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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Bamidbar The Power of Faith

“...in the desert...”

At the beginning of the founding of the State of Israel, living here was like living in a desert.

This is a story I heard from my *mechutan*, Rabbi Michoel Bachar:

When my parents arrived in Eretz Yisrael, they settled near Binyamina. This was about 75 years ago. It was a difficult time in Eretz Yisrael. It was after the war. My father, who fought for the British, was wounded in the war. It was the time of the *tzena* – there was almost nothing to eat. My father bought a donkey and a plow and hired himself out. Him and the donkey. Furrow after furrow. It was very hard work.

My mother learned to sew and worked as a seamstress - and that's how they make a living. It wasn't a high standard of life but enough for them to be able to survive.

And that's how the years passed. Slowly they saved some money and decided that they would plant a vineyard. The soil was heavy and ideal for growing grapes. This is a part of Eretz Yisrael where the vines of the Land of Israel grow well.

My father went to one of his army friends and bought seedlings from him, and planted his own vineyard. According to halacha, you have to wait 4 years before you can enjoy the fruits of the vine. For the first three years, the grapes are Orlah and forbidden to have benefit from them, and then they are Kerem Revai.

As the vines developed, he hoisted them onto trellises, and separated the seedlings so each and every seedling would have its own space to grow. Then he stuck poles in the ground, and cross beams through which he threaded thick wire for the vineyard to grow. And the vines grew thick, covering the wires and even the poles.

We waited.

In the fourth year, the grapes looked really luscious. He couldn't wait to harvest them. One morning, he woke up to see that all the grapes had fallen off the vines and were lying on the ground. He was heartbroken. He went to mother and she said, "Don't worry! The vines were probably too young and not strong enough. We've waited four years - we can wait five."

The next year came, and exactly the same thing happened.

Father said, "Mother, this isn't working. Let's move." She said, "No. It must be that the vines weren't strong enough yet. We'll wait another year. Don't worry. Don't panic. It's not easy but," she pointed to Heaven, "it's going to be fine."

The following year, the harvest season was approaching, and my father went out to the vineyard. Again, all the grapes had fallen from the vine.

My father said to my mother, "What now? What are we going to do?"

She said, "Go and speak to an agricultural expert, and see what he says."

My father brought in a specialist. He walked around the vineyard, looking at everything. He took away some samples. About a week later, he came back and said to my father, "You're going to have to pull up the entire vineyard."

“But why?” exclaimed my father. The agronomist explained that this was an unusual type of vine which was not hermaphroditic. Most grapevines contain both male and female parts within the same flower, but these vines don’t have the female parts. Just before as they ripen, they fall from the trees. “It’s not a vineyard.” He said.

My father went to my mother and told her. “Uproot the vineyard?” she said. “Seven years we’ve waited for this vineyard. Seven years. It’s not possible that HaKadosh Baruch Hu would do such a thing to us. What will we do? We will wait. We believe in Him. We will wait.”

The area in which we lived had many springs. Not more than a half a year had passed when it was announced that Mekorot, the Israeli Water Authority was going to channel all these springs into a large reservoir near Pardes Chana. They were going to build a large overland aqueduct through the area. All of the local farmers wanted the aqueduct to pass through their land because they would receive very generous compensation.

My father wanted to go and argue and put in a claim for his land, but my mother said, “You’re not built for that.” She pointed her finger to Heaven. “Let’s wait and see.”

Mekorot took many parts of our neighbors’ property, but when it came to my parents, they wanted the whole thing. Every single square inch.

They gave us an enormous sum of money. And with that, my father bought a tractor and forty dunam of land – nearly ten acres. That’s about the size of five city blocks.

That’s the power of faith. That’s the power of trusting in Hashem.

**The Ohr Somayach Family wishes all our students,
alumni and friends a *Chag Somyach*.**

**With heartfelt tefillos for the return of the hostages, the
protection of our chayalim, and the safety of all of Klal
Yisrael.**

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

Bamidbar and Chag HaShavuot Masechet Shavuot 30-36

Power of Attorney

“And he did among his people that which is not good” (Yechezkel 18:18) — Rav said, “This refers to a person who comes (to court) with power-of-attorney.”

The verse is speaking about a person being punished for his own transgressions, and not those of his ancestors. The Maharsha explains that the context of the verse is about monetary claims made between close family members — such as between a father and son, or between brothers — and there is likely a great temptation to appoint a third party to press the claim in court in order to avoid embarrassment and lack of family harmony.

However, explains the Maharsha, this is “not good” since if the actual litigant would be present in court to put forward his claim, it is possible that a harmonious compromise would be reached. Or, better yet, it is possible that the claimant would forgo the debt and stop pursuing his claim. The Maharsha sees a hint to this idea in the *repetition* of the words for the monetary transgressions mentioned in the verse, suggesting that the one making a claim might realize that he too is guilty of the same transgression in the other direction, and therefore drop his claim altogether. Introducing a non-litigant to represent one of the parties makes the possibility of complete or partial compromise virtually impossible, since this “outsider” with power of attorney needs to be rigid in his ways in order to fairly represent the one who appointed him.

There are other reasons taught as halacha for a power of attorney to be “not good”. One case is if both litigants live in the same city and can therefore be in attendance — so why should a person who is not a litigant come with a power of attorney to inject himself into a dispute that is not his business? However, if the defendant is in a different city, or is a “bully” who will intimidate the lender trying to retrieve his loan or monetary claim — it is a mitzvah for a person to act with a power of attorney to help the claimant receive just treatment and compensation. (See Aruch Hashulchan, *Choshen Mishpat* 123, who discusses this subject in greater detail.)

▪ *Shavuot 31a*

Questions - Shavuot

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 Shavuot

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 dairy 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

The Scroll of Ruth and Seven Reasons

Here 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 *Kabbalas HaTorah*.
3. Ruth the Moabite was permitted to marry Boaz, based on a *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. David Hamelech was born on Shavuot. The Megillah of Ruth concludes with David's lineage.
5. To teach the greatness of *gemillus 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 *Har Sinai* the Jewish People accepted 606 *mitzvos*, in addition to the 7 Noachide Laws which were incumbent upon them already.

The Secret of *Sefiras Ha'Omer*

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

Klal Yisrael is currently nearing the end of the *Sefiras Ha'Omer* – the fifty-day period where we daily (or more accurately, nightly) count the days and weeks from the second day of Pesach, when the *Korban Omer*, a special annual barley offering was offered in the *Beis Hamikdash*, until the holiday of Shavuos, which commemorates the most pivotal event in Jewish history, *Mattan Torah*, our receiving of the Torah. This practice is actually instructed by the Torah (*Parashas Emor*, *Vayikra* Ch. 23:15; see also *Devarim* Ch. 15:9): “*U’sefartem Lachem*” – to count these specific days and weeks leading up to Shavuos (See Gemara *Menachos* 66a. Most authorities maintain that with the *Beis Hamikdash* unfortunately not extant, it currently is a Rabbinic *Mitzvah*).

The *Sefer Hachinuch* (*Mitzvah* 306) elucidates that although the holiday of Pesach commemorates the Jewish people’s redemption from slavery, the zenith, as well as the *raison d’être* of this freedom, only occurred on Shavuos, fifty days later, with *Klal Yisrael*’s acceptance of the Torah. Hence, we count down the days and weeks from the time when a familial group of slaves first tasted freedom, to showcase the inherent significance of its culmination, when a unified people received the Torah.

However, this notable explanation leads to several questions. First of all, why would we count specifically from the offering of the *Korban Omer*, which as mentioned previously, is a meal-offering of ground barley? Moreover, the *Korban ‘Omer’* itself seems to be a misnomer. All other *Korbanos* are descriptive of the type of offering they are or are intended for – i.e., *Korban Pesach*, *Korban Bikkurim*, *Korban Chatas*. But an *Omer* is actually just a basic measurement – a dry measure containing the volume of 43.2 average eggs. Why is this *Korban* named for a measurement? Furthermore, why would a daily *Mitzvah* of counting down seven weeks to Shavuos be specifically tied to this *Korban*?

Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865), famed Rav of Konigsberg, Prussia in the 19th century, in his classic *sefer*, *Haksav V'Kabbalah* (*Vayikra* Ch. 23:11), addresses these concerns, offering a remarkable insight. He proposes that the *Korban 'Omer'* is not only named for the measure of barley it consists of, but rather has an alternate meaning as well, that of '*Tashmish Ha'Avodah*' (loosely translated as 'subservience'). Citing precedent from the term '*Vehisamer Bo*' (*Devarim* Ch. 24:7), referring to one who subjugates another, he explains that this is the underlying theme of this special period of time.

The days between Pesach and Shavuot commemorate our becoming a people in the service of Hashem. Hence, by noting and counting these days, we are effectively measuring, fine-tuning, and improving the quality of our service, "*lehachin levaveinu lehiskadeish u'lehistaher yom yom b'yomim eilu*," – preparing our hearts to sanctify and purify ourselves on a daily basis. Accordingly, when we count "today is such and such of the *Omer*," we are essentially thanking Hashem for the days past that denote the time of our freedom from slavery, as well as for the ability to focus our hearts and minds in His service, gradually refining and bettering ourselves, ultimately reaching the pinnacle of the '*Avodah Hatachlitis*' on *Yom Mattan Torah*, the holiday of Shavuot, when we received the Torah.

To sum up the matter, counting *Sefiras Ha'Omer* in the days and weeks leading up to Shavuot is not only about counting the days, but rather to make sure the days count.

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Q & A

Questions Bamidbar

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 Bamidbar

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

BAMIDBAR & SHAVUOT KRIAT SHEMA AL HAMITAH (PART 14)

Kriat Shema al Hamitah continues: “Lay us down to sleep in peace, Hashem, our G-d; and awaken us to life, our King. Spread over us the shelter of Your peace. Guide us with good counsel from before Your presence and save us for Your Name’s sake. Shield us, remove from us enemies, plague, sword, famine and sorrow. Remove the evil forces that are in front of us and behind us, and shelter us in the shadow of Your wings. Because You are G-d, Who guards us and delivers us. You are G-d, Who is the merciful and compassionate King. Protect our going and our coming, for life and peace, now and always.”

Our Tefillah appears in Kriat Shema al Hamitah mainly because of the first verse, “Lay us down to sleep in peace, Hashem, our G-d; and awaken us to life, our King.” When a person goes to sleep at night worrying about the things that are happening in their life, it has a negative impact on the quality of their sleep. Therefore, we ask Hashem to bless us with a peaceful night’s sleep.

The Midrash (Tehillim 86), in explaining the phrase, “Spread over us the shelter of Your peace,” writes that when we go to sleep we are not protected by the Mitzvah of Tzitzit because there is no Torah obligation to wear Tzitzit at night. Consequently, we ask Hashem to “spread over us” His protection instead.

This is why the general theme of our Tefillah is *bitachon*, trust in Hashem. It is not always easy to remember that Hashem watches over us at all times. But, however difficult it is, it is a concept that needs to be internalized. And while it is true that worry is a natural and a normative reaction to disturbing occurrences in our lives, it is equally true that worrying very rarely helps. I once saw a somewhat thought-provoking quote that read: “Why worry? If there is something that you can do about the problem, then do it. If there is nothing that you can do, what good will worrying do?”

The Hebrew word for worry is *‘da’agah*.’ It is spelled: *‘dalet’ ‘aleph’ ‘gimmel’ ‘heh,’* which are four of the first five letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The only letter missing is the letter *‘bet,’* the second letter of the Aleph-Bet. The Rabbis explain that the letter *‘bet’* symbolizes the concept of *‘bitachon.’* When one has *‘bitachon’* in Hashem, there is no room for *‘da’agah.’*

The Kotzker Rebbe used to say, “It’s a good thing that worrying doesn’t accomplish anything. People are always worried and constantly anxious, although they know that their worries don’t help them. Imagine, if worrying would accomplish something, people would be ten times more worried than they already are!”

The second Rebbe of Bobov, Rabbi Ben Zion Halberstam (1874-1941) – Hashem should avenge his death – was murdered by the accursed Nazis. Until his death he led his Chassidim with great piety and was renowned for his caring and concern for all. In a letter to one of his followers who was struggling to make a livelihood, he wrote, “If it were not that we are obligated to put our own individual effort into everything we do [what is known as *‘hishtadlut’*], it would be forbidden to do so. So, we must do *‘hishtadlut,’* but who permitted you to worry?”

In conclusion there is a delightful story told about Rabbi Avraham Genichovsky (1936-2013). Rabbi Genichovsky was the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Tchebin in Yerushalayim. He was an exceptionally brilliant Talmud scholar and was careful to write all of his novel Torah thoughts into notebooks. Once, there was a fire in the building where Rabbi Genichovsky lived. People saw him standing outside the building, but, surprisingly, he did not appear to be worried despite the fact that there were more than a thousand of his precious notebooks in his apartment. When they asked him why he wasn’t worried when there was a chance that his unique Torah thoughts might all go up in flames, he answered them, “There is only one day a week a person should be *‘beda’agah’* – on Erev Shabbat. The Rema (*Orach Chaim* 260:1) writes that when one cuts their fingernails of their right hand in honor of Shabbat, they should cut them in the order of *‘beda’agah’* – *‘bet’* being the second finger, *‘daled’* the fourth finger, *‘aleph’* the thumb, *‘gimmel’* the third finger, and *‘heh’* the fifth finger.”

Said Rabbi Genichovsky with a smile, “That is the only place where a Jew should have *‘da’agah’!*”

To be continued...

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Bamidbar/Shavuot: Coincidence or Happenstance? (Part 1/2)

In a Biblical passage that the Talmud (*Megillah* 31b) ordains ought to be read immediately before the holiday of Shavuot, the Torah foretells of a whole set of horrible ordeals that are the lot of those who fail to uphold the Law (Lev. 26:14–46). A recurring theme within that pericope of rebuke is the notion that if man serves Hashem flippantly or haphazardly, then Hashem too will deal with man in an offhand, dismissive way such that without Divine protection, all sorts of calamities may befall him. The term used to refer to this “flippancy/randomness” is *keri* (Lev. 26:21, 26:23, 26:24, 26:27–28, 26:40–41). That term (which appears nowhere else in the entire Bible) literally means “occurrence/incident,” with the implication of that happening not being premeditated, but instead transpiring almost randomly. In this essay we seek a deeper understanding of the word *keri* and its apparent synonyms, *te'unah* and *i'rua*.

The root of the word *keri* is KUF-REISH-(HEY/ALEPH). Readers might be familiar with other declensions of that root, like *mikreh* (“occurrence”), or the word *koreh* as in the phrase *mah koreh* (“what is happening?”). The word *mikreh* appears in the Bible in several cases to mean a “random happening.” For example, when the Philistines were Divinely punished after capturing the Ark of the Covenant, they wanted to run an experiment to determine whether those calamities were really a punishment from Hashem or were simply a *mikreh* (I Sam. 6:9). Likewise, King Solomon cynically writes: “For the *mikreh* of mankind and the *mikreh* of animalkind — there is one *mikreh* for them, the death of this one is just like the death of this one” (Ecc. 3:19), and again he later writes: “There is one *mikreh* for the righteous and for the wicked... there is one *mikreh* for all” (Ecc. 9:2–3). The upshot of King Solomon’s statement is that since everything is Divinely pre-ordained, it is hopeless to try to escape one’s fate.

In Mishnaic Hebrew, the term *keri* assumes a very specific meaning in reference to a man who had a seminal emission (*Brachot* 3:4-6, *Terumot* 1:6, *Avodah Zarah* 3:4, *Avot* 5:5, *Tamid* 1:1, *Middot* 1:9, *Keilim* 1:5, *Mikvaot* 3:4, 8:4, *Niddah* 5:1, *Zavim* 1:1-2, 2:3). This follows the general practice of the Hebrew Language of refraining from explicitly referring to matters related to sexuality and instead referring to them euphemistically. In this case, such a seminal emission is simply referred to as “an incident.” This rabbinic usage of the term *keri* actually has precedent in the Biblical usage of the word *mikreh* (Deut. 23:11, I Sam. 20:26) in reference to an occurrence related to ritual impurity.

In his work *Cheshek Shlomo*, Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim offers an extended discussion of the biliteral root KUF-REISH, whose core meaning he sees as related to a “strong impact.” He lists many different words as deriving from this root, with one group of words referring to a physical point of impact/stress: *korah* (“wooden beam”) and *tikrah* (“ceiling”), on account of the fact that these horizontal beams’ weight comprise the ceiling weigh down on a building’s support creating a point of “impact”; *kir* (“wall”), because vertically-positioned beams bear the weight of a structure; *kiryah* (“city”), because such urban settings are comprised of multiple walled structures; *kurei* (“spider web”), because it is a wall-like structure used for capturing small insects; and *krum* (“covering”) because that ceiling-like membrane covers one’s internal organs. Likewise, Rabbi Pappenheim sees *kor/kar* (“coldness/cold”) as derived from this root because homeostasis ensures that the body remains warm in a way that encountering something cold causes a clash of differing temperatures, which results in a “strong impact.”

Given this rubric, Rabbi Pappenheim explains the word *mikreh* in the sense of an “occurrence” or “happenstance” as referring to the sudden, unanticipated collision of a person and a new set of circumstances. For example, when Hashem speaks to Balaam, Balaam had not prepared himself for his prophetic experience, thus the word *vayikar* (Num. 23:4, 23:16) is used to denote Hashem speaking to him “out of the blue.” Similarly, when Jacob is scared that an accident might befall his son Benjamin if Benjamin is allowed to descend to Egypt with his brothers, the word *karahu* is used to denote the accident “happening” (Gen. 42:38, 44:29). Likewise, the Bible uses the word *karcha* when relating how Amalek “happened to encounter” the Jews exiting Egypt (Deut. 25:18), and similarly uses the word *yikareh* when referring to a person who happens to come across a bird nest (Deut. 22:6). Likewise, when the Book of Ruth relates that Ruth went out to the fields and “ended up” in the field of Boaz, who was her father-in-law’s relative, it says *vayiker mikreh* (Ruth 2:3) — “an occurrence occurred.”

Although many commentators (like Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch to Gen. 42:4, Lev. 26:21) understand *keri* in the Biblical sense to refer to a non-deliberate, glib way of acting, Rabbi Pappenheim takes a slightly different approach. He sees the term *keri* as referring to the sinner's attitude of trying to "anger" Hashem through his perfidious actions. In that sense, the problem with such a sinner is twofold: one that he committed the sin itself, and one that he maintains this antagonistic attitude towards Hashem. According to this, Rabbi Pappenheim explains that the term *keri* in the context of the Levitical rebuke refers to the "stronger impact" that such a person's sin has in his clash against the Divine and the stronger Divine reaction that this impact induces.

Likewise, the seemingly triliteral root KUF-REISH-ALEPH (*kara*, *kriyah*, *vayikra*) in the sense of "calling" somebody refers to a means of "getting their attention" and serves a catalyst for bringing about a meeting ("impact") of the various relevant parties. Rabbi Pappenheim writes that it too can be traced back to the biliteral KUF-REISH (with the ALEPH seen as extraneous to the core root). Additionally, the Biblical Hebrew term *li'krat* ("towards/greeting") refers to coming closer to each other in a way that brings a "meeting/impact" closer to reality. In Targumic Aramaic, these terms are often rendered as inflections of the root AYIN-REISH-AYIN (which also refers to "meeting" as the Targumic terms for *pegiah* and *pegishah* as we will see below).

Interestingly, Malbim as cited in *Sefer HaCarmel* sees the term *mikreh* as almost synonymous with *metziah* (MEM-TZADI-ALEPH, usually meaning "finding"). He attempts to differentiate between them by explaining that when the cause of something that happens is unknown or irregular, then the occurrence is called a *mikreh*, but when the cause is not so out of the ordinary, then the occurrence is called a *metziah*. He explains that when Jacob's sons related to their father all the bizarre occurrences that happened to them when they went to Egypt, they used the word *korot* (Gen. 42:29, which means "resume" in Modern Hebrew) because all that transpired was totally unexpected. Yet, when Joshua's spies related back to him what they encountered in the Land of Canaan, the Bible uses the word *motzaot* (Josh. 2:23) because since they were dispatched as scouts/spies in the first place, they were anticipating the transpiring of incidents about which they would report back.

To be continued...

REJOICING ON THE FESTIVALS

Mitzvah #488; *Devarim* 16:14

We have a Mitzvah to rejoice during the three festivals, Pesach, Shavuos, and Sukkos. By bringing joy over the festivals into our hearts, we connect with their meaning and deepen our relationship with Hashem. As with any relationship, the joy that exists between the two parties is like emotional glue. It is similar to the way the joy that exists between a bride and groom at the time of their wedding bonds them together (see *Rashi* to *Kesubos* 8a).

Each festival commemorates a different fundamental event in our history and has its own flavor of joy, which enhances our relationship with Hashem correspondingly. When we rejoice on Pesach over our rise from slavery to Hashem's chosen people, we become inspired to accept the yoke of His kingship with love. When we rejoice over the Giving of the Torah on Shavuos, we become inspired to study and fulfill it. On Sukkos, we rejoice over how Hashem took us under His wing in the Wilderness, and then showed unconditional love for us when He forgave our sin of the Golden Calf and returned to dwell among us. This celebration deepens our love and appreciation for Him and strengthens our bond to the highest degree.

Sefer HaChinuch suggests that another reason for the Mitzvah to rejoice over the festivals is that people have a natural need to rejoice periodically. Hashem therefore designated the festivals as outlets to channel this drive for a highly productive and holy purpose so that it does not drive us down and away from Him instead.

The three festivals also coincide with three stages in the agricultural year. Pesach is the time of spring and the barley harvest, and Shavuos is the time of the wheat harvest, which is even more significant. Sukkos is the time when all the produce that has been left to dry on the field during the summer is gathered, and then the joy reaches the highest degree (see *Shulchan Shel Arba* §2).

At all these times of joy, there is a risk that a person may attribute his success to his efforts and rejoice over his own greatness. The resultant combination of engaging in frivolity while not feeling subjugated to Hashem can be disastrous. Therefore, Hashem commanded us to appear before Him in the Beis HaMikdash at those times and acknowledge Him to be our master and benefactor, so that we will rejoice over Him instead and merit additional bounty.

Orchos Tzaddikim (*Shaar Simcha*; cited in *Taryag Mitzvos HaMevuaros*) suggests that when a person enjoys delicacies on Yom Tov, he should use the opportunity to recall the ultimate spiritual delight of World to Come, and he should aspire to attain it.

There is a special obligation to rejoice on Shavuos, the day when we received the Torah. Even the opinion among the Sages that maintains that a person is allowed to engage solely in spiritual matters on Pesach and Sukkos agrees that it is necessary to feast on Shavuos (*Pesachim* 68b). This is because we need to show that we are happy that we received the Torah (Rashi). Rav Yosef would have a succulent calf prepared on this day, and he would proclaim: If not for this day, how many Yosefs there are in the marketplace! He celebrated the day that elevated him above ordinary people.

We will close by mentioning two of the many reasons suggested for the custom of eating dairy products on Shavuos. This topic is discussed at length in *Taam HaChalav*, from where I quote. One reason is that the Torah is compared to milk and honey (*Shir HaShirim* 4:11), and some therefore have a custom of enjoying honey as well (*Aruch HaShulchan*, citing *Sheyarei Keneses HaGedolah*). By delighting in something that symbolizes the Torah, we bond with it and its Giver. A second reason is that we want to bring to heart that the Torah is to us like a mother's milk is to her infant (based on *Yeshayah* 28:34 and *Resisei Laylah* §56). Just like an infant feeds regularly, finds new flavor in the milk every time (*Eruvin* 54b), derives from it all necessary nutrients, and depends on it for his life, so too, we discover new insights and tastes within words of Torah every time we contemplate them, we feed on it day and night, we derive from it all the knowledge, inspiration, and blessing we need, and it is our very life for all eternity.