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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Bamidbar

You Are Not Everybody Else

“In the desert” (1:1)

It is the late 1800’s.

A simple farmer is tilling his field and then he hits the motherlode. Gold! And a lot of it.

A wealthy financier in the big city offers him a fortune for his field. The financier sends him a nice advance and asks to meet him at his office where they will close the deal. The big city is a two-week trip by horse from his village. But he’s heard of this newfangled invention called the train.

He goes to the central train station to buy a ticket. The lady behind the ticket counter asks him what type of ticket he wants: first, second or third class. She sees he’s not too sure, so she says, “Third class tickets get you a place on the train but nothing more. You may also have to stand for the entire trip. Second class guarantees a seat, but it costs more.” Giving him a quick once over, she figures that there’s no point in describing first class.

“And first class?” he inquires indignantly. Rolling her eyes, she explains the luxuries of first class travel. She concludes, “It’s only for the very, very wealthy.” Sensing her condescension, he juts out his chin and tells her, “First class for me!” and pays the exorbitant price.

The farmer heads for the platform as the train pulls into the station. It’s still early and most people haven’t arrived yet, but he notices some passengers boarding the very last car on the train. Not wanting to stick out, he follows them in. He sees them looking around furtively and then squeezing beneath the benches, so he does the same. He gets into a cozy position and in no time falls asleep.

The next thing he knows, he is being woken by a furious man who is kicking him and pulling him out from under the bench. Startled and disoriented, he stumbles to his feet and confronts his attacker. “Who are you?”

The man smirks, grabs his shirt, and speaks right into his face. "I am the conductor. That's who. And you, lowlife, are trying to hitch a free ride." "No, I'm not! I paid top dollar for this first class seat!" he responds, which elicits peals of laughter from the other passengers, who are relishing the free entertainment.

He starts fishing around in his pockets, and, to their utter surprise, pulls out, just as he said, a first class ticket. The conductor studies the ticket, realizes it is authentic, and then, speaking in the hushed tones reserved for the very wealthy, asks the farmer, "Sir. You have a first class ticket. Why were you under the bench?" The farmer's face flushes in embarrassment, "But that's what everybody else was doing?" To which the conductor tells him, "Sir, you are *not* everybody else."

In the Book of Devarim, the Torah is described as "a great sound that does not cease" (5:19). The Torah was given in a desert, and does not cease to be given in the desert. There are many kinds of desert. There are physical deserts and there are moral and spiritual deserts. We are living in a type of desert where the self-evident axioms of morality and decency are under constant and overwhelming onslaught. Our only salvation is to remember that "we are not everyone else." We are members of the greatest family in the world - the Jewish People.

We have a first class ticket that takes us where nobody else can go.

**Sources: Based on a story in Positive Vision by Rabbi Avrohom Neuberger*

SHAVOUT SPECIAL FEATURE

SHAVUOT AND THE SOUND FROM SILENCE

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

Have you noticed how the car radio usually comes on with the engine? Or the first thing you do after starting it up is to put on a CD? I never noted this until I recently read a psychologist's report saying that people need a certain amount of background noise to feel relaxed. The theme of the article was that more and more people are not comfortable being "alone." And it's not just in the car. It's at home, in the elevator and virtually everywhere. Everything is designed to protect us from being alone when no one else is around. The report presented data without answering the question of "Why?"

It seems that we are less and less at ease with ourselves. I found the article fascinating because discomfort with ourselves is the opposite of the Torah approach. The Torah teaches that in order to build a relationship with Hashem we must get to know ourselves. This requires introspection without any distractions. As a Chassidic rabbi put it, "Getting to know yourself better allows you to get to know the world better."

I wonder what conclusions the researcher would have drawn if he had spent time in a Synagogue. Daily we take time out from our decibel-laden lives to pray in near silence. At the most intense moment of our spiritual connection each of us is in a "cocoon of silence" - alone with Hashem. Silence is the tool for drawing ourselves closer to Hashem in this physical world.

Over 3,300 years ago, on the morning Hashem gave the Jewish People the Torah, the entire Creation was silent. All life forms were mute. The sea was completely still. Nothing moved. Not a sound. Pure silence.

And it was from this silence the Torah was given.

Imagine. Each Jew was forced to look into his heart and come to terms with himself without the aid of anything external. No mobile phones and not even a beeper. Just an old-fashioned heart. Because it is from the heart that a person defines what kind of relationship he wants with his Creator. The Midrash teaches that on Shavuot, the day that Hashem gave us the Torah, His voice reverberated with an intensity and a strength that had never before been revealed. That voice was so powerful that it penetrated into the heart of every single person standing at Sinai - and yet not a sound was heard. Hashem spoke to each heart in the most personal way. Each person was chosen by Hashem to become the recipient of the Torah, the greatest treasure in the world.

During the British Mandate, Rabbi A. I. Kook was forced to appear at a Royal Commission. The commission was convened to discuss why the Jews insisted on praying at the site of the destroyed Temple. Rabbi Kook was asked why the Jewish People make such a fuss over the Western Wall. "After all," drawled an English officer. "It is just a bunch of rocks one on top of the other." Rabbi Kook replied that "Just as there are hearts which are made of stone, so too there are stones which are made of heart."

Shavuot, the day the Torah was given, is the day when we can choose the nature of our hearts. Whether they will remain impervious and unresponsive to the silence. Dormant and rocklike. Or if our hearts will serve as the spiritual center of our being. Shavuot is the day that we decide if our hearts are going to listen to the silence and unite together with Hashem in genuine celebration.

The dictionary defines silence as being the absence of noise. Not so the Torah. The Torah defines silence as being the key to a positive and healthy relationship with Hashem.

PEREK SHIRA

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

THE SONG OF CREEPING CREATURES

Creeping Creatures say: "The Jewish People will rejoice in their Maker; the children of Zion will delight in their King!" (Tehillim 149:2)

"Creeping creatures" (sheratzim) refers to all low-crawling lifeforms, including rodents, lizards, turtles, and insects, which the Torah pronounces repulsive, impure, and forbidden for consumption. One of the reasons for this is that whatever a person absorbs into his body affects him, and thus, the consumption of creeping creatures would lower, contaminate, and ruin our souls.

Hashem declared, "Would it be that I raised the Jewish nation up from Egypt only so that they would not contaminate themselves with creeping creatures, it would have been enough for Me!" We may explain this as follows: The Torah compares our conduct as slaves in Egypt to that of creeping creatures, that is, lowly and impure. When Hashem raised us up from that lowly state, and gave us the Torah from the highest Heavens, He commanded us never again to eat creeping creatures, which would return us to our original lowly state. Hence, this mitzvah is so important that it justifies the entire Exodus. The creeping creatures thus sing that the Jewish People rejoice upon their Creator and delight upon their King for sanctifying them with His Divine mitzvahs and raising them not just about the level of slaves, but also far above all the other nations.

Hashem's mitzvahs were not designed to limit us, but rather to lift us up from the earthly pull of our bodies and of the world we live in. We thank Him for this with the blessings we recite before performing any mitzvah. When we rejoice over elevated status, which places all the impurities in this world far below our reach, we bring forth song from the countless multitudes of creeping creatures across the planet.

*Sources: Bava Metzia 61b; Ohr HaChaim to Vayikra 11:43; Seforno to Shemos 1:7; Likkutei Maamarim to Perek Shira

*In loving memory of Harav Zeev Shlomo ben Zecharia Leib

Q & A - Bamidbar

Questions

1. Why were the Jewish People counted so frequently?
2. What documents did the people bring when they were counted?
3. What determined the color of the tribal flags?
4. What is the difference between an "ot" and a "degel"?
5. How do we see that the Jews in the time of Moshe observed techum Shabbat - the prohibition against traveling more than 2,000 amot on Shabbat?
6. What was the signal for the camp to travel?
7. What was the sum total of the counting of the 12 tribes?
8. Why are Aharon's sons called "sons of Aharon and Moshe"?
9. Who was Nadav's oldest son?
10. Which two people from the Book of Esther does Rashi mention in this week's Parsha?
11. Why did the levi'im receive ma'aser rishon?
12. Which groups of people were counted from the age of one month?
13. Name the first descendant of Levi in history to be counted as an infant.
14. Who assisted Moshe in counting the levi'im?
15. Why did so many people from the tribe of Reuven support Korach in his campaign against Moshe?
16. Why did so many people from the tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun become great Torah scholars?
17. In verse 3:39 the Torah states that the total number of levi'im was 22,000. The actual number was 22,300. Why does the Torah seem to ignore 300 levi'im?
18. The firstborn males of the Jewish People were redeemed for five shekalim. Why five shekalim?
19. During what age-span is a man considered at his full strength?
20. As the camp was readying itself for travel, who was in charge of covering the vessels of the Mishkan in preparation for transport?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 1:1 - They are very dear to G-d.
2. 1:18 - They brought birth records.
3. 2:2 - Each tribe's flag was the color of that tribe's stone in the breastplate of the kohen gadol.
4. 2:2 - An "ot" is a flag, i.e. a colored cloth that hangs from a flagpole. A degel is a flagpole.
5. 2:2 - G-d commanded them to camp no more than 2,000 amot from the Ohel Moed. Had they camped farther, it would have been forbidden for them to go to the Ohel Moed on Shabbat.
6. 2:9 - The cloud over the Ohel Moed departed and the kohanim sounded the trumpets.
7. 2:32 - 603,550.
8. 3:1 - Since Moshe taught them Torah, it's as if he gave birth to them.
9. 3:4 - Nadav had no children.
10. 3:7 - Bigtan and Teresh.
11. 3:8 - Since the leviim served in the Mishkan in place of everyone else, they received tithes as "payment."
12. 3:15, 40 - The leviim, and the firstborn of Bnei Yisrael.
13. 3:15 - Levi's daughter Yocheved was born while the Jewish People were entering Egypt. She is counted as one of the 70 people who entered Egypt.
14. 3:16 G-d.
15. 3:29 - The tribe of Reuven was encamped near Korach, and were therefore influenced for the worse. This teaches that one should avoid living near the wicked.
16. 3:38 - The tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun were encamped near Moshe, and were therefore influenced for the good. This teaches that one should seek to live near the righteous.
17. 3:39 - Each levi served to redeem a first-born of the Jewish People. Since 300 leviim were themselves firstborn, they themselves needed to be redeemed, and could therefore not redeem others.
18. 3:46 - To atone for the sale of Yosef, Rachel's firstborn, who was sold by his brothers for five shekalim (20 pieces of silver.)
19. 4:2 - Between the ages of 30 and 50.
20. 4:5 - The Kohanim.

Questions

1. What is the significance of the number 8,580 in this week's Parsha?
2. Besides transporting the Mishkan, what other service performed by the Leviim is referred to in this Parsha?
3. On which day did Moshe teach the command to send those who are *temeim* (ritually impure) out of the camp?
4. Name the three camps in the desert.
5. Who was sent out of each of the camps?
6. A person stole from another and swore that he was innocent. If he later confesses his guilt, what are his obligations?
7. Who determines which *kohen* receives the gifts that must be given to the *kohanim*?
8. What does the Torah promise a person who gives *matnot kehuna*?
9. Why are the verses about *matnot kehuna* followed by the verses about the *sotah*?
10. Why is the *sotah* given water from the holy basin?
11. What does the *kohen* do to the hair of a *sotah*?
12. When a *sotah* who is guilty of adultery drinks the water, she dies in a very specific fashion. What happens to the adulterer?
13. Before the name of G-d is erased, the *sotah* has the option either to admit guilt or to drink the water. Does she have a third option?
14. What are *chartzanim*? What are *zagim*?
15. What sin does a *Nazir* commit against himself?
16. Where was the cut hair of a *Nazir* placed?
17. A *kohen* should bless the people "with a full heart". What word in the Parsha conveys this idea of "a full heart"?
18. What is the meaning of the blessing "May G-d bless you and guard you"?
19. What is the meaning of the blessing "May G-d lift up His countenance upon you"?
20. The Tribe of Yissachar was the second tribe to offer their gifts. Why did they merit this position?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 4:47-48 - It is the number of *leviim* between ages thirty and fifty.
2. 4:47 - Singing and playing cymbals and harps to accompany the sacrifices.
3. 5:2 - The day the Mishkan was erected.
4. 5:2 - The camp of the Shechina was in the center, surrounded by the camp of Levi which was surrounded by the camp of Yisrael.
5. 5:2 - A *metzora* was sent out of all three camps. A *zav* was permitted in the camp of Yisrael but excluded from the two inner camps. A person who was *tamei* from contact with the dead had to leave only the camp of the Shechina.
6. 5:6-8 - He pays the principle plus a fifth to the victim, and brings a *korban asham*.
7. 5:10 - The giver.
8. 5:10 - Great wealth.
9. 5:12 - To teach that someone who withholds the gifts due the *kohanim* may eventually bring his wife to the *kohanim* to be tried as a *sotah*.
10. 5:17 - The holy basin was made from the mirrors of the righteous women who left Egypt; the *sotah* strayed from the example set by these women.
11. 5:18 - He uncovers it.
12. 5:22 - He dies a similar death.
13. 5:27 - Yes, she can refuse both: She can refuse to admit guilt and also refuse to drink the water. (After the Name of G-d is erased, she loses this option.)
14. 6:4 - *Chartzanim* are seeds. *Zagim* are peels.
15. 6:11 - He abstains from enjoying wine.
16. 6:18 - It was placed on the fire under the pot in which the *nazir's shelamim* offering was cooked.
17. 6:23 - "Amor."
18. 6:24 - "May G-d bless you" that your property may increase, "and guard you" from robbery.
19. 6:26 - "May He suppress His anger."
20. 7:18 - The Tribe of Yissachar was well versed in Torah. Also, they proposed the idea **that** the *nesiim* should offer gifts.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

KIDDUSH (Part 3) – Unity Through Separation

“Although you may enjoy the rest and the tranquility of Shabbat, have in mind that you are not observing the day for your own pleasure; rather to honor the One who commanded you to do so.”

Sefat Emet (Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter)

Kiddush continues: “Blessed are you, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who creates the fruit of the vine” – “... *Borei Pri HaGefen.*”

The blessing over wine is intriguing. When we eat fruit, including grapes, we recite the blessing end with “Borei Pri haEitz – Who creates the fruit of the trees.” When the fruit is turned into fruit juice, we recite the blessing that ends “Shehakol Nihayah Bidvaro – that everything came into being through His [Hashem’s] words.” Yet, when we make a blessing over wine or pure grape juice, we do not say “Shehakol.” Rather, we recite a blessing that is designed specifically for wine, “Borei Pri haGefen – Who creates the fruit of the vine.” This is as our Sages teach (Brachot 35a), “In which way does one recite the blessing over the fruits? On the fruits of the tree, one says Borei Pri haEitz, except for wine. On wine, one says Borei Pri haGefen.”

What is it about wine that moved our Sages to give it its own unique blessing? Rashi (ibid.) says the reason is because of its inherent importance. But, how is wine superior to other beverages? The Rabbis teach that wine has two factors that gives it significance over other drinks. The first is that wine leaves a person feeling satiated. The second reason is that drinking wine brings joy to the person. According to our Sages, these two reasons are enough for wine to warrant its own special blessing. As King David writes in Tehillim (104:15), “Wine gladdens a person’s heart.” Rabbi David Kimche, in his commentary on Nach explains that when wine is drunk in moderation, it gladdens the heart and dispels sadness. Even more than that, Rabbi Kimche writes that wine can enhance a person’s intellect, and, in Biblical times, wine was sometimes used to help a prophet be in the correct frame of mind to receive prophecy from Hashem.

In the same way, Rabbi Kimche explains the verse in Shoftim (9:13): “But the grapevine said to them, ‘Shall I give up my vintage that gladdens Hashem and men?’” He writes, “That honorable and respectable people use wine to enhance their spiritual connection.” This is why the verse states that wine brings joy to both Hashem, by being offered in the Tabernacle, and to people.” Such is the potential of wine, that when it is used for holy purposes, such as to celebrate Shabbat, it “gladdens Hashem.”

This unique dimension of wine – the joy it brings to those who drink it and the way it enhances the sanctity of Shabbat and Yom Tov – is why it has its own distinct blessing. And this is also why wine was offered up as a libation on the Altar in the Holy Temple, and why wine is found in conjunction with so many other holy ceremonies.

Perhaps this helps explain why the cup that the wine is poured into is referred to as “kos shel bracha – a cup of blessing”. Not just because we make a blessing over it, but because the wine it holds can help bring blessings into our lives.

To be continued...

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Shavuot: Just Say No

Jewish tradition recognizes that the Torah given at Mount Sinai consists of six-hundred and thirteen commandments. Of those, it is generally understood that 248 commandments can be classified as “positive commandments” (“thou shalt...”) that generally require a person to go out and actively do something, while the other 365 are labelled “negative commandments” (“thou shalt not...”) that typically demand that a person refrain from performing certain actions. Negative commandments in the Torah can usually be identified by the use of the terms *lo* or *al* (“no/not/without”). For example, the final five commandments of the Ten Commandments are *lo tirtzach* (“do not murder”), *lo tinaf* (“do not philander”), *lo tignov* (“do not kidnap”), *lo taaneh* (“do not afflict [others by giving false testament]”), and *lo tachmod* (“do not desire”). In all these cases, the Torah uses the word *lo* to denote that a certain proscribed action may not be performed. Yet, when rabbinic sources refer to the same prohibitions that appear in the Torah, the rabbis use the word *bal* instead of *lo/al*. In this essay, we will consider whether the word *bal* is a true synonym to *lo* and *al*, or in a nuanced way expresses something slightly different from the terminology used in the Torah.

To give more concrete examples of the phenomenon described in the previous paragraph, we can look at various prohibitions in the Torah wherein the Torah uses the word *lo* when mentioning a proscribed act, whereas the rabbis instead use the word *bal*: For example, the Biblical phrase *lo tashchit* (Deut. 20:19) becomes *bal tashchit* in rabbinic sources (*Bikkurim* 4:2, *Kiddushin* 1:7), with the word *bal* replacing the word *lo*. Similarly, *lo tossif* (Deut. 13:1) becomes *bal tossif* (*Zevachim* 8:10), *lo tishaktzu* (Lev. 20:25) becomes *bal tishaktzu* (*Shabbat* 90b, *Makkot* 16b, *Meilah* 17a), *lo ye'raeh* (Ex. 13:7) becomes *bal ye'raeh* (*Pesachim* 3:3, 9:3), *lo yimatze* (Ex. 12:19) becomes *bal yimatze* (*Pesachim* there), and so forth. Essentially, as we will see, in Mishnaic Hebrew, *bal* is used in an abstract sense to refer to a specific prohibition already outlawed by the use of *lo/al* in the Torah.

The truth is that the word *bal* is not a rabbinic neologism, it already appears in the Bible itself – close to seventy times, in fact. These Biblical appearances of the Hebrew word *bal* are concentrated in four books of the Bible: Isaiah, Psalms, Proverbs, and Hosea (with one more instance in Iyov 41:15 and one more in I Chron. 16:30). Essentially, this means that while the word *bal* appears in the Bible, it does not appear in the Torah (Pentateuch) or, in fact, in most books of the Bible. In case it was not clear to the reader, Rashi (to Isa. 26:10) clarifies that the Biblical *bal* means the same thing as *lo*, as does *Machberet Menachem* when explaining the first category of words derived from the biliteral root BET-LAMMED.

That said, in most of its Biblical appearances, the word *bal* does not intend to convey a prohibition, but simply relates a fact that something *does not* happen or *cannot* happen. For example, Psalms praises Hashem by saying “He even prepared the world [in a way that] it will not (*bal*) falter” (Ps. 93:1, 96:10) and Proverbs praises the righteous man by saying that he “does not (*bal*) slip” (Prov. 10:30, 12:3).

Nevertheless, there are cases where the Bible uses the word *bal* in stating a historical fact, but the rabbis – who use the word *bal* for talking about prohibitions – used their exegetical prowess to give a proscriptive dimension to those historical facts. For example: “He told His words to Jacob / His statues and His laws to Israel / He did not do so for all the nations / And laws He did not (*bal*) make them know / Hallelujah!” (Ps. 147:19). This passage is clearly talking about the historical fact that Hashem revealed the Torah to the Jewish People at Mount Sinai, and that He did not offer a similar revelation to teach the Law to other nations. But possibly because of the word *bal*, the rabbis saw this passage as instructive, not merely historical, and therefore derived from it: “we do not transmit Words of Torah to gentiles” (*Chagigah* 13a). They thus took the word *bal* in this passage in the same sense that they themselves used the word *bal*, that is, to prohibit certain courses of action.

**To find how why did the rabbis would prefer using the word *bal* when discussing Biblical prohibitions instead of using the Bible’s own wording of *lo*, check out the rest of this article online at:
http://ohr.edu/this_week/whats_in_a_word/

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Bamidbar

The Book of Bamidbar – "In the desert" – begins with Hashem commanding Moshe to take a census of all men over age twenty – old enough for service. The count reveals just over 600,000. The *levi'im* are counted separately later on because their service will be unique. They will be responsible for transporting the Mishkan and its furnishings, and assembling them when the nation encamps. The 12 Tribes of Israel, each with its banner, are arranged around the Mishkan in four sections: east, south, west and north. Since Levi is singled out, the tribe of Yosef is split into two tribes, Efraim and Menashe, so there will be four groups of three. When the nation travels, they march in a formation similar to the way they camp.

A formal transfer is made between the first-born and the *levi'im*, whereby the *levi'im* take over the role the first-born would have had serving in the Mishkan if not for the sin of the golden calf. The transfer is made using all the 22,000 surveyed *levi'im* from one month old and up. Only *levi'im* between 30 and 50 will work in the Mishkan. The remaining first-born sons are redeemed with silver, similar to the way we redeem our first-born today. The sons of Levi are divided into the three main families of Gershon, Kehat and Merari (besides the *kohanim* – the special division from Kehat's family). The family of Kehat carried the Menorah, the Table, the Altar and the Holy Ark. Because of their utmost sanctity, the Ark and the Altar are covered only by Aharon and his sons, before the *levi'im* prepare them for travel.

Naso

The Torah assigns the exact Mishkan-related tasks to be performed by the families of Gershon, Kehat, and Merari, the sons of Levi. A census reveals that over 8,000 men are ready for such service. All those ritually impure are to be sent out of the encampments.

If a person, after having sworn in court to the contrary, confesses that he wrongfully retained his neighbor's property, he has to pay an additional fifth of the base-price of the object and bring a guilt offering as atonement. If the claimant has already passed away without heirs, the payments are made to a *kohen*.

In certain circumstances, a husband who suspects that his wife had been unfaithful brings her to the Temple. A *kohen* prepares a drink of water mixed with dust from the Temple floor and a special ink that was used for inscribing G-d's Name on a piece of parchment. If she is innocent, the potion does not harm her, but, rather, it brings her a blessing of children. If she is guilty, she suffers a supernatural death.

A *Nazir* is one who vows to dedicate himself to G-d for a specific period of time. He must abstain from all grape products, grow his hair and avoid contact with corpses. At the end of this period he shaves his head and brings special offerings. The *kohanim* are commanded to bless the people. The Mishkan is completed and dedicated on the first day of Nissan in the second year after the Exodus. The prince of each tribe makes a communal gift to help transport the Mishkan, as well as donating identical individual gifts of gold, silver, animal and meal offerings.

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Shavuot and Torah Study

Learning Torah Together

“Take care to learn Torah only together with other people in a group.”

This is an important message that the Sages of Bavel sent to the Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael at that time. By learning Torah with the others, the members of the group help “sharpen” each other in understanding the Torah. This applies to both the students and the Rabbi who teaches them. (Rashi & Rabbeinu Nissim)

**Nedarim 81a*

Torah Study and Children of the Poor

“Pay special heed to the children of the poor because Torah will come forth from them.”

This was another important message sent to the Sages of Bavel to Eretz Yisrael, and is supported by a verse in the Torah (Bamidbar 24:7), as is explained in the gemara.

Is there a logical basis to explain why poverty should be an indication of great potential for success in Torah study? Yes. One reason is that the students will not be preoccupied with wealth or lofty, pressing careers, and therefore they will not be distracted from dedicating their time and thoughts to Torah study. Another reason is that poverty is humbling, and humility is essential for being successful in learning Torah. (Rabbeinu Nissim)

**Nedarim 81a*

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LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Herschman

Bamidbar: Diversity and Unity

The opening command of this fourth book of the Torah, Bamidbar, is to take a census of the nation as an eidah, a community united by a common calling. The counting of individuals conveys that every individual personally 'counts' as an important member of the community, and that the communal mission may be accomplished only when each member devotes himself to it. The manner of counting was by donation of a half-shekel, and the total sum collected was used for the upkeep of the Sanctuary. The message in this mode of counting is that every Jew is counted and valued only on the basis of his commitment to the Torah; the census is taken in the service of the Sanctuary.

This eidah community of the Children of Israel is counted in their subgroups – according to their families, which in turn comprise their tribes. The tribes are called matot, literally branches, on account of their one common stem, and they are also called beit avot on account of the numerous families in each tribe.

This is the uniqueness of the Jewish nation: the nation as a whole is considered one house, the House of Israel, and its members are called the children of one man, the Children of Israel. Our myriads descend from one man – our forefather Yisrael. And although multitudinous and even diverse, not a single member is left without the impression of the same stamp, the stamp that bears throughout the ages our heritage of one mission and one destiny.

Amidst this fundamental unity, the counting also emphasizes the diversity of qualities unique to the tribes and families of Israel. This diversity is nurtured and preserved as much as is the unity of mission. Indeed, the unified mission can be accomplished only when diversity is embraced, and the special character traits, variety of professions and positions in life, are given their full expression, and passed on to the next generation. This is why the hundreds of thousands of members of the Children of Israel do not come to the nation as unorganized multitudes, but rather according to their families, according to their father's heads (tribes), by name. The sum here is a sum only of its parts – each indispensable part with a name, a family and a tribe.

**Sources: Commentary, Bamidbar 1:2*

Q & A – Megillat Ruth

Questions:

1. Who wrote the Book of Ruth?
2. During which historical period did the events of the Megillah of Ruth occur?
3. Who was Naomi's husband?
4. After she returned from Moav, by what name did Naomi ask to be called?
5. How was Boaz related to Naomi?
6. Into what did Boaz tell Ruth to dip her bread?
7. Why is Elimelech's brother referred to as Ploni Almoni and not by his real name?
8. With what object did Boaz redeem Elimelech's property?
9. The people and the elders blessed Ruth that she should be like whom?
10. What was Ruth's relationship to King David?

Answers

1. The Prophet Samuel (Bava Batra 14b).
2. During the era of the Shoftim, the Judges. Boaz was the shofet at the time (1:1).
3. Elimelech. (1:2).
4. Mara (1:20).
5. He was her husband's brother's son. (2:1, Rashi).
6. Vinegar (2:14).
7. Since he didn't want to redeem his brother's property and thereby discharge his family duty (Rashi 4:1).
8. With a shoe (according to the Targum, a glove) (4:8).
9. Like Rachel and Leah (4:11).
10. She was his great-grandmother: Ruth, Oved, Yishai, David (4:22).

I Did Not Know That!

There is a custom to eat "milchigs" on Shavuot. Pharaoh's daughter drew Moshe out of the water on the 6th of Sivan, and he was willing to be nursed only by a Hebrew woman. Therefore, we recall Moshe's merit on Shavuot by eating milk foods. Furthermore, the numerical values of the letters of the Hebrew word chalav (milk) add up to 40, corresponding to the 40 days Moshe spent on Mount Sinai.

*Sefer Matamim, Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropol

There are seven reasons why we read the Megillah of Ruth on Shavuot:

1. The events occurred during the harvest season. Shavuot is the harvest festival.
2. Ruth was a convert to Judaism. Conversion is an individual Kabbalat HaTorah.
3. Ruth the Moabite was permitted to marry Boaz, based on the drasha (a teaching of the Oral Law) of the verse, "A Moabite may not marry into the Congregation of Hashem" (Devarim 23:4). This hints at the unity between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.
4. King David was born on Shavuot. The Megillah of Ruth concludes with David's lineage.
5. To teach the greatness of gemillut chassadim - acts of loving-kindness.
6. To teach that the Torah is acquired only through affliction and poverty.
7. The name "Ruth" has the numerical value of 606. At Mount Sinai, the Jewish People accepted 606 mitzvahs in addition to the 7 Noachide Laws that were already incumbent upon them.

