Home Weekly Parsha BAMIDBAR 5782
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

This week's reading as well as the entire book of Bamidbar is replete with the numbers of the populations of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai. Slightly more than 600,000 male Jews over the age of twenty comprise the population of the Jewish people under the leadership of Moshe. Extrapolating the old, the young, infirmed, the women and the multitudes of people of other nations that left Egypt together with the Jewish people, most Rabbinic authorities estimate a Jewish population of between two and three million souls.

As important as it may be for us to be aware of the population numbers, the question arises: why does the Torah spend so many verses and details in enumerating the population of the Jewish people at that time? What is the religious, spiritual, or historical perspective necessary for us to understand this listing? Regarding this question, there are many proposed ideas and answers, but it is almost universally accepted by all commentaries that this is one of the areas of the Torah where mystery prevails over mere human understanding and logical reasoning.

In short, whatever answers we may give to this problem of why the population numbers seem so important, and occupy such prominence in the book itself, is difficult for us mere mortals to comprehend its true message and meaning. Apparently, the greater the detail, the greater the mystery that it engenders. Since the words of the Torah are eternal accounts of the Jewish people and its population, this indicates that, somehow, this remain a source of inspiration and spiritual holiness for all generations.

One of the interesting facets of the detailed counting is the fact that the Torah lists the names of the leaders of the individual tribes who participated at arriving at this census of the people. As difficult as it is for us to understand the count itself, it is doubly difficult for us to understand the prominence given the names of the leaders of the tribes. This is true because we are aware that none of these people would survive the 40-year sojourn in the desert, and all of them would be replaced with new leaders of their respective tribes, before the entry of the Jewish people into the land of Israel after the death of Moshe.

One understanding of this difficulty is that the Torah wants to constantly remind us that it is a book about people and their behavior, and not about cold facts, events, trends, and esoteric knowledge. The Torah wishes us to remember that people are not merely ciphers or numbers but, rather, flesh and blood individuals, personalities, all different one from another.

The words of the Talmud are that we are all cast from one mold, but no two of us are alike. Since the Torah expends so much detail, both in the count of the people, as well as the specific names of who counted them emphasizes that we are talking about actual people, and not only about numbers per se. This is a fundamental lesson in Judaism, and it is also why the Torah calls itself the book of the generations of humankind.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Chana Necha bas Yakov. "May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

Making it Count

And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai […] saying: "Take a census of all the congregation of Bnei Yisroel […]" (1:1-2).

The fourth book of the Chumash, known as Sefer Bamidbar (literally, book of being "in the desert"), opens with Hashem asking Moshe to undertake a comprehensive counting of the Jewish people. Our sages, therefore, refer to it as "The Book of Counting" (see Mishna Yoma 68b and Rashi ad loc). In fact, even in English we don't translate it literally (i.e. "In the Desert"), rather the fourth book of the Torah has come to be known as "Numbers."

This is odd for a number of reasons; first, what is so significant about this counting that the event has come to define the entire sefer? In other words, Sefer Bamidbar spans a period of forty years, so why does an event that took place at the beginning of the forty years define the entire volume?

Second, the whole concept of a census seems problematic. We have a steadfast rule regarding quantifying objects: Rabbi Yitzchak said, "We only find blessings by things that are concealed from the eye" (See Baba Metzia 42a and Rashi ad loc). Once objects become quantified they are no longer subject to specific blessings from Hashem (this is very different from the secular philosophy of "count your blessings"). The Zohar (Bamidbar 117b) ask, if this is true, then why does Hashem want us to take a census?

Furthermore, why are things that have been counted no longer subject to blessings from above?

We find a very interesting principle of Jewish law: If someone loses money, the rule is "finders keepers." This is not true by other possessions – only for money. The Talmud (Baba Metzia 21b) explains the reason for this as "a person is always checking his pocket (and making sure that his money is there)." Therefore, if someone finds money, one can assume that the person who lost the money is aware of his loss and has given up hope of ever getting it back, thereby relinquishing his ownership. However, what is behind the psychology of a person always checking on his money?

Most assets that a person owns have already been actualized to some kind of use (jewelry, cars, art, etc.); they

have intrinsic value and therefore add some measure of pleasure to the owner. By their very nature, a person has a sense of ownership over these objects; they are his to enjoy. On the other hand, money and monetary instruments (e.g. stocks, etc.) are merely tools to acquire what he wants. Money has no intrinsic value as an object; its only value lies in its potential. This makes it hard to feel like you have anything. The reason a person is constantly checking on his wallet (or stock portfolio for that matter) is to feel connected and a sense of ownership.

The very act of quantifying something is to count what you have. Once a person has done that, the object leaves the domain of God's blessing and enters the domain of the owner; it is therefore no longer subject to a blessing from Hashem. The only exception to this universal rule is when Hashem Himself wants to make an accounting. Rashi (1:1) explains that Hashem counts the Jewish people as an expression of His deep love for us. By counting us, Hashem is showing His desire to be connected to us. It is fascinating to note that the word that Rashi uses for love is "chiba," which is derived from the word "chav – responsibility."

In other words, true love is taking responsibility for the object of your affection. A true love relationship requires you to be a giver. This means making sure your beloved is well taken care of (obviously, the other party has to respond in kind for it to be a relationship and not some kind of self-sacrificing martyrdom).

This is why our sages chose the name the "Book of Counting" for the desert experience. This fourth volume of the Torah is replete with story after story of Hashem's steadfast love and support for the Jewish people throughout the sometimes tumultuous experience of forty years in the desert. By counting us at the beginning of this experience, Hashem is telling us that he will take care of us – because he loves us.

Patrilineal Descent?

These are the children of Aharon and Moshe […] And these are the names of the sons of Aaron; Nadav the firstborn, and Avihu, Eleazar, and Itamar (3:1-2).

Rashi (as loc) points out a rather glaring inconsistency in the verses; although the Torah explicitly mentioned that it was about to list the children of both Aharon and Moshe, the Torah only records the names of Aharon's children. Rashi goes on to explain that from here the Talmud derives the axiom; "whoever teaches Torah to his friend's child, it is considered as if he gave birth to them" (Sanhedrin 19b).

This principle needs clarification. What does it mean that if you teach someone Torah it is as if you gave birth to him? Chazal don't exaggerate or take poetic license; perhaps you taught them some information or gave them some life skills, but how is this akin to giving birth to someone? Additionally, Moshe taught Torah to all of Bnei Yisroel; why are the children of Aharon singled out? This principle should apply to anyone who was at Mount Sinai.

The next Rashi on the verse provides us with a clue: "On the day Hashem spoke to Moshe" (3:1), this teaches us that "they became his children because he taught them what he had heard from the mouth of the Almighty" (Rashi ad loc). Why does Rashi essentially repeat what he already told us in his previous comment?

Rashi is bothered by the words "on that day." What specific day is being referred to? If we look at the last verse in next week's parsha, we find a very interesting concept: Hashem communicated to Moshe by talking to himself and Moshe merely listened. This seems a little odd; throughout the Torah we find that Hashem spoke directly to Moshe. What is being added here?

The answer is that Moshe heard Hashem studying Torah aloud. Hashem wasn't giving a speech for Moshe to listen to; Hashem was teaching Moshe how to analyze the Torah through His studying it aloud.

This is what Moshe taught the children of Aharon. He didn't merely give them information on what they should and should not do. Moshe taught them the skills in the analyzation of Torah. These skills allow one to have insights into the Torah that are wholly one's own. In other words, this skill allows one to create one's own Torah. This transforms the Torah from merely being information to being a tool from which one is able to transform one's self through the study of Torah.

What happens when a person is born? A person achieves a separate identity from his parents. While inside the mother, there is a shared identity. Once born a person has an independence and separate life mission. This is what Moshe achieved by giving the sons of Aharon the skills of Torah analysis. They now had their own individual portion within the Torah – their own identity and that it is why Moshe is credited in giving birth to them.

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ZTL

Law as Love

BAMIDBAR

One of the most amusing scenes in Anglo-Jewish history occurred on 14 October 1663. A mere seven years had passed since Oliver Cromwell had found no legal bar to Jews living in England (hence the so-called "return" of 1656). A small synagogue was opened in Creechurch Lane in the City of London, forerunner of Bevis Marks (1701), the oldest still-extant place of Jewish worship in Britain.

The famous diarist Samuel Pepys decided to pay a visit to this new curiosity, to see how Jews conducted themselves at prayer. What he saw amazed and scandalised him. As chance or providence had it, the day of his visit turned out to be Simchat Torah. This is how he described what he saw:

And anon their Laws that they take out of the press [i.e., the Ark] are carried by several men, four or five several burthens in all, and they do relieve one another; and

whether it is that every one desires to have the carrying of it, I cannot tell, thus they carried it round about the room while such a service is singing … But, Lord! to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true God, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this.

The Diary of Samuel Pepys, entry for 14 October 1663, ed. Richard Le Gallienne (New York: Modern Library Classics, 2003), p. 106.

This was not the kind of behaviour that Pepys was used to in a house of worship.

There is something unique about the relationship of Jews to the Torah, the way we stand in its presence as if it were a king, dance with it as if it were a bride, listen to it telling our story, and study it, as we say in our prayers, as "our life and the length of our days." There are few more poignant lines of prayer than the one contained in a poem said at Neilah, at the end of Yom Kippur: Ein shiyur rak haTorah hazot – "Nothing remains," after the destruction of the Temple and the loss of the land, "but this Torah." A book, a scroll, was all that stood between Jews and despair.

What non-Jews (and sometimes Jews) fail to appreciate is how, in Judaism, Torah represents law as love, and love as law. Torah is not just "revealed legislation".[1] It represents God's faith in our ancestors that He entrusted them with the creation of a society that would become a home for His Presence and an example to the world.

One of the keys as to how this worked is contained in the parsha of Bamidbar, always read before Shavuot, the commemoration of the Giving of the Torah. This reminds us how central is the idea of wilderness – the desert, no man's land – is to Judaism. It is midbar, wilderness, that gives our parsha and the book as a whole its name. It was in the desert that the Israelites made a covenant with God and received the Torah, their constitution as a nation under the sovereignty of God. It is the desert that provides the setting for four of the five books of the Torah, and it was there that the Israelites experienced their most intimate contact with God, who sent them water from a rock, manna from heaven and surrounded them with Clouds of Glory.

What story is being told here? The Torah is telling us three fundamentals to Jewish identity. First is the unique phenomenon that, in Judaism, the law preceded the land. For every other nation in history the reverse was the case. First came the land, then human settlements, first in small groups, then in villages, towns and cities. Then came forms of order and governance and a legal system: first the land, then the law.

The fact that in Judaism the Torah was given bemidbar, in the desert, before they had even entered the land, meant that uniquely Jews and Judaism were able to survive, their identity intact, even in exile. Because the law came before the land, even when Jews lost the land they still had the law. This meant that, even in exile, Jews were still a nation. God remained their sovereign. The covenant was still in place. Even without a geography, they had an ongoing history. Even before they entered the land, Jews had been given the ability to survive outside the land.

Second, there is a tantalising connection between midbar, 'wilderness,' and davar, 'word.' Where other nations found the gods in nature – the rain, the earth, fertility, and the seasons of the agricultural year – Jews discovered God in transcendence, beyond nature, a God who could not be seen but rather heard. In the desert, there is no nature. Instead there is emptiness and silence, a silence in which one can hear the unearthly voice of the One-beyond-the-world. As Edmond Jabès put it: "The word cannot dwell except in the silence of other words. To speak is, accordingly, to lean on a metaphor of the desert."[2]

The German-American political scientist Eric Voegelin saw this as fundamental to the completely new form of spirituality born in the experience of the Israelites:

When we undertake the exodus and wander into the world, in order to found a new society elsewhere, we discover the world as the Desert. The flight leads nowhere, until we stop in order to find our bearings beyond the world. When the world has become Desert, man is at last in the solitude in which he can hear thunderingly the voice of the spirit that with its urgent whispering has already driven and rescued him from Sheol [the domain of death]. In the Desert God spoke to the leader and his tribes; in the desert, by listening to the voice, by accepting its offer, and by submitting to its command, they had at last reached life and became the people chosen by God.[3]

Israel and Revelation

In the silence of the desert Israel became the people for whom the primary religious experience was not seeing but listening and hearing: Shema Yisrael. The God of Israel revealed Himself in speech. Judaism is a religion of holy words, in which the most sacred object is a book, a scroll, a text.

Third, and most remarkable, is the interpretation the prophets gave to those formative years in which the Israelites, having left Egypt and not yet entered the land, were alone with God. Hosea, predicting a second exodus, says in God's name regarding the Israelites:

I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her . . .

There she will respond as in the days of her youth,

As in the day she came out of Egypt.

Hos. 2:14-15

Jeremiah says in God's name:

"I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved Me and followed Me through the wilderness, through a land not sown."

Jer. 2:2

Shir HaShirim, The Song of Songs, contains the line, "Who is this coming up from the wilderness leaning on her beloved?" (Shir HaShirim 8:5)

Common to each of these texts is the idea of the desert as a honeymoon in which God and the people, imagined as bridegroom and bride, were alone together, consummating their union in love. To be sure, in the Torah itself we see the Israelites as a recalcitrant, obstinate people complaining and rebelling against the God. Yet the Prophets in retrospect saw things differently. The wilderness was a kind of yichud, an alone-togetherness, in which the people and God bonded in love.

Most instructive in this context is the work of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep who focused attention on the importance of rites of passage.[4] Societies develop rituals to mark the transition from one state to the next – from childhood to adulthood, for example, or from being single to being married – and they involve three stages. The first is separation, a symbolic break with the past. The last is incorporation, re-entering society with a new identity. Between the two comes the crucial stage of transition when, having cast off one identity but not yet donned another, you are remade, reborn, refashioned.

Van Gennep used the term liminal, from the Latin word for "threshold," to describe this transitional state when you are in a kind of no-man's-land between the old and the new. That is what the wilderness signifies for Israel: liminal space between slavery and freedom, past and future, exile and return, Egypt and the Promised Land. The desert was the space that made transition and transformation possible. There, in no-man's-land, the Israelites, alone with God and with one another, could cast off one identity and assume another. There they could be reborn, no longer slaves to Pharaoh, instead servants of God, summoned to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex. 19:6)

Seeing the wilderness as the space-between helps us to see the connection between the Israelites in the days of Moses and the ancestor whose name they bore. For it was Jacob among the patriarchs who had his most intense experiences of God in liminal space, between the place he was leaving and the one he was travelling to, alone and at night. It was there, fleeing from his brother Esau but not yet arrived at the house of Laban, that he saw a vision of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending, and there on his return that he fought with a stranger from night until dawn and was given the name Israel.

These episodes can now be seen to be prefigurations of what would later happen to his descendants (ma'aseh avot siman levanim, "the acts of the fathers are a sign of what would later happen to the children").[5]

The desert thus became the birthplace of a wholly new relationship between God and humankind, a relationship built on covenant, speech, and love as concretised in the Torah. Distant from the great centres of civilisation, a people found themselves alone with God and there consummated a bond that neither exile nor tragedy could break. That is the moral truth at the beating heart of our faith: that it is not power or politics that link us to God, but love.

Joy in the celebration of that love led King David to "leap and dance" when the Ark was brought into Jerusalem, earning the disapproval of King Saul's daughter Michal (2 Sam. 6:16), and many centuries later led the Anglo-Jews of Creechurch Lane to dance on Simchat Torah, to the disapproval of Samuel Pepys. When love defeats dignity, faith is alive and well.

[1] As Moses Mendelssohn described it in Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 89–90, pp. 126–28.

[2] Edmond Jabès, Du Desert au Libre, Paris, Pierre Belford, 1980, p. 101.

[3] Eric Voegelin, Israel and Revelation, Louisiana State University Press, 1956, p. 153.

[4] Arnold Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage (Chicago: University of Chicago) 1960.

[5] See Ramban's commentary on Gen. 12:6.

Shabbat Shalom: Parshat Bamidbar (Numbers 1:1-4:20)

By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin Efrat, Israel –"And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they left the Land of Egypt." (Numbers 1:1)

How can we transform a no-man's land into a domain of sanctity? The Book of Numbers, which we begin reading this Sabbath, provides an answer to this question. In doing so, it addresses the uncertainties and complexities of transitions: from Egyptian servitude to desert freedom and from abject slavery to the possibility of redemption.

Perhaps most importantly, this fourth book of the Bible offers a glimpse into the complexities assailing the greatest leader in world history, Moses, and the challenges he faced in leading this transformation.

A fierce advocate for his people and passionate lover of God, Moshe Rabbeinu is a towering persona who reminded a nation about its mission in the world and inspired humanity with his clarion call about the human right to freedom. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding his stunningly remarkable achievements, Moses left the world frustrated and disappointed, having been denied his dream of joining his people in the Promised Land.

Fortunately, God's greatest prophet has been resoundingly vindicated by Jewish history. The Jewish People's dramatic and historic return to the Land of Israel continues to draw inspiration from his teachings and longings, as well as from his legacy. The book that bears his name, "Torat Moshe," is humanity's blueprint for redemption.

It is with this context in mind that we approach the book of "Bamidbar" ("In the Desert"), an apt name for a work that documents the Jewish People's 40-years of transition between Egypt and the Land of Canaan. Indeed, this desert period serves as the precursor of – as well as a most poignant metaphor for – the nearly two thousand years of homeless wandering that characterized much of Jewish history from the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

The Hebrew word for desert, midbar, contains meanings and allusions that in many ways have served as a beacon for our exile. An example of this is the word for leader, which, though most commonly referred to in Hebrew as manhig, our Sages also referred to as dabar, fully cognizant of its shared Hebrew letter root d-b-r with midbar. (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 8a).

In the Bible, the paradigmatic position of leadership – as exemplified by Abraham, Moses, and David – is the shepherd. And the desert is, of course, the most natural place for a shepherd to lead his flock: the sheep can comfortably wander in a virtual no-man's land and graze on the vegetation of the various oases or their outskirts without the problem of stealing from private property or harming the ecology of settled habitations.

And perhaps the letter-root d-b-r means leader-shepherd because it also means "word" (dibur). Just as the shepherd directs the flock using sounds and words, the leader of people must also inspire and lead with the verbal message he communicates. Indeed, the Aseret Ha-Dibrot (literally, "The Ten Utterances," but better known as "The Ten Commandments") were revealed in the Sinai desert (midbar), and they govern the Jewish People – as well as a good part of the whole world – to this very day.

Moreover, it is important to note that wherever the Jewish People wandered in the desert, they were always accompanied by the portable desert sanctuary (mishkan), which is derived from the word Shekhina (Divine Presence). However, God was not in the Sanctuary, for even the greatest expanse of the heavens cannot contain the Divine Presence, as King Solomon declared when he dedicated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem (I Kings 8:27). It was rather God's word (dibur), which was in the sanctuary, in the form of The Ten Utterances (Aseret Ha-Dibrot) on the Tablets of Stone preserved in the Holy Ark, as well as the ongoing and continuing Word of God that He would speak from between the cherubs on above the Holy Ark (Exodus 25:16-22).

It was by means of these Divine words (dibrot) that even the desert (midbar) – a metaphor for an inhospitable and alien exile environment: boiling hot by day, freezing cold by night, and deficient in water, the elixir of life – can be transformed into sacred space, the place of the Divine word (dibur).

Indeed, the words from the desert of Sinai succeeded in sanctifying the many Marrakeshes and Vilnas and New Yorks of our wanderings. The world is a desert (midbar) waiting to become a sanctuary (d'vir) by means of God's word (dibur), communicated by inspiring leaders (dabarim).

Shabbat Shalom!

A Tale of Two Covenants
by Jonathan Rosenblum

Mishpacha Magazine

A fundamental commonality between the United States and the Jewish People

David Goldman and others have pointed to a fundamental commonality between the United Stations and the Jewish People: Both nations are founded on a covenant, not on blood and soil.

The Jewish covenant was forged at Sinai, an event that we will celebrate a few days from now on Shavuos. Just as our ancestors entered into a covenant with Hashem based on their acceptance of mitzvos, so too any person who commits to the observance of mitzvos in the same fashion is eligible to become a full-fledged member of the Jewish People today.

Similarly, citizenship in America never depended exclusively on one's ancestry or longtime presence. America is, after all, a land of immigrants, composed of people from all corners of the earth. The one fundamental requirement for becoming a citizen is an oath of loyalty to the United States and to the Constitution.

Americans have traditionally been bound by their constitutional faith and belief in the wisdom of the Founders. They studied in school the Founders' vision of divided and limited government, and read the best arguments in favor of the arrangement entered into in the Federalist Papers.

Of late, however, the parallel between the Jewish devotion to Torah and American's constitutional faith has been waning fast. During the Watergate hearings my first year in law school, Senator Sam Ervin would frequently pull a well-worn copy of the Constitution and read from it.

Even then his reverence for the Constitution was a bit quaint. I never managed to read the entire document in law school — and I wanted to teach constitutional law. And I would be surprised if even a handful of classmates did. But few would have dismissed the Constitution, as did one current Yale law student recently, as a "document drafted by wealthy white men," or argue that the Founders "did not codify rights for anyone other than themselves," as if there were no Bill of Rights.

Another current YLS student described classmates who are members of the Federalist Society — in which Yale Law graduates Justices Samuel Alito and Bret Kavanaugh have been active — as conspirators in a "Christo-fascist political takeover," and wondered "why are they still coming to our parties [and] laughing in the library... with precious few social consequences and without being subjected to

unrelenting daily confrontation?" Another proclaimed, "Democratic institutions will not save us. Now is not the time for 'reform.' " At least one of these law students enthusiastic about burning the place down will be interning for a prominent federal judge this summer. Apparently, it did not occur to these future advocates that there might be value in debating the "originalist" understanding of constitutional interpretation against other approaches, or in reasoned debate at all. Long forgotten is John Stuart Mills's trenchant comment, "He who knows but one side of an argument knows not even that."

The call for ostracizing conservative students is of a piece with the recent actions of 120 Yale Law students to prevent a Christian lawyer from presenting her position at a Federalist Society event. Since the woman in question has prevailed nine times in the Supreme Court, one might have thought that those eager to advance another legal opinion would have seized the opportunity to hear and challenge arguments that they are likely to confront one day as lawyers. But no.

No wonder that a prominent law professor told Bari Weiss after the leak of Justice Alito's draft opinion overruling Roe v. Wade, an unprecedented breach of confidentiality, "To me, the leak is not surprising, because many of the people we've been graduation from schools like Yale are the kind of people who would do such a thing." Like the anarchist Stavrogin in Dostoyevsky's The Possessed, "They think that everything is violence. And so everything is permitted."

Even if Yale were not annually rated the country's top law school, this mental cast would be cause for concern. That ranking only makes the type of graduates it is producing a matter of greater concern. As Andrew Sullivan puts it, "We all live on campus today." Students don't grow up and become more nuanced; they don't discover new value in long-existent institutions or patterns of behavior, or find something to be said for reasoned debate. Rather they dictate the future.

AND WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE THE U.S., once bound together by that constitutional faith set forth in historian Louis Hartz's The Liberal Tradition in America, which allowed America to avoid the bitter class and ideological divisions of Europe?

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt, in an April piece in the Atlantic, "Why the Past 10 Year of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid," finds the collapse of the Tower of Babel to be the best metaphor for that ten-year period. "We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth. We are cut off from one another and from the past."

The problem is not just the factionalism of which James Madison warned in Federalist No. 10, without any mediating institutions to keep things from coming to an instantaneous boil. Rather it is the "fragmentation of everything. It's about all that had seemed solid, the scattering of people who had been a community... not only between red and blue, but within the left and within the right, as well as within universities, companies, professional associations, museums, and even families." (We will discuss in coming weeks some of Haidt's suggestions for reversing that fragmentation through procedural reforms of the tech platforms that fan it.)

When trust has been lost, as in the publicizing of a draft opinion of the Supreme Court, whether in private or public affairs, it is almost impossible to restore fully.

IF, HOWEVER, the American covenant is fracturing, it seems to me that something quite the opposite is occurring within that community (or communities) that still order their lives around Torah.

I am now back in America for the first time in nearly three years. And while I am unqualified to comment on all the various ways in which Covid affected communal life based on my two-week visit, one thing appears clear to me: Thousands of Jews took advantage of Covid to increase both the quantity and quality of their Torah learning. (And I should add that apart from one brief foray into Boro Park for some long-delayed suit shopping, I was not in what would be described as yeshivish communities.)

Everywhere I went, all the talking was in learning — of the proliferation of daf yomi shiurim being offered by Jews from various walks of life, of the means being developed to foster mastery and retention of material learned, or of new nighttime kollelim for balabatim, many of them with regular tests. In Teaneck this morning, I could say for perhaps the first time with confidence (not just faith) that the baal tefillah said every word of the long Tachanun. On this trip, I watched a lawyer in one of the country's cutting-edge firms learning Teshuvos Rabi Akiva Eiger until the wee hours of the morning with his chavrusa. Another friend — a Harvard-trained doctor but without a day of formal yeshivah learning — has been taking off an hour or more every afternoon to daven in a yeshivah near his hospital and to learn with bochurim for years. With another chavrusa, he has been learning Aruch Hashulchan for well over a decade. He has now resigned his prestigious position in large part to devote more time to learning.

When great roshei yeshivah come from Eretz Yisrael, hundreds flock to hear their Torah. And many balabatim receive the shiurim of leading roshei yeshivah and learn them with chavrusas.

While I am depressed by the loss of the American covenant, and view the effects of its passing as unsettling for Jews, it is a source of inspiration that it is the bris olam (eternal covenant) of Torah that remains strong after more than three millennia, while the former is barely holding on after less than 250 years.

The Fighter Still Remains
Are You Still the Chosen People?
Rabbi YY Jacobson

The infinite value of human life.

The Blind Golfer

Charlie Boswell was a great athlete who became blind during World War II while rescuing his friend from a tank that was under fire. When he returned to this country after the War, he decided to take up a sport that he had never tried as yet—golf. Years of practice and determination led him to win the honor of National Blind Golf Champion no less than 13 times. One of his heroes was the great golfer Ben Hogan, so it indeed was an honor for Charlie to win the Ben Hogan Award in 1958.

Upon meeting Hogan, Charlie was awestruck and told the legendary golfer that his greatest wish was to have one round of golf with the great Ben Hogan.

Hogan was duly honored, after all, he knew Charlie as the great blind player that he was, and truly admired his skills.

But suddenly Boswell blurted out an unexpected challenge. "Would you like to play for money, Mr. Hogan?"

"Charlie, you know I can't play you for money, it wouldn't be fair!" said Mr. Hogan.

Boswell did not flinch. Instead, he upped the ante. "Come on, $1,000 per hole!"

"I can't. What would people think of me, taking advantage of a blind man," replied the golfer who was able to see.

"Chicken, Mr. Hogan?"

"Okay," blurted a frustrated Hogan, "I'll play. But I warn you, I am going to play my best!"

"I wouldn't expect anything else," said the confident Boswell.

"You're on Charlie. I'll tell you what. You name the time and the place!"

A very self-assured Boswell responded: “Fine. 10 o'clock . . . tonight!"

A Strange Juxtaposition

In the portion of Bechokosai, G-d communicates to the Jewish people the idyllic blessings awaiting them if they live up to their covenant with the Almighty. This is followed by the warning, that if the Jewish people fail to fulfill their role in our world as the Divine ambassadors, they will become the victims of horrendous curses and losses described in frightening detail.

Immediately following this section, known as the “Tochacha” (rebuke, chastisement), the Torah begins a totally new subject—the laws of “erchin,” which means evaluation. These laws specify how a person might donate his or her own value or the value of another human being to the Holy Temple. The Torah specifies the exact sum one must contribute if he or she makes such a pledge. The sum is not based on the individual’s strength, or character, but rather it is a generic value for each gender and each age. For example, the “erech,” or standard value, of a Jewish male between the ages of 20 and 60 is fifty silver shekel (a silver currency weighing around 9000 grams of silver). It doesn’t make a difference whether the individual whose worth was pledged was a neurosurgeon or a street sweeper, no matter if the person whose worth I pledged was Moses himself, or some outcast, the amount donated is dependent only on age and gender. If I pledged to contribute the value of a five-year-old boy, I need to contribute 20 silver shekel (a silver currency weighing around 360 grams) to the Temple. If I pledge to contribute the value of a one-year-old boy, I need to pay to the Temple five silver shekel. (There is an entire Tractate in the Talmud, Erchin, devoted to this topic.)

[Obviously, these numbers do not reflect the true value of a human being. A person is priceless. Rather, these are symbolic numbers the Torah attaches to different genders and different ages representing certain generic features of this gender or age group. The details of this are beyond the scope of this article.]

The order in Torah is meticulous. What is the connection between the Tochacha, the stern and harsh chastisement, and the laws of evaluation, discussing the “value” of every single human being, man, woman, and child?

The Power of Charity

I will present two answers, one is numerical and moral; the other is psychological.

The Baal Haturim (Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, one of the great Medieval sages in Germany and Spain, 1269-1343) explains this as follows.

The Portion of erchin contains evaluations in this order: 50 shekel, 30 shekel, 20 shekel, 10 shekel, 5 shekel, 3 shekel, 15 shekel, and 10 shekel—for various age and gender groups. The total of all distinct categories comes out to be 143 shekel. This number matches the exact sum of the curses in the Torah—45 in this week’s portion, Bechokosai, and 98 in the portion of Ki Savo in the book of Deuteronomy. The Torah is, in effect, saying that the antidote for the Tochacha is the mitzvah of erchin, the mitzvah of charity. The 143 shekels of contributions cancel out the 143 chastisements.

This is the power of giving.

Still the Chosen People?

The second explanation, presented by the Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenstern (Poland, 1787-1859), is this.

One of the greatest gifts of the Jewish people was that they did not allow the humiliation and persecution they endured by mighty nations to define their inner identity, dignity, and destiny. Like fearless lions, they left Auschwitz, and the next day they went to rebuild Jerusalem.

We know of many people or cultures who endured savage suffering, and as a result, they could never rehabilitate themselves emotionally. They remained eternal victims of their oppressors. And even after they were set free, it was merely external freedom, but their inner sense of identity and liberty has been obliterated.

Where did the Jewish people glean the strength to emerge from every disaster with the courage and confidence to rebuild and prosper? From the order in this week’s portion!

After the Torah enumerates the suffering the Jews might experience from the nations around them, it goes right on to discuss the value of every single human being. No matter what happens to you, the Torah is intimating, you have value as an individual, and as part of a nation. And your value can contribute to the Holy Temple, to the revealing of the Divine presence in the world.

Still Chosen?

After the Nazis invaded the small village of Klausenberg, Romania, they began to celebrate the defeat of the Jews in their usual sadistic fashion. They gathered the Jews into a circle in the center of town, and then paraded their Rebbe, Rabbi Yekusial Yehuda Halberstam (1905-1994), into the center.

The Klausenberger Rebbe was later taken to Auschwitz, where his wife and 11 children perished. He survived the war and came to America, where he remarried, had more children, and built a grand Chassidic movement. He also built the beautiful Laniado hospital in Netanya, Israel.

The SS guards began taunting and teasing the Klausenberger Rebbe, pulling his beard and pushing him around. The vile soldiers trained their guns on him as the commander began to speak. "Tell us, Rabbi," sneered the officer, "do you really believe that you are the Chosen People?"

The soldiers guarding the crowd howled in laughter. But the Rebbe did not. In a serene voice, he answered loud and clear, "Most certainly."

The officer became enraged. He lifted his rifle above his head and sent it crashing on the head of the Rebbe. The Rebbe fell to the ground. There was a rage in the officer's voice. "Do you still think you are the Chosen People?" he yelled.

Once again, the Rebbe nodded his head and said, "yes, we are." The officer became infuriated. He kicked the rebbe in the chin and repeated. "You stupid Jew, you lie here on the ground, beaten and humiliated, in a puddle of blood. What makes you think that you are the Chosen People?"

With his mouth gushing blood, the Rebbe replied. "As long as we are not the ones kicking, beating, and murdering innocent people, we are the chosen people."

Rise Up

Many of us have experienced loss, abuse, and grief in our lives. There are individuals who from a very young age have been given the message that they are worthless and that their lives amount to nothing. For years they struggle to regain the inner confidence to create a blessed life for themselves.

Comes the Torah and teaches, that after you experienced turbulence in your life, after you endured a “Tochachah,” a harsh experience, make sure that you do not allow those experiences and messages to make you doubt your value. You may have been challenged, but let the fighter in you still remain.

True Dignity

It also works the other way around.

The true value and dignity of a person emerge in moments of pain and despair. The real quality of people, their depth and majesty emerge after a “Tochacha,” after a painful experience.

When Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, the Satmar Rav (1887-1979), visited Israel, a Hungarian Jew came and asked him for a blessing before his departure back to the US. This Jew expressed the fear that after the Satmar Rav returned to America, there would be no one worthy to ask for a blessing. His Rebbe told him: "Go to any Jew that has a number tattooed on his arm and ask him for a blessing. When such a person is available, you do not need me to give you a blessing."

Violence in Schools

America is reeling from the school shooting in Texas, on May 24, 2022. 18-year-old Salvador Ramos opened fire at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, killing nineteen students and two teachers, and wounding seventeen people.

What our youth in America needs more than anything else is a moral education -- an education about values and character, about the truth that the dignity of each life is absolute and non-negotiable.

Sure, it is absurd that an 18-year-old can just obtain a machine gun legally, without any investigation. Even if you are pro-guns, there must be limits. But beyond that, when each of our children is taught from the earliest age that we are responsible to G-d, and that He expects us to honor life, and to be kind to each other, murder will not be part of the language of a teen in pain.

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Bamidbar

The Starting Count

This week we begin the book of Numbers. Actually, the first portion, Bamidbar, begins with a discussion of numbers. Moshe was told to count the Jewish nation. “Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers’ household, by number of the names, every male according to their head count. From twenty years of age and up — everyone who goes out to the legion in Israel — you shall count them according to their legions, you and Aaron.” (Numbers 1:2-3). This count included every tribe except that of Levi. They were reserved for a separate count. And their count was not of men ages twenty and up. It began with a much younger crew. “Hashem spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, saying. “Count the sons of Levi according to their fathers’ household, according to their families, every male from one month of age and up shall you count them” (Numbers 3:14-15).

The question is obvious. Why did the infants, one month and above, get counted? Why were the tiny babies included the count? Why were the infant Levites counted and not the

infants of the other tribes? The Torah also differentiates between this Levite count and the rest of the nation. “The leader of the Levite leaders was Elazar, the son of Aaron the Kohen, the assignment of the guardians of the charge of the sanctity” (ibid v. 32). This was not a count for legions. It was a count to assign the guardians in charge of sanctity. Does that start at thirty-days-old? Not long after my father, Rabbi Benjamin Kamenetzky, founded the Yeshiva of South Shore, back in the late 1950s, he invited his illustrious father Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, of blessed memory, to visit the school. After an impressive tour, in which he interviewed teachers and tested the students of the fledgling institution, my father showed him the pre-school program, which imbued the youngest children with a love for Judaism. On the portal of the classroom, there was a colorful mezuzah. Normally a mezuzah is supposed to be placed at the bottom of the top third of the doorpost. This one was not. It was placed lower – at the bottom third of the doorpost. The teachers explained to both my father and grandfather the reasoning for the downward adjustment. “This way, the children will be able to reach the mezuzah, and kiss it.” My grandfather smiled. “We must not lower the mezuzah, for the children to kiss it. Instead, we must raise the child, to reach the mezuzah at its proper level. What we must do is put a stepstool in order for the children to reach higher — to the proper level of the mezuzah! Raise the child at an early age to reach the height of the mitzvah, instead of lowering the mitzvah to the child!”

The difference between the counting of the Levites and the rest of the nation is very clear. The nation was, as a whole, counted “according to their legions,” the Levites were counted for their job of ” guardians of the charge of the sanctity.” Though legions are counted at a fighting age, our children, guardians of the sanctity of our nation, must be counted as early as possible. The tribe of Levi represents our leadership. “Today,” says Maimonides, “everyone who accepts Torah leadership is considered an integral member of tribe of Levi!” For that mission, no child is too young! Charged with the mission of guarding the sanctuary and preserving the spirituality of the nation, we must lift the heads of our children, imbuing them with finite goals and responsibilities, from their very first moments of cognizance. We must raise them to the greatest height of spirituality at the earliest age. Even if we need a stepstool!

Good Shabbos

Dedicated to the speedy healing of Hinda bas Gittel, Mrs. Henrietta Milstein

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לע״נ

שרה משא בת ר׳ יעקב אליעזר ע״ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע״ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל ע״ה