role model

The first approach accepts that in fact Rut has self-effacing qualities that are more extreme than what we should aspire to ourselves; this does not, however, detract from her standing as a heroine and role model. How so? Sarah, the student who proposed the question initially, herself suggested a that the Megilla opens by highlighting its historical

Likutei Divrei Torah

context – “ויהי בימי שפט השפטים” (and it was when the Judges judged) – indicating that this is a critical nugget of information. The era of the Judges was a disastrous one for the Jewish people, steeped in repetitive cycles of idol worship and then oppression by other nations in punishment for their abandonment of God. It was an era marked by selfishness, insularity, and a lack of concern for anyone outside of oneself. In such a time period, there could not have been a more perfect heroine or role model than Rut.

Perhaps Rut demonstrates to us that the Rambam’s prescription for correcting an individual’s character traits is equally applicable on the national level. As a nation, Bnei Yisrael during Rut’s time were falling prey to excessive selfishness; Rut emerged on the scene and modeled unreserved self-sacrifice that was precisely what was needed as a corrective measure. Rut’s contemporaries trampled on others’ identities in order to assert their own; Rut muted her own identity in order to restore Naomi’s. The people in Rut’s time needed to behave selflessly not merely in appropriate amounts but to Rut-esque excessive degrees precisely to serve as an antidote to their self-centeredness, and help them eventually achieve the “proper middle path.”

Approach #2: Rut is a role model of trust and faith

A second approach was suggested to me by a wise mother-in-law, who pointed out that Rut is not blindly heeding the instructions of just anyone; the disturbing command to seek out Boaz in the middle of the night has been issued by none other than Naomi, whom Rut has learned to trust deeply and unconditionally through many years of living, breathing, eating, sleeping, suffering, and surviving side-by-side. From all these experiences, Rut has developed unwavering faith and confidence both in Naomi’s goodness and in her utter devotion to Rut’s well-being. Within the context of this relationship, Rut’s blind obedience to Naomi’s plan is transformed from troubling docility to a praiseworthy act of trust and faith. A trusted, beloved parent asking us to embark on a questionable mission or to perform an arduous favor is entirely different than a random stranger requesting the identical thing.

This point resonated deeply with me. Yet, I was still somewhat unsettled, largely because of recent alarming incidents in which trusted figures, including Rabbinic ones, have manipulated and abused unsuspecting congregants. Did I really want to convey the message to my students that they should unquestioningly agree to anything a trusted figure in their life asks of them?

A fascinating twist emerges from noting the specific time that Chazal selected for the reading of Megillat Rut, the holiday of Shavuot. Numerous commentators have pondered the connection between the two. Perhaps the key lies in the fact that it was at Har Sinai that Am Yisrael declared, “נעשה ונשמע!” – we will do and we will hear, placing submission to God’s will prior to, and not predicated upon, understanding it. Perhaps Rut and Naomi’s relationship is meant to be a metaphor for our relationship with God. Just as Rut had developed unwavering trust in Naomi, leading her to ultimately submit to whatever Naomi would suggest, so too had Am Yisrael acquired steadfast faith in God over the course of the Plagues, the Exodus, and the Splitting of the Sea, culminating in their declaration of absolute commitment to His commandments at Har Sinai. No human being deserves the kind of blind trust that Rut places in Naomi, but God does. On the holiday of Shavuot when we relive our acceptance of God and His Torah, Rut is the perfect heroine. Her traits of faith, obedience, and submission are precisely the ones to emulate in the realm of our relationship with our Creator.

Approach #3: Rut is not as self-effacing as she appears - Rut is a much stronger, more proactive character than she appears at first glance. First, it is Rut's own decision, and her decision alone, to cling so determinedly to Naomi. In fact, Naomi repeatedly attempts to dissuade her, yet Rut tenaciously holds fast.

More significantly, a neighbor of mine, Micah Gimpel, suggested that Rut may not be as passive and docile as she appears. When Naomi describes the plan, she essentially instructs Rut to be merely a puppet. Rut ought to be silent and await Boaz's instructions. But that is not what Rut does! She continues speaking, and seizes the opportunity to voice her own hope, nay her own demand: "וּפְרַשְׁתָּ" – spread your wing over your maidservant for you are a redeemer. Rather than silently, passively await Boaz's response to discovering a woman at his feet as Naomi had instructed her, Rut veers from the script and takes matters into her own hands, demanding that Boaz do something to protect her and secure her future. This is Rut's moment of transformation. Precisely at the moment when she might appear weakest and most submissive is exactly the moment when she charts her own future and directs the course of how it will play out. Remarkably, Boaz endorses Rut's newfound bold, assertive voice by declaring "בְּרוּכָה" – blessed are you to Hashem, my daughter. He then completes the role reversal by declaring that he will do all that Rut says – "כָּל אֲשֶׁר לֵךְ" – "אֲמַרְי אֵעֲשֶׂה לָךְ", a remarkable turnaround from Naomi's plan in which Rut was supposed to do all that Boaz instructed. Even more striking is that these words echo almost verbatim the very language with which Rut initially expressed her submission to Naomi's plan – "כָּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַרְי אֵעֲשֶׂה". The fact that Boaz now employs the identical phraseology to affirm his submission to Rut underscores the stunning reversals that have taken place between the lines of this brilliant Megilla.

Conclusion - A close read indicates that Rut is in truth a much more assertive character than she appears. Whichever approach resonates most with you, I hope you feel as I do – that delving into the character of Rut has enriched and deepened my appreciation of her, her Megilla, and the myriad lessons hidden within its four chapters.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Yakov Haber: Thoughts on Shavuos, Corona and Coronation

The world is, with the help of G-d and His kindness, possibly at the cusp of healing - at least for now - from the greatest epidemic that has hit humanity for decades although the danger lurks of a second breakout. To be sure, the world is no stranger to tragedies of epic proportions: war, famine, disease, massacres and myriad "natural" disasters. The Jewish people especially have been victims of targeted persecution because of their religion or race throughout the ages. But a world-wide crisis of this proportion on so many planes certainly requires much reflection. Many prominent Rabbinic figures both here in Eretz Yisrael and in chutz la'aretz have voiced their suggestions as to what particular areas of avodas Hashem require improvement and which are the areas concerning which the Creator of the world and Giver of the Torah is sending us messages to improve. The Tochacha of parashas B'chukosai is read before Shavuos since this holiday is also considered a Rosh Hashana, a day on which we not only celebrate the momentous event of the giving of the Torah but is also meant as a day on which to reflect on an individual and communal level as to how well we are committed to the covenant of Sinai. It is in light of this perspective that I add these humble words well aware of the fact that מִי אֲנִי וְמִה

אני כלפי רבותי החשובים שלי"ט"א וכל שכן לומר דברי מוסר לרבים.

[R. Shimon b. Yochai taught,] "This is analogous to one who was punishing his son, and [the son] did not know why he was being beaten. After he beat him, he said to him, 'Go do what I commanded you to do for many days already and you didn't pay any attention to [it] [me].' So too all the thousands who fell [during a plague] in the days of David only fell because they did not demand the building of the mikdash. ... If even regarding the [generation] who never had a Beis Hamikdash in their time and it was not destroyed in their time, this happened to them and they were punished for not demanding it, we, in whose time it was destroyed, and we do not sufficiently mourn over it, and we do not request mercy [for its rebuilding] all the more so! Therefore the original pious ones instituted that we should pray three times a day and instituted in the amida, 'Please, Merciful One with Your abundant mercy, restore Your Presence to Zion and the sacrificial order to Jerusalem.' And they also instituted the building of Jerusalem as a separate blessing in the amida and in birchas hamazon.

R. Shimon b. Yochai taught ... "They [a large segment of the Jewish people] ultimately will despise the Kingdom of Heaven, the kingdom of the house of David and the Beis Hamikdash ... in the days of Rechav'am (Yorovam) ... Said R. Simon b. Menasia, "Israel will not see a sign of redemption (blessing) ever unless they return and request all three. This is indicated by the verse, "Afterward the Children of Israel will return and seek out Hashem, their G-d" - this refers to the Kingdom of Heaven - "and David their king" - this refers to the kingdom of the house of David - "and they shall tremble for Hashem and His goodness (in the End of Days)" - this refers to the building of the Beis Hamikdash.

The aforementioned midrashic teachings underscore the centrality of longing for geula bringing in its wake the recognition of malchus Hashem over the entire world, the restoration of the Davidic dynasty, one which represents the kingdom of Torah in this world, and the mikdash, the house serving as a place manifesting the Divine Presence specifically among G-d's beloved people whose fame and centrality affects the entire world. The first midrash underscores the connection of a plague, or national pandemic, to an insufficient yearning for mikdash.

The State of Israel has had, in an unprecedented turn of events, had several inconclusive elections recently. A "unity" government was formed with the prime minister currently on trial for a variety of charges placing even the current government in Israel in a tenuous state of stability. In addition, almost worldwide, shuls and batei midrash were shuttered for several months. Even outdoor prayer was banned by many governments for a time and even where allowed was prohibited by various Rabbinic authorities. Here in Israel shuls were reopened after months of closure, subject to strict rules to avoid further spread of disease. I humbly submit that there are perhaps two crucial messages inherent in these two seemingly unrelated events.

The current State of Israel has been the subject of much hashkafic and halachic analysis. Mori v'Rabi Rav Hershel Schachter shlita has often presented his view that its existence is a partial fulfillment of the mitzvah of appointing a Jewish king, namely a Jewish government. The ideal government would be malchus beis Dovid, but even one not matching this criterion also is included in this commandment. His view is agreed upon by many. Other Rabbinic authorities vociferously debate this characterization. But all agree that from a Torah perspective, it is certainly not the ideal model of government both

Likutei Divrei Torah

because it is not malchus beis Dovid and - notwithstanding all of the positive religiously significant developments which were fostered by it - because it was not founded from the perspective of Torah fulfillment. As people committed to Torah values, whereas we are certainly bound to be loyal to governmental authorities and, in at least the worldview in which many maintain we greatly value all that the State of Israel has accomplished for the Jewish people, we certainly long for the Ribono shel olam to restore the ideal form of Jewish government. Perhaps a message inherent in the recent uncertainty regarding the State is meant to awaken us to more fully to long for the ideal Jewish malchus which we pray for every day. Granted that we value and thank Hashem for the great gift of Medinat Yisrael, but we view it as a "transitional government", one preparing the way for the ideal malchus. I believe this message is all the more important for those who value the Medina so greatly. Do we sufficiently long for the ideal Torah government of the Davidic dynasty?

Our shuls and batei midrash are referred to as midkeshei me'at, mini-temples granted as a Divine gift wherein Hashem yisborach promises to rest His Shechina even during the long exile. But here too, the ideal, glorious resting place for the Divine presence is the "bais hagadol v'hakadosh hazeh", not just the mikdash me'at. Perhaps the events of these past few months whereby our shuls were closed to us are meant as a sign for us to redouble our efforts in praying for the mikdash hagadol in the amida, in birchas hamazon as mentioned by the above midrash and in our personal prayers. The prayer of ya'aleh v'yavo as well as the Mussaf prayer to be recited b'ezras Hashem multiple times on the upcoming holiday of Shavuos also contain these same themes.

A ruling stated in the Talmud Yerushalmi - actually relevant during the past year - is most informative. If a congregation does not have a sefer Torah, should they read the Torah reading that week from a chumash? The Yerushalmi rules in the negative since if they would do so, there would be no motivation to acquire a real sefer Torah. Even though we follow the view that we should read from a chumash without blessings so that in some manner we hear the Torah reading even though not in an ideal fashion, the Yerushalmi's message of not being comfortable with a non-ideal situation is most important and sheds light on the themes discussed above.

Rav Shimshon Pincus zt"l beautifully describes the urgency of taking advantage of the ten days of repentance with an impactful mashal I believe very relevant to the current situation as well. A king's son rebelled against him, and he was exiled from the palace. Wandering aimlessly through the forest, the prince fell into a pit. Helpless, in need of food and medical care, he desperately screamed out "Help! Help!" Sure enough, the king's entourage, making its way near the forest, heard the cries for help. Hearing his beloved son's voice, the king quickly rushed to the edge of the pit and asked, "My dear son, how can I help you?" The son answered, "Father, Your Majesty, I need food! I need doctors!" The king quickly lowered in tons of food and commanded doctors to jump into the pit to heal his son. The king asked, "Is there anything else you need?" The son replied, "No, that's all." The king bid his son farewell saying, "Maybe next time we pass by, you'll ask for something else..." So too, explains Rav Pincus, we often solely focus on our personal needs: continued health, healing, sustenance, family etc. But we have to member to fervently, with a sense of urgency, ask our Father, the King, to "take us out of the pit!", to take us out of exile, to restore His Kingdom in the world and his Holy Temple!