

Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah
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Covenant and Conversation Rabbi 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. (Rashi to Bamidbar 1:1)

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." (Ex. 30:11-12).

When, centuries later, King David counted the people, there was Divine anger and seventy thousand people died.[1] 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." (Num. 1:2) This is a strange, circumlocutory expression. Biblical Hebrew contains many verbs meaning "to

count": *limnot*, *lifkod*, *lispur*, *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,"[2] 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.[3] Maimonides wrote that each of us should see ourselves as if our next act could change the fate of the world.[4] 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." [5] 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 seashore, 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.[6] 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,

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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

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.”[7] MIT professor Sherry Turkle calls our age of Twitter, Facebook, and electronic rather than face-to-face friendships, “Alone together.”[8] Judaism values individuality, not individualism. As Hillel said, “If I am only for myself, what am I?”[9]

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” (Ex. 4:10). 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.

[1] 2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21.

[2] Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd*, London, Fisher Unwin 1896, 134.

[3] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:4.

[4] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4.

[5] Brachot 58a.

[6] Beitsah 3b.

[7] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000.

[8] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, New York, Basic Books, 2011.

[9] Mishnah Avot 1:14.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

“...by their families, by their parents’ houses.” (Numbers 1:2) 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” (Numbers 1:2). 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 [lemishpehotam], by their parents’ houses [leveit avotam].”

This particular term is repeated with each of the tribes and families, except for two instances wherein 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 (Numbers 4:2) and Merari (Numbers 4:27) are presented in the book of 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 “leveit avotam” to mean “by their immediate parental names,” in accordance with the interpretation of Rashi (1040–1105). 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 “leveit 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

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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
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Transitions and Destinations

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

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, 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 (Numbers 1:1-4:20), 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." (Pirkei Avot, 4:21)

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).'" (Berachot 64a).

One is tempted to assume that it is only the righteous who progress ever upward and know no final destination. But surely the wicked,

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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." (Eduyot 2:10)

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 Person in the Parasha column, I celebrated the first publication of this weekly series of columns, for Parshat Bamidbar. 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.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Why So Few Leviim?

The Torah records that after Moshe counted Bnei Yisrael, he counted the Tribe of Levi separately. The Leviim were counted from the age of one month and above, and they numbered 22,000. The Ramban asks a basic demographic question: The male population of the Tribe of Levi, which was counted from thirty days and up, numbered less than half of the next smallest Tribe, despite the fact that all the rest of the tribes were counted only from the age of twenty years and above! The Ramban asks: Why were there so few Leviim?

The Ramban suggests an answer to this question. He says this corroborates Chazal's teaching on the pasuk "As they (the Egyptians) persecuted them (the Jews), so did they multiply and so did they expand..." [Shemos 1:12]. The more the Egyptians tried to minimize us through their bondage and persecution, the more Hashem blessed us and allowed the Jewish women to have multiple births, creating a population explosion amongst the Children of Israel. Chazal teach that the Tribe of Levi was not subjected to the bondage of slavery. They were free from the work and the persecution suffered by the other tribes. Therefore, since they were not part of the persecution, they also were not part of the blessing of the population explosion, and consequently their total population at the end of the period of Egyptian slavery was much smaller than that of the other tribes.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh quotes this Ramban and is not happy with his suggestion. He offers his own unique—and in a sense, startling—answer: The Gemara says that Amram divorced his wife (after having only two children—Miriam and Aharon). His

rationale for doing so was that given the grim situation of the Jews in Egypt (Jewish male children being thrown at birth into the Nile, at that time), he did not want to bring any more children into the world. Amram was the gadol ha'dor (the leader of the generation). He was also the head of the Tribe of Levi. When the rest of his tribesmen saw that Amram divorced his wife, they all got up and divorced their wives as well. Even though the Gemara says that Amram had second thoughts about the matter and remarried his wife Yocheved, the Ohr HaChaim suggests (this is speculation on his part) that the other Levites did not follow his lead in that action, and they remained separated from their wives.

The Ohr HaChaim supplies a rationale for their motivation: The Tribe of Levi had it relatively good in Egypt. They were not subject to the same horrors and unspeakable suffering that the rest of the Jews had to bear. Consequently, they appreciated the lives they led and they appreciated life in general. They simply could not bear the thought of bringing children into the world only to have them thrown into the Nile to be drowned or abandoned (as was the case with Amram's third child, Moshe).

Ironically, because the other Jews suffered so much, they appreciated life less and they somehow came to terms with the thought that their children may be taken away from them. Their lives were so oppressed and they were so depressed that they felt that life was almost worthless. Consequently, the thought of having their children taken away from them seemed almost "par for the course" and therefore it did not stop them from bringing more Jewish souls into the world! They valued life so little, that they did not recoil in horror from the thought of what might happen to their to-be-born children as did the Leviim.

The only analogy I can think of is that in some countries in the world, life is not as valuable as it is in the United States. In America (and all the more so this is true in Eretz Yisrael), much of the general perception of the populace is that every life is of infinite value. The Leviim did not want to bring children into this world. We should father children who will suffer? We should bear children who will be murdered? We are not going to have such children!

The rest of the Israelites, who themselves lived unbearable lives, were not as frightened by the idea of bringing children into the world, who themselves would have a miserable lot in life. This is a startling idea, but if we think about it, I believe we can understand it.

As a result of this phenomenon, the Ohr HaChaim writes, the Tribe of Levi had significantly fewer children than the enslaved tribes.

A Cryptic Comment of the Baal HaTurim Explained by the Bach

The Talmud [Sotah 12a] sheds further light on the above-mentioned incident. When Amram divorced his wife (not wishing to bring more Jewish children into the world under such dire circumstances), his young daughter Miriam told him, "Father, your decree is worse than Pharaoh's decree. Pharaoh's decree only affects the boys; your decree affects both male and female children!" The Talmud states that Amram accepted his daughter's critique, and this is the background to the pasuk "A man went (va'yelech ish) from the House of Levi and married the daughter of Levi" [Shemos 2:1] The Rabbis ask, "From where did he go?" And they answer, "He went from the counsel of his daughter (to remarry Yocheved)."

The Baal HaTurim points out that there are only two places in all of Tanach where we find the expression "va'yelech ish". One is the aforementioned pasuk "va'yelech ish m'Beis Levi va'yikach es bas Levi," and the other is in the Book of Rus; "va'yelech ish m'Beis Lechem Yehudah..." (And a man went from Bethlehem in Judea to dwell in the fields of Moab) [Rus 1:1].

The Baal HaTurim (who did not have a computer) is certainly not merely sharing an interesting word anomaly. He means something when he provides these insights. Unfortunately, the Baal HaTurim does not do us the favor of explaining the significance of the linkage between these two pesukim. But in a sense, he did do us a favor, because this gives all darshanim in every generation the opportunity to suggest their own insights explaining the connection between "va'yelech ish m'Beis Levi..." (which was a pious action—Amram took back his wife and wanted to bring children into the world) and "va'yelech ish m'Beis Lechem Yehudah..." (where Elimelech, the leader of his generation, abandoned his people by leaving Eretz Yisrael in a time of famine and fled to Moav, which apparently was a sinful action).

The Bach (Rav Yoel Sirkis [1561-1640]), in a sefer called Meishiv Nefesh, shares an interesting idea. He says that Elimelech did not perform a wicked act in the Book of Rus. He did not abandon his people. He acted for the Sake of Heaven (l'Shem Shamayim). Elimelech knew prophetically (B'Ruach HaKodesh) that the Moshiach must trace his lineage back to the daughters of Moav. Since he was aware, however, that there was a halacha that "Neither an Ammonite nor a Moabite shall enter into the Congregation of Hashem..." [Devorim 23:4] (and at this point it was not known that this halacha only restricted male Moavites from marrying into Jewish families) and people therefore distanced themselves from any potential marriage with someone of Moavite lineage, Elimelech was perturbed that the Moshiach would never come into existence. Therefore, he took it upon himself to go with his family to

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the fields of Moav, because he sensed that over there, somehow, he would wind up with a woman in his family who would become the matriarch of the Messianic King.

This is the similarity the Baal HaTurim is pointing out between these two pesukim. "Va'yelech ish m'Beis Levi va'yikach es bas Levi" produced Moshe Rabbeinu, the Redeemer from Egypt, the first redeemer in Jewish history. And "va'yelech ish m'Beis Lechem Yehudah..." ultimately produced the final redeemer. Just as Amram's intent was to bring forth women (as Miriam pointed out to him, Pharaoh only decreed death on the Jewish males, but Amram's separation from his wife ruled out the possibility of women coming into the world as well), so too, Elimelech's intent in going to the fields of Moav was to bring forth women (i.e., Rus, the matriarch of the Davidic monarchy)

All Is Well That Ends Well

The last pasuk in Parshas Bamidbar is, "But they shall not come and look as the holy is inserted, lest they die." [Bamidbar 4:20] When the Leviim were carrying the Aron HaKodesh, they needed to make sure it was covered, so as not to see it while it was uncovered. It was not an easy job being a Levi. It was a dangerous profession. If they looked at the Aron uncovered, they would die!

The problem is that we have a principle learned from a pasuk in Koheles [8:3] "...Lo sa'amod al davar rah..." (literally—"Do not stand on a bad thing"), which teaches that it is inappropriate to end a parsha (or even an Aliyah) on a bad note. Baal Korehs and Gabbaim know that when you need to insert an additional aliyah ("hosafa") in the leining, there are certain places where it is forbidden to stop. One of the rules is that you cannot stop on a pasuk with a "bad message."

And yet, Parshas Bamidbar ends with "V'lo Yiroo k'valah es haKodesh, va'meisu." And this is not the only occurrence of this phenomenon. Parshas Kedoshim ends with the pasuk "...they shall be put to death; they shall pelt them with stones, their blood shall be within them (d'meiham bam)." [Vayikra 20:27]. This is a "beautiful ending?" "Their blood shall be within them!" How do we explain this? Koheles says not to pause on a "davar rah". So how do we end on such frightening and somber notes as those at the end of Parshas Bamidbar and Parshas Kedoshim?

Rav Isaac Bernstein shared an interesting idea from the Teshuvos Rav Pe'alim. In Talmudic times, every person who received an aliyah did not make two brachos (one prior to his aliyah and one following it) as is the custom today. Rather, the first olah recited the beginning bracha (asher bachar banu...) and the final (usually the seventh) olah made the final bracha (asher nasan lanu Toras emes...). The Rav Pe'alim says that the result of this is that

the last thing the congregation hears is not the final words of the last pasuk, but rather the last words of the final bracha “Who gave us the True Torah and Eternal Life He has implanted in our midst, Blessed Art Thou Who Gives Us the Torah!” That is not a bad note. We are not stopping at the words “They will die” or “their blood is within them.” We are stopping at “Who Gives Us the Torah.”

Now, in truth, this is the case, not only in Talmudic times, but in our day as well. So, I believe that the Rav Pe’alim is saying that the rule of not stopping on a “bad note” (davar rah) only applies to the intermediate aliyahs—namely all the section endings except the final one—which are not followed by the ending bracha. However, the rule of not ending on a “bad note” does not apply to the very end of a Parsha, because the last aliyah never ended with the Torah pasuk itself, but with the final Torah blessing.

What a better way could there be to end my final shiur before Shavuos than with the words “Baruch Ata Hashem, Nosen HaTorah”.

Dvar Torah

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Will people be proud to be connected to you? This Shabbat, we commence the reading of the book of Bamidbar. Right at the beginning of the book the Torah provides us with details of the heads of tribes, it says רֹאשׁ לְבֵית־אֲבֹתָיו – ‘each one of them was the head of a household’. Rav Moshe Chofetz tells us in his book Melech Machshevet that there is a message here for each and every one of us. That’s because every one of us is an ‘איש’ – a person, and we should likewise strive to be רֹאשׁ לְבֵית־אֲבֹתָיו – ‘the head of a household’. This means, he explains, that people will be proud to be connected to us and in future generations, people will be proud to be descended from us.

The Maggid of Mezerich, Rav Dov Ber ben Avraham, was the primary disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov, one of the great founders of Chassidism. When he was five years old he came home to find his mother distraught. There had been a fire in their home, it had caused damage but they had managed to put it out. So he said “Mummy, all of us are okay! Nobody died, isn’t that what’s important?” She replied, “that’s not why I’m crying. You see, we had a document, a piece of paper that was our family tree and we can show everyone how we are descended directly from King David. That document has now gone up in flames.” So the little Dov Ber said to his mother ‘don’t worry Mummy, I will always try to be a good person and please God one day, people will be proud to be descended from me’. That is the message of רֹאשׁ לְבֵית־אֲבֹתָיו – that we should strive to be outstanding role models, whom people are proud to be connected to.

I believe that this is always a lesson of

importance but particularly right now during The COVID-19 pandemic. Ever since 1945, we have been living in the post-war era, from 2020, we’ll be living in the post virus era. People will be looking to us, the people who endured this very trying and challenging period. We have an opportunity now to set an example, a tone, to show how despite great difficulty, we are acting responsibly, for ourselves and our societies, so that in the future, people will look back and be proud of the role models we have been.

רֹאשׁ לְבֵית־אֲבֹתָיו – this is the time for us to be the heads of households, to be responsible for ourselves, our families and our communities and indeed for the entire world.

OTS Dvar Torah

“Take the Levites”

Rabbi Yoni Rosensweig

Why does the Torah go to such lengths to keep the Levites completely separate from the rest of the Israelites? Why did it order a separate census of the Levites?

Parashat Bamidbar contains technical lists of the numbers of Israelites, and each census was done a bit differently. In the first chapter, we find the head counts of the Israelites, tribe by tribe, with the exception of the Levites who, as the Torah emphasizes, were not counted in the general census of the Israelites. The second chapter presents the census “by standards”. Here, the Israelites were grouped and arranged in a particular way, which conformed with how they camped and travelled. Here, too, the text underscores the Levites’ unique position, and the fact that they are not counted among the Israelites.

One question comes to mind: Why does the Torah go to such lengths to keep the Levites completely separate from the rest of the Israelites? Why did Hashem refuse to count the Levites along with the rest of the Israelites, only to later command that they be counted separately? Biblical commentators have tried to explain the significance of the different censuses and their details. We would also like to propose a way to appreciate the significance of the amount of text the Torah uses in this regard. Studying these fine details can reveal the secret buried within the text.

Let’s begin by recapping the head counts of all of the tribes:

Reuben – 46500, Simeon – 59300, Gad – 45650, Judah – 74600, Issachar – 54400, Zebulun – 57400, Ephraim – 40500, Menashe – 32200, Benjamin – 35400, Dan – 62700, Asher – 41500, and Naftali – 53400.

With regard to the standards, the tribes were grouped into four camps, as follows:

The camp of Judah – Judah, Issachar and Zebulun (74600+54400+57400= 186400).

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This group camped in the east, and it formed the vanguard for the rest of the Israelites when they travelled.

The camp of Reuben: Reuben, Simeon and Gad (46500 + 59300 + 45650 = 151450).

This group camped in the south, and it formed the right flank of the Israelite camp (when viewed from the rear).

The camp of Ephraim: Ephraim, Menashe and Benjamin (40500+32200+35400= 108100). This group camped in the west, and it formed the rearguard when the Israelites travelled.

The camp of Dan: Dan, Asher and Naftali (62700 + 41500 + 53400 = 157600).

This group camped in the north, and it formed the left flank of the Israelite camp (when viewed from the rear).

If we revisit this camping formation, we’ll realize that Hashem created an order reminiscent of a grand military parade, a formation that made sense military, as well: the numerically superior group would form the vanguard, groups with similar numbers made up the two flanks, and finally, the weakest of the four groups would make up the rearguard. Furthermore, since all of these camps were supposed to be under the orders of the commander of the camp, the groups were arranged in a way that allowed each of the tribes making up those groups to get along while accepting the authority of their superiors. Judah, Issachar and Zebulun were all descended from Leah, and it goes without saying that they accepted Judah’s authority. Reuben, Simeon and Gad were also Leah’s sons, or, in the case of Gad, the son of Leah’s maidservant, so they would certainly have accepted Reuben’s authority. Ephraim, Menashe and Benjamin are all descended from Rachel, Ephraim was clearly given preference over Menashe in leadership, and finally, the Dan camp included Asher and Naftali – all descended from maidservants.

The Levites are mentioned twice in this formation. The first mention is in chapter 1, when the Torah sets them apart, stating that all of the tribes camped beside their standards, but the Levites set up camp outside the Tabernacle. They are kept separate and distinct from the other tribes and they maintain a separate identity. At this point, the Torah hasn’t given us any further details, and it proceeds to describe the “census of the standards”.

The following important description occurs in the middle of the explanation of the standard formation, in verse 17: “Then, midway between the divisions, the Tent of Meeting, the division of the Levites, shall move. As they camp, so they shall march, each in position, by their standards.” The Tribe of Levi camped among the people – right in the middle. This contrasts with the text in the previous chapter:

on the one hand, the Torah emphasizes the Levite's detachment from the rest of the Israelites, while on the other hand, it stresses that the Levites are an inseparable and key component of the entire nation. The nation is gathered around the Levites. The Levites are at the center of the Jewish people, since they camp by the Mishkan.

Unlike the other tribes, the tribe of Levi was split into family groups. Even the expression "by the clans of its ancestral houses", often used in reference to the tribal censuses, is reversed in the case of the Levites; the Torah states that the Levites must be counted "by their ancestral house and by their clans."

One way to explain this is that the Levites were divided into clans because the Holy One, Blessed Be He divided them based on their roles, not based on their tribal affiliation, and in essence, the tribe of Levi no longer maintained an independent identity, as it now became the staff of the servants of Hashem. This is the tribe of those who served Hashem, and as such, it is connected to the entire Jewish people.

Today, those who serve the nation spiritually are our rabbis and educators. For them, too, tribalism must be done away with. Educators, teachers and rabbis are all dedicated to serving the entire Jewish people, regardless of whether they are secular, religious, ultra-orthodox or otherwise. They must take charge of ignoring the small portion of Israeli society in which they were raised, and dedicate themselves to the holy work of creating connections with the entire Jewish people.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Daniel Stein

There is Nothing More Beautiful Than Serving Hashem Be'Tznius

At the outset of their relationship, Hashem communicated with Moshe outdoors and in public, first at the burning bush and then later in Mitzrayim. However, the pasuk states that subsequently, "Hashem spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai from within the Ohel Moed" (Bamidbar 1:1). The Medrash Rabba (Bamidbar 1:3) comments that following the construction of the Mishkan, Hashem only spoke to Moshe from within the Ohel Moed, for Hashem typically prefers to operate discreetly and indoors as it says, "walk modestly with your God" (Micha 6:8), and it is for this reason that Hashem is described in general as a "God who conceals Himself," (Yeshaya 45:15). A similar transition occurred in connection with the giving of the Torah. The Medrash Tanchuma (Ki Sisa 31) claims that the first set of luchos were broken precisely because they arrived amidst great attention and fanfare which leads the Medrash to conclude that "there is nothing more beautiful than tznius." In order to protect the second set of luchos from a similar fate, Moshe was instructed to fashion them while alone and in private as the pasuk says, "carve

for yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones" (Shemos 34:1).

The value of being removed from the public eye is further supported by the Gemara (Bava Metzia 42a) which comments that, "blessings can only exist regarding objects that are concealed." Moreover, the Gemara (Sukkah 49b and Moed Katan 16a) asserts, that even those events which are generally held in public, such as a wedding, funeral, or even teaching Torah, should nonetheless be conducted with the greatest degree of discretion possible. The expansive range and scope of these comments indicates that the imperative to conduct ourselves privately and with tznius is not limited to our wardrobe choices or modes of attire, but rather encompasses all of our interactions and indeed defines our very way of life.[1] This is underscored by the manner in which Balak praises the Jewish People, "How good are your tents, Yaakov" (Bamidbar 24:5), referring to the arrangement of their tents which opened in opposite directions in order to prevent one from peering into the home of another.

The central message of tznius is illuminated by the Maharal (Nesivos Olam) who writes that the meaning and significance of an object or event which is open to the public and exposed in plain sight is limited to that which can be observed and is on display. Conversely, an item which is hidden and concealed suggests that it possesses greater depth and therefore should not be judged superficially. This is comparable to the tip of an iceberg whose spire protrudes above the water but at the same time hints that its true girth and might resides beneath the surface. For this reason, while the Mishkan was in transit, Bnei Yisrael were commanded to cover the furniture and utensils, "so that they not go inside and witness the dismantling of the Sanctuary lest they die" (Bamidbar 4:20). Rav Sternbuch (Taam V'daas) explains that the pieces of the Mishkan were wrapped and concealed deliberately in order to convey to any potential spectators that the ultimate purpose of the Mishkan and its utensils were beyond their grasp and all human understanding.

Given the general emphasis on tznius and privacy it is not surprising, that the holiest items and places within the Mishkan were guarded by numerous coverings and layers designed to protect its contents and restrict access. This notion is punctuated by the avodah of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur which was performed entirely in solitude, as the pasuk states, "nobody else shall be in the Ohel Moed until he comes out" (Vayikra 16:17). Additionally, Moshe was commanded at Har Sinai to ascend the mountain by himself and to instruct the rest of the nation to remain behind for "nobody else shall come up with you, and nobody else shall be seen anywhere on the mountain" (Shemos 34:3). The Degel Machaneh Efraim (Matos) derives from these instances that intense spiritual experiences can

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only materialize while one is secluded, removed from all societal limitations and expectations. Perhaps, the Mishnah (Avos 2:5) which states, "in the place where there is no man strive to be a man," can also be interpreted creatively, "strive to be a man who serves Hashem like he is in a place where there are no other men." Therefore, Rav Tzadok Hakohen (Tzidkos Hatzaddik) writes that even when davening together with the rest of the community, one should attempt to imagine as if he is conversing privately with Hashem.

However, if the quiet and understated nature which accompanied the second set of luchos is ideal, why were the first set of luchos introduced with such pomp and circumstance in the first place? The Sfas Emes (Ki Sisa) deduces that public performances are occasionally necessary in order to initially infuse an endeavor with a certain measure of excitement and enthusiasm which can only be generated by a large and impressive gathering. For this reason, we occasionally applaud the accomplishments of young children in public and celebrate their milestones together with the community. However, as a child matures and develops it is critical that we instill within them the belief that "there is nothing more beautiful than tznius." They must be taught that their lives and actions are inherently consequential in the eyes of Hashem even if it is not "commented" upon by others or "liked" by someone else. We have to convince them, that from the perspective of Yiddishkeit, the more something is concealed the more valuable it is, and the more an activity or accomplishment is publicized the less special it becomes, not the reverse.

Similarly, the Maharshal (Yam Shel Shlomo, Kesubos 1:17) claims that the glass which is broken at a wedding by the chosson is an allusion to the shevrias haluchos. Rav Soloveitchik (cited in Divrei Harav pg. 229) suggests that this symbol serves as a reminder to the chosson and kallah that the public nature of their relationship at the time of their wedding is not sustainable, just like the first set of luchos. Over time, as their relationship deepens and matures their home should evolve from a chuppah where the entire community is invited to watch, into a sealed domain whose entrance is obscured from its neighbors. The coronavirus pandemic which has confined us to our houses has also refocused our attention on the concept of tznius and the importance of cultivating a private relationship with Hashem. Whenever we emerge from this predicament and are able to reconvene as a community, (it should hopefully be soon and in good health), we should travel forth with this same orientation and mindset, to continue to walk modestly with Hashem at all times, for there is nothing more beautiful and beneficial than tznius.

[1] See Rav Hershel Schachter, Eretz Hatzvi (pg. 96) and Can Women Be Rabbis?.

A Real King

Dovid HaMelech finds himself at the center of the Yom Tov of Shavuos for many reasons. The Midrash tells us that not only was he born on the day that we celebrate the reception of the Torah but he passed away on Shavuos 70 years later. Therefore, in preparation for that special occasion it might prove worthy to take some time to reflect on the extraordinary life and the sublime gift of “King David”

The Ramchal writes in Derech Etz Chaim, “ This is the biggest and most powerful medicine that one can find against the Yetzer. It is easy and its effects are great. Its fruit is many, in that a man should stand each day for at least an hour, free from all other thoughts, and to think only on this matter that I’ve said. And he should seek in his heart: “What did the early ones, the fathers of the world do, that G-d desired in them? What did Moshe Rabbeinu do? What did David, the Moshiach (chosen of) HASHEM do? And all the Gedolim (great men) who lived before us?”

What did Dovid do? I have no specific answer for now, however we have the clearest window into the mind and the heart of Dovid HaMelech in the form of the readily accessible and ubiquitous Sefer Tehillim. Dovid tells us everything. He reveals all we need to know.

Now just to add an electric charge of appreciation and to help affirm that Tehillim is a prophetically inspired we might cogitate on this discovery of the Vilna Gaon. There are five books within Sefer Tehillim corresponding to the Five Books of the Torah. If one counts the number of letters in the first book of Tehillim and then begins to count that number of letters starting the first books of Torah, Bereishis, one comes to a letter TOF. Do the same with the second book of Tehillim and the second book of Torah, Shemos, and one comes to the HEY. Follow the same procedure for the next three books and one finds the letters LAMED and then YUD and then MEM, spelling out TEHILLIM. A huge statistical anomaly!

Tehillim is unique and distinct from other books of prophecy. It is not the record of G-d speaking to man but rather it’s record of the highest expression of mankind speaking to G-d! Every page of Tehillim is saturated with the many Good and Holy Names of HASHEM. Dovid was a G-d intoxicated person, as he says, “I place HASHEM before always!”

We know Dovid merited to become the King of Israel. What is the quality of a Jewish King? In Hebrew the word “Melech” for King does not connote a brutish authority. Just the opposite. The Hebrew word “Nimlach” means to take counsel. The Jewish Kings feels the pulse of the people. He not only needs to represent all that is noble and just to the people

but he is the ultimate spokesperson for the people.

The sages tell us that the king is the heart of the nation. The heart is connected to and distributes precious life blood to all the organs and extremities of the body. A Jewish King like Dovid does not tell people what to think but he tells them what they are really thinking and feeling deep in their hearts. He speaks to us and for us for all time. He lets us know that we are a G-d intoxicated people.

Dovid HaMelech was not just a warrior, or a statesman, or a politician, or a sage, or a singer, or a poet, or a musician, even though he was all of those things too. He shows us his heart and he reveals to us our heart in Sefer Tehillim. He was and still is the teacher of our heart.

The summary of all our devotions and good deeds and learning Torah and performing Mitzvos is to effectively reach and cure the heart. The Talmud says it straight, “The Merciful One wants the heart.” Let us not make a mistake. Actions are required because they prove the sincerity of and directly inspire the heart. The heart cannot be conquered with passive thought alone. Dovid HaMelech was and is the most ideal teacher in both word and deed of that deepest lesson. In Dovid HaMelech each of us and all of us can find the wisdom and courage to straighten and strengthen our hearts and that’s the portrait of a real king.

Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah
via the Internet

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

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 intermarriage, conversion to Judaism, and the agricultural life in ancient Israel. The Rabbinic Sages ordained that we read this Scroll on Shavuot, 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 Shavuot 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 Shavuot). 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 Shavuot, 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 (Ruth 4:14-22), which specifically deal with the birth of Oved, son to Boaz and Ruth as well as

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 Zanzvil Tzvi),
on the fifth of Sivan

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 Shavuot 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 (Elimelekh) 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 Elimelekh 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" – Ruth 1:16), 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 Elimelekh. 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 (Ruth 3:3,4). 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 (see Genesis, chapter 38).

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 Elimelekh'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

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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 (Gen 12:1-3) – the Gentiles will certainly adopt our ethical outlook!

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

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. 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 Shavuot. 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, 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

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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.”

Dvar Torah

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Why is it important to enjoy the meal at a wedding? The Gemara in Berachot 6b tells us, “קַל הַנִּשְׁתֵּה מִסְעוּדַת הַתּוֹן... זֶזְבָּה לְתוֹרָה” – “whoever enjoys the meal at a wedding and makes the bride and groom happy... acquires Torah”. What is the source for this? In the biblical account of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai the term “קול- voice” is mentioned 5 times. Similarly in Jeremiah chapter 33 verse 11, with reference to a bride and groom that same word “קול” is mentioned five times. A beautiful teaching but does it actually make sense? I could have understood perhaps some

of the more spiritual elements of the wedding ceremony being linked to acquiring Torah but why the physical activity of eating the meal?

I'd like to suggest the following peirush: Here we find an outstanding example of that Torah-true character trait of empathy.

Anyone who has hosted a simcha, a wedding or bar or bat mitzvah knows how much effort goes into creating the menu. All the considerations relating to the options for the food, the financial investment, the tasting, etc. But it's a long run up for a short jump -after so many months of planning it's all over within a few hours. That is why it's so important that as guests at a wedding, if we enjoy the meal, we must let the hosts know that we appreciated their choice of food – that will give them so much encouragement and make them feel good. If you relate to others in this way you are showing you can be 'Zocher Latorah'. The reason is, that our consideration for others in our tradition is always seen as an integral part of the way in which we connect spiritually with our creator.

The previous Gerer Rebbe was once asked 'what should the name be for the Shabbat before Shavuot?' After all the Shabbat before Pesach is called Shabbat HaGadol. The Shabbat before Yom Kippur is Shabbat Shuva, so what about the Shabbat before Shavuot? In an instant he replied: It should be called 'Shabbat Derech Eretz' – the Shabbat of menchelechite, of being considerate, of being a decent human being -because the Mishna tells us 'Derech Eretz Kadma la'Torah' – 'being a good person precedes the Torah'. That is why the Shabbat before Shavuot should be 'Shabbat Derech Eretz'...

Let us take the very same message forward for all years to come and if indeed we show that beautiful empathy towards those living around us we will all be 'Zocher Latorah', we will have the privilege of embracing a Torah way of life.

May it be a shining light to guide us with meaning and joy throughout our lives.
[*excerpted*]

OTS Dvar Torah

Is Rut Really a Role Model?

By Rabbanit Dena Freundlich

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 chessed 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? Chessed, 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.[1] 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 תאמרר אעשה" – whatever you say, I will do? [2]

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[3]

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?

There are several possible answers. Sarah, the very student who proposed the question initially, herself suggested a particularly insightful one. She pointed out that the Megilla opens by highlighting its historical 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. The most oft-repeated phrase throughout Sefer Shoftim, the line that best encapsulates the era is "איש הישר בעיניו יעשה" – each person did whatever was right in his own eyes.[4] 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.

The Rambam writes in Hilchot De'ot 2:2 that the best method for an individual to correct a character flaw is to go to the opposite extreme. For example, if he suffers from arrogance,

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writes the Rambam, he "should sit in the least honorable seat and wear worn-out clothes which shame their wearer." The Rambam explicitly writes that he does not believe it is ideal to subject oneself to humiliation; he recommends it only as a temporary corrective for someone suffering from arrogance. He concludes, "So too should a person behave regarding all character traits. If he is on one extreme he should move to the opposite extreme and accustom himself to such behavior for a good while until he may return to the proper middle path."

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.[5] 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." [6]

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

A second approach was suggested to me by a wise mother-in-law,[7] 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 unswerving 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.[8] 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

This final approach goes in a completely different direction than either of the first two. It suggests that a close reading of the text of the Megilla reveals that 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 the following fascinating read: The most disturbing scene of the Megilla is Rut’s rendezvous with Boaz on his threshing floor. There are many troubling aspects[9] but for our purposes, the most problematic is Rut’s obedient acquiescence to be a pawn in such a potentially humiliating, degrading plot. Wouldn’t we want to teach our daughters and students to have the confidence and self-respect to resolutely refuse to participate in such a plan? How can we possibly view Rut as a heroine and role model?

What Micah pointed out is 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, first her own and then Boaz’s, with no agency of her own. Naomi directs her to bathe, anoint, dress attractively, descend to the threshing floor, lie down next to the satiated and perhaps inebriated Boaz, uncover his feet, and then await his instructions for what to do next. In other words, in Naomi’s plan, Rut is to pass directly from following her (Naomi’s) explicit, detailed instructions to following Boaz’s without a moment to think or act on her own. And Rut dutifully assents, “כל אשר תאמר” – all that you say I will do.[10]

Everything begins exactly according to plan. Pasuk 5 informs us, “ותעש ככל אשר ציתה המוטה” – Rut does everything that her mother-in-law commanded her. She goes down to Boaz’s threshing floor, uncovers his feet, and lies down beside him to await the unfolding of events. Boaz in fact awakens and is shocked to discover a woman at his feet. He inquires as to her identity, and Rut responds, “אנכי רוּת” – I am Rut your maidservant. What happens next is the critical turning point. According to Naomi’s plan, Rut ought to be silent at this point 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: “ופרשת כנפך על אמתך כי גואל אתה” – 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. [11] Just as Esther has her transformative moment in her Megilla when she ceases to follow everyone else’s commands[12] and pronounces one of her own,[13] 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 “ברוכה את לה’ בתי” – blessed are you to Hashem, my daughter. He then completes the role reversal by declaring that he will do all that Rut says – “כל אשר תאמרי אעשה” – “לך”, a remarkable turnaround from Naomi’s plan in which Rut was supposed to do all that Boaz instructed.[14] Even more striking is that these words echo almost verbatim the very language with which Rut initially expressed her submission to Naomi’s plan – “כל אשר” [15]. 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 - We have explored three different approaches to understanding why Rut’s seemingly self-effacing character is in fact a role model: that Rut was in fact overly meek but she was a role model and corrective for her specific era; that Rut’s blind faith in Naomi models for us the kind of deep trust and obedience we should strive to develop in our relationship with God (perhaps other trusted figures in our life as well); and that 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.

[1] הרצת וסכת ושמת שמלותיך עליך וירדת הגורן אל תודעני” (רות ג:ג-ד) לאיש... ושכבת והוא יגיד לך את אשר תעשין” (רות ג:ג-ד)

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[2] Rut 3:4

[3] In theory, another approach could suggest Rut is not meant to be a role model at all. Not every character who appears in Tanach is a hero meant to be emulated. However, to me it seems clear that she is portrayed as a positive character from whom we are supposed to learn how to behave ourselves in at least some way. After all, the Megilla ends by delineating the direct line of descent from Rut to King David.

[4] See for example Shoftim 17:6 and 21:25

[5] Naomi’s loss of identity is highlighted by her insisting on a name change for herself. As she and Rut are returning to Israel from the fields of Moav, Naomi tells the townspeople, “ותקראנה לי נעמי קראן” – Do not call me Naomi; call me “Bitterness (Mara)” for God has done bitter things to me. It is incredibly significant then that at the end of the Megilla (4:17), the townspeople proclaim that Rut’s baby should be to Naomi a “משיב נפש” – restorer of her spirit, and they (the women of the town) are the ones who bestow upon him a name, declaring that a son has been born to Naomi – “ותקראנה לו השכנות שם לאמר ילד בן לנעמי” – Through Rut and her son, Naomi’s spirit, her name, and her family line have been restored.

[6] Along similar lines, Dr. Yael Ziegler also posited that Rut’s historical context provides the key, but she focused on Rut as the prelude to the era of Kings, rather than as an antidote to the period of the Shoftim. She suggested that since monarchs are at such high risk of arrogance and utilizing their power to subjugate others, the Torah inserted the story of Rut immediately prior to the inception of that era as a powerful message to maintain humility and a deep sense of service to others.

[7] Mrs. Chani Poupko

[8] A quick Google search will reveal a multitude of different answers

[9] Such as: What was Naomi thinking in sending Rut out on such a mission? Does the Torah approve of using such methods? See Rav Mordechai Sabato’s article <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/night-threshing-floor-uncovering-motives-naomi-ruth-and-boaz>

[10] Rut 3:4

[11] The specific language that Rut employs amplifies the chutzpah thinly veiled in her request. In their first interaction, Boaz praises Rut for her devotion to Naomi and blesses her that she should be recompensed by God under whose wings she has sought refuge – “ישלם ה’ פעלך ותהי משכרתך שלמה מעם” – ה’ אלקי ישראל באת להסות תחת כנפיו” (ב:יב). In her transformational moment, Rut expresses her demand utilizing strikingly similar imagery – “ופרשת כנפך על” – “אמתך” – spread your wing over your maidservant. Her bold message seems to be, “If you really believe I am so praiseworthy, do not leave it to God to protect me under His Divine wings; take action yourself and protect me under yours!”

[12] Esther 2:10, 2:15, 2:20

[13] Esther 4:15-16

[14] Interestingly, Megillat Esther contains almost an identical role reversal. Initially, Esther does everything Mordechai commands her, even when she is queen of the land – “ואת מאמר מרדכי אסתר עשה כאשר” – “אסתר ב:כ)”. Yet, once Esther undergoes her transformation and issues a command to Mordechai, the Megilla relates: “ויעש ככל אשר ציתה” – Mordechai did everything Esther commanded him.

[15] Rut 3:4

Rabbi Yakov Haber: Thoughts on Shavuot, 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.[1] 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.[2] The Tochacha of parashas B'chukosai is read before Shavuot since this holiday is also considered a Rosh Hashana (Megilla 31b), 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 **מי אני ומה אני כלפי רבותי החשובים שלי"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. (Midrash Tehillim (Shochar Tov) 17)

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> 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, (Hoshei'a 3:5) "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. (Yalkut Shimoni, Shmuel 106 from Midrash Shmuel 13 with slight differences)

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 (see Yeshayahu 56:7). 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 been banned by many governments for a time and even where allowed was been 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.[3] 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 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.[4] 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

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the State of Israel has accomplished for the Jewish people,[5] 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.[6] 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 (see Megilla 29a based on Yechezkel 11:16). But here too, the ideal, glorious resting place for the Divine presence is the "bayis 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 Shavuot also contain these same themes.

An enlightening ruling stated in the Talmud Yerushalmi - actually relevant halachically in these past few months - 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 (Megilla 3:1 quoted in Beis Yosef 143) 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 (see Shulchan Aruch ibid.) 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!

[1] The idle banter of several across the world that this is just a case of world overreaction to a type of influenza does not in any way reflect the reality of what has actually happened.

[2] The very attempt at uncovering root causes for tragedy is reinforced by the oft-quoted powerful words of Rambam in hilchos Ta'aniyos. Those not possessing specialized ruach hakodesh cannot be certain that their assessment is correct, but it would appear that this does not exempt communal leaders from attempting such an analysis with all due disclaimers of possible error either made explicit or remaining implicit. In a carefully formulated statement by Rav Elyashiv zt"l and Rav Shteinman zt"l a number of years ago in calling for improvement in certain mitzvos during the Second Lebanon War, they wrote that they are not claiming to know that weakness in those areas caused the tzara, but nevertheless improvement in those areas will definitely lead to a bettering of the situation if not its elimination. It is with this spirit, I believe, that the words of our Rabbinic leaders are given and should be received.

[3] Also see Rav Chaim Jachter, "The Halachic Status of the State of Israel" available on koltorah.org.

[4] An oft-repeated phrase in the Israeli political scene is "מדינת החוק ולא מדינת הלכה". This tension most recently surfaced in barbs hurled between MK Smotrich and MK Lieberman.

[5] Just as one recent example, in this pandemic, Israel's governmental guidance saved countless lives.

[6] An apocryphal story circulating has one of the Gedolei Yisrael telling one of the prime ministers that he will "hand over the keys" to the melech hamashiach.