**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BAMIDBAR**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Midrash, commenting to the word “*ba-midbar*” (“in the desert”) in the opening verse of Sefer Bamidbar, for which this book is named, makes several statements regarding the significance of the fact that God gave *Benei Yisrael* the Torah specifically in a “*midbar*,” a barren wilderness.  In one famous passage (*Bamidbar Rabba* 1:7), the Midrash states, “Anyone who does not make himself ownerless like a desert is not able to acquire wisdom or Torah.”  Many different explanations have been offered for the meaning of this exhortation to make oneself “ownerless like a desert.”

The *Imrei Emet* understands the Midrash to mean that we must be prepared to study even when we don’t feel emotionally responsive to the material.  Just as a desert does not produce vegetation even if seeds are planted, similarly, the *Imrei Emet* writes, we sometimes find that the “seeds” of knowledge that we “plant” within our beings do not yield any tangible benefit.   Sometimes the material we study does not pique our interest, and does not appear to affect us in any way.  We want the Torah we learn to produce spiritually nourishing “vegetation” within us, to inspire and uplift us, but this does not always happen.  The Midrash thus teaches us that in order to acquire Torah knowledge, we must be prepared to devote ourselves to learning even when we feel like a “desert,” unresponsive and unreceptive to the material.

The *Imrei Emet* cites in this context the Mishna’s famous teaching in *Pirkei Avot* (4:9), “Whoever upholds the Torah in a state of poverty will in the end uphold it in a state of wealth.”  On the surface, the Mishna seems to promise that if one struggles to observe the Torah amid financial hardship, despite the difficulties and sacrifices entailed, he will be rewarded with wealth.  Additionally,, however, the *Imrei Emet* suggested that the “poverty” and “wealth” mentioned by the Mishna refer to an emotional condition.  If one persists in the study of Torah in his state of “poverty,” when he receives no emotional satisfaction, enjoyment or inspiration from his learning, then he will, gradually, grow and reach the point where he studies in a state of “wealth,” when he indeed finds Torah study enjoyable and spiritually enriching.  Even when we do not feel naturally driven or inspired to learn, we must struggle to continue learning and trust that eventually it will yield the internal, spiritual “produce” that we seek, elevating us and providing us with a profound sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

Sunday

Parashat Bamidbar begins by telling of the census taken of each tribe of *Benei Yisrael*, which was conducted by Moshe and Aharon with the help of one leader from each tribe. The Torah refers to these representatives of the tribes as “*keru’ei ha-eida*” (loosely translated, “distinguished members of the nation” – 1:16).

The *Pesikta Zutreta* notes that a similar phrase appears later in Sefer Bamidbar (16:2), in reference to the 250 men who joined Korach in his uprising against Moshe’s leadership, whom the Torah calls “*keri’ei mo’eid*.” The word “*keru’ei*” here in Parashat Bamidbar, as the *Pesikta* observes, is written unusually, with the letter *yod*, which has the numerical value of 10. The *Pesikta* suggests that this alludes to the fact that “they were righteous and they were present when the Ten Commandments were given.” The word “*keri’ei*” used in reference to Korach’s followers, by contrast, is written without the letter *yod*, because, the *Pesikta* writes, they were sinful, in contrast to the righteous leaders who conducted the census.

What might be the significance of the event of *Matan Torah* – when the Ten Commandments were pronounced – in regard to the contrast between these two groups of men? Why is the piety of the representatives named here in Parashat Bamidbar associated specifically with *Matan Torah*? And, why does the *Pesikta* describe them as having been present at *Matan Torah*, given that the entire nation was present at that time?

The answer, perhaps, can be found in the content of the argument presented by Korach and his followers when they confronted Moshe and Aharon: “The people – they are all sacred, and the Lord is in their midst; so why do you raise yourselves over the congregation of the Lord?!” (16:3). Rashi, citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, explains that Korach and his followers refer here to the event of *Matan Torah*, when the entire nation heard God speaking. These leaders pointed to the Revelation at Sinai as proving that the entire nation should be allowed to serve as *kohanim* and do not require formal leadership.

It is perhaps for this reason that the *Pesikta* contrasts the leaders who conducted the census with Korach’s cohorts by describing the former as having been present at *Matan Torah*. Korach’s followers were, of course, also present, but they walked away from the event with a fundamentally wrong conception of what it meant for the nation. They concluded that since God revealed Himself to all *Benei Yisrael*, they are all essentially the same, and no divisions should be made between different groups. The leaders who conducted the census, by contrast, understood that God revealed Himself to the entire nation to charge each tribe, each group and each individual with a unique mission, to maximize its or his unique potential to its fullest. The fact that the entire nation stood at Sinai and beheld the Revelation did not mean that they are all expected to be exactly the same. Rather, it meant that each individual is expected to fulfill his or her special role. This notion is reflected by the census, whereby each tribe was counted separately – demonstrating that each tribe is assigned its unique role and place within the nation.

When *Benei Yisrael* stood at Sinai, they all received the same Torah which they must all observe, but within the boundaries of Torah law and teaching, each group and each individual has a unique role to fulfill. Korach and his followers were correct that the entire nation is sacred – but they were incorrect in assuming that because of this sanctity, the entire nation should serve God in the capacity of *kohanim*. Each “tribe” must fill its role and find its place, as we all work together, each of us in our own individual capacity, to create a society that brings glory to God.

Monday

We read in Parashat Bamidbar of the census taken of *Benei Yisrael* at Mount Sinai, in which all males age twenty and above in every tribe except the tribe of Levi were counted. Afterward, God commanded that a separate census be taken of the tribe of Levi, which was assigned the special task of serving in the *Mishkan*. Levi’s census differed from the census of the rest of the tribes in that included even young children – all males from the age of one month (3:15).

Rashi (3:16), based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, comments that because the census of Levi included the infants, special divine assistance was required. After Moshe received the command to count all male Levites from the age of one month, the Midrash relates, he turned to God and asked, “How can I go into all of their homes and into their tents to know the number of their babies?”

God replied, “You do yours, and I will do Mine.”

The Midrash proceeds to tell that Moshe stood at the entrance of each Levite tent, and a heavenly voice announced the number of children in each tent. For this reason, the Midrash concludes, the Torah tells that Moshe counted the *Leviyim* “*al pi Hashem*” – “by the word of the Lord” (3:16), as it was God’s word that informed him the number of males in each Levite home.

This account in the Midrash has been explained as noting the importance of basic manners and etiquette, as showing us that even for an important cause, one must not violate the rules of elementary courtesy. After being commanded to count even the infants of the tribe of Levi, Moshe immediately realized that God could not possibly expect him to go inside all the *Leviyim*’s homes, which would be inappropriate – because Moshe understood that even for a lofty purpose, basic standards of etiquette must be maintained. More specifically, the Midrash here teaches us the importance of respecting people’s privacy, that we have no right to go inside people’s “tents” – their private domain – to learn about their personal lives without their consent. Even if we feel our violation of people’s privacy is necessary for serving some important objective, the Midrash teaches, we have no right to invade their private space.

We might also suggest an additional perspective on the Midrash’s comments. Just as Moshe was not entitled to go into a Levite tent to determine the number of males in the home who would be serving in the *Mishkan*, similarly, we do not have the ability to determine the extent of any person’s potential, how much a person is capable of contributing and accomplishing. Moshe was able to find out how many adults and grown children living in each Levite tent, but he was unable to go inside the tent to see the infants – perhaps symbolizing the fact that there is often far more potential within each person than what meets the eye. We can and generally do recognize other people’s fine qualities, talents and capabilities, but very often, there is far more than that inside their “tent” – enormous potential beneath the surface that we are not able to see. Before casting judgment, we must recognize that we see only a small part of other people’s abilities and promise, that people often have within them the potential for greatness which is concealed from our vision. We must therefore show respect for all people – trusting that there is greatness beneath the surface which will eventually be manifest and become clearly visible, far more than what we see in the present.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Bamidbar of the census taken of *Benei Yisrael* at Mount Sinai, which included all males aged twenty and above. The tribe of Levi, we read, was counted separately, and this tribe’s census included all males from the age of one month. Rashi (3:15) explains that until an infant completes one month of life, it is uncertain whether it was a viable fetus, and so it was from the age of one month that the Levite infants were worthy of being counted. Fundamentally, then, the census included all males of Levi, even newborns, the only condition being that they completed one month of life and were thus determined to have been properly developed at the time of their birth.

Rashi then proceeds to cite the *Midrash Tanchuma* as commenting about the *Leviyim*, “This tribe was accustomed to being counted from the womb.” The Midrash notes the famous tradition that Moshe’s mother, Yokheved, who was the daughter of Levi – the founder of the Levite tribe – was born just as Yaakov and his family crossed the border from Canaan to Egypt – and she was counted among the seventy members of the family who moved to Egypt. The Midrash views Yokheved’s inclusion in this list, of the original seventy people who relocated in Egypt, as setting a precedent of Levite infants being included when the tribe is counted. According to the Midrash, this is a significant characteristic of the tribe of Levi, the tribe chosen to serve in the *Mishkan* – that its members are counted not only upon reaching adulthood, but already during infancy.

Some writers explained the Midrash as emphasizing the importance of early education in preparing a child for a life of religious devotion. The tribe of Levi, which represents religious excellence, was the tribe whose members were counted already in infancy – to show that children must be taught and trained to serve God already in their younger years.

Others, however, explained differently. The census of the other tribes included only the adults because it is only at adulthood when one’s unique strengths, talents and preferences are discernible, and when a person begins charting his course in life. And so when *Benei Yisrael* was counted before departing from Sinai, for the purpose – according to several commentators – of preparing for warfare in *Eretz Yisrael*, the census counted only those old enough to be assigned a role appropriate for their individual characteristics and skills. The members of the tribe of Levi, however, were designated from birth for the service in the *Mishkan*. Immediately upon being born, a child born in this tribe was destined to serve in the *Mishkan*, in one of the several capacities filled by the *Leviyim*. Therefore, they were counted already from the age of one month, because already at that point, their role was, for the most part, determined.

If so, then the two censuses taken of *Benei Yisrael* shows us that there are some roles we are given at birth, and some which we assume only once we reach adulthood and chart our individual course. On the one hand, we are born with a wide range of opportunities for us to choose from, with many different roles that are open for us to assume, according to our personal preferences. At the same time, however, like the *Leviyim*, there are certain responsibilities which we bear by virtue of the specific conditions into which we are born. Every individual’s possibilities are limited, to one extent or another, by circumstance. Many aspects of our life are for us to determine through our decisions, but some are dictated by conditions beyond our control. Like the other tribes, we are able to chart our course; but like the tribe of Levi, we are born into a reality with certain limits to which we are confined. Our challenge is to maximize our full potential within the limits set for us – without, one the one hand, overlooking any of the vast opportunities that are presented to us, but also, on the other hand, without trying in vain to extend beyond the limits set by our conditions and circumstances.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Bamidbar of God’s pronouncement that He has chosen the *Leviyim* as the sacred tribe, replacing the firstborns. He explains, “For every firstborn was Mine on the day I struck every firstborn in the land of Egypt; I consecrated every firstborn in Israel” (3:13). Now, however, after the construction of the *Mishkan*, God substituted the firstborns with the tribe of Levi. The subsequent verses describe how each Levi replaced one firstborn, and the remaining firstborns paid a sum of money to release themselves of their sacred stature. The commentaries explain that the tribe of Levi earned this privilege by being the only tribe which did not participate in the sin of the golden calf. (This is indicated by the fact that after the sin of the calf, Moshe summoned all those who had remained loyal to God, and the tribe of Levi assembled around him – Shemot 32:26.)

God concludes this pronouncement by declaring, “*Ani Hashem*” – “I am the Lord” (3:13). Rav Saadia Gaon explains this as emphasizing that it was God who elevated the tribe of Levi to this stature. It seems, according to this interpretation, that God here in a sense sought to preempt the complaints of Korach and his cohorts who would later accuse Moshe of selfishly reserving the privileges associated with the *Mishkan* for members of his own tribe.

Seforno, however, explains differently. He suggests that “*ani Hashem*” should be understood as emphasizing God’s permanence, that He never changes. *Benei Yisrael* may have figured that God simply changed His mind in deciding the transfer the privileges of serving in the *Mishkan* from the firstborns to the *Leviyim*. God therefore proclaimed, “*Ani Hashem*,” to make it clear that, in Seforno’s words, “I did not change when I rejected the firstborns, for this change occurred not because of Me, but rather because of them, in that they sinned.” The reason for replacing the firstborns was not any change in God’s mind, as it were, but solely the grave sin of the golden calf.

Often, when we fail or forfeit an opportunity, we instinctively point to external factors and conditions as the reason for our failure or loss. We assume the mistake was made by somebody else, or resulted from conditions beyond our control. But while sometimes this may be correct, at other times, we ourselves are to blame. Just as God emphasized to the firstborns that they forfeited their privileges not because of Him, but because of their mistake, similarly, many of our missed opportunities are the result of our missteps, and cannot be blamed on anybody or anything else. It is far more tempting to cast the blame on other people or external factors, but it is only by acknowledging our mistakes that we are capable of learning from our failures and growing. If we accustom ourselves to blame our troubles and disappointments on others, we will find ourselves mired in fruitless resentment and bitterness. But if we have the humility and honesty to recognize what we could have done better, we help ensure that in the future we will do it better, and in this way we will grow and improve with every mistake we make, thereby turning each one into a valuable growth experience.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Bamidbar tells about the census which God commanded Moshe and Aharon to conduct at Mount Sinai, whereby the males of *Benei Yisrael* were counted from age twenty and above. The *Leviyim*, however, as we noted earlier this week, were counted already as infants, from the age of one month.

Rav Avraham Borenstein of Sochatchov, the *Avnei Neizer*, is cited by his son, the *Sheim Mi-Shmuel*,as offering an explanation for the significance of the *Leviyim*’s being counted already as infants. At the time when the Torah was given, *Benei Yisrael* proclaimed their unconditional commitment to God’s laws even before hearing what they entailed, announcing, “*Na’aseh ve-nishma*” – “We will perform, and we will hear” (Shemot 24:7). The *Avnei Neizer* views this event as reflecting the level whereby the people were naturally and instinctively drawn to Torah observance without the need for intellectual engagement. *Benei Yisrael* at that time developed an intuitive drive to fulfill the divine will, without having to engage their rational faculties. Overcome by awe and having achieved complete faith, they did not need to think or rationalize; they immediately proclaimed their unconditional devotion to God, without any hesitation or consideration. Unfortunately, the *Avnei Neizer* continued, *Benei Yisrael* fell from this level forty days later, when they worshipped the golden calf. Only the tribe of Levi, which did not participate in the worship of the calf, retained this lofty stature, the intuitive, instinctive drive to unconditionally serve the Almighty. And for this reason, the *Avnei Neizer* explained, most of the nation was counted only from age twenty, but the *Leviyim* were counted from the age of one month. The rest of the nation was counted from adulthood, from the age at which one’s rational faculties are fully developed. (The *Avnei Neizer* referenced in this context the Gemara’s ruling in Masekhet Gittin (65a) that one who inherits real estate is legally empowered to sell it only from the age of twenty, as at a younger age he is prone to make a rash transaction – indicating that one is considered to have achieved full rational development at the age of twenty.) The *Leviyim*, however, who retained their instinctive commitment to God which does not depend on reason, were counted already as infants. They could be counted among the legions of God even before their intellectual development, because their commitment to God’s service was ingrained in their essence and did not require the engagement of their rational faculties.

The *Avnei Neizer*’s comments regarding the significance of the “*na’aseh ve-nishma*” proclamation resemble the approach developed by Rav Soloveitchik in one of his published addresses (“Mt. Sinai – Their Finest Hour,” in Rav Avraham Besdin’s *Reflections of the Rav*, chapter 8). Rav Soloveitchik explains the people’s pronouncement as a reflection of their “*ratzon elyon*” (“higher will”), the dimension of human will which, in the Rav’s words, “makes decisions without consulting the intellect.” This layer is “in the center of the spiritual personality and constitutes man’s real identity.” The “*ratzon elyon*” stands in contrast to man’s lower will, what the Rav terms his “pragmatic intellect, which weighs pros and cons,” and is “of subordinate stature in man’s personality.”

On the basis of this concept, Rav Soloveitchik explains the meaning of “*na’aseh ve-nishma*”:

When God offered the Torah at Mt. Sinai, the Israelites did not ask for a sample, to witness a demonstration, or to accept the Torah for a thirty-day trial period. This would have been the calculated, practical thing to do… The Jewish response was…“we have decided to commit ourselves and, after that, to understand intellectually.” The decision was a leap of faith by the *ratzon elyon*, an intuitive sense of what was valid and imperative. The inner soul of man is capable of such bold visions, to transcend mundane considerations in an heroic embrace of what is or must be.

According to the *Avnei Neizer*, this “*ratzon elyon*” which was manifest at the time of *Matan Torah* is reflected by the census, which included even the infants of Levi, the only tribe that preserved what Rav Soloveitchik would later call “this intuitive sense of what was valid and imperative.” The tribe of Levi represented the ideal of instinctive commitment, a level of devotion that does not require any intellectual process, but is rather innate and reflexive. This is an ideal standard which we may not be able to actually achieve, but towards which we can and must strive, working to make our commitment to God’s laws part of our very essence and of the fabric of our beings.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Bamidbar tells of the special census taken of the tribe of Levi, which included all males from the age of one month – in contrast to the census taken of rest of the nation, which included only the adults (from age twenty and up). Rashi (3:15) explains that it is after one month of life when a newborn is determined to have been a viable fetus at the time of birth, and so the Levite infants were counted from the age of one month. Interestingly, however, Rashi does not simply state that at this age the Levite infants were worthy of being counted, but rather writes that from this age an infant “is counted to be considered a watchman of the sacred guard.”

The phrase used here by Rashi – “*shomer mishmeret ha-kodesh*” – is taken from a verse later in Sefer Bamidbar (3:38) which refers to the *Leviyim* as “watchmen of the sacred guard.” The Gemara in Masekhet Tamid (26a) cites this verse as a source of the obligation to station guards from the tribe of Levi around the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. A number of writers noted that Rashi’s remarks appear to indicate that even young children from the tribe of Levi were qualified to serve in this capacity. Although minors (children below the age of *mitzva* obligation) are not qualified to serve in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, and later (chapter 4) God commands Moshe to count the *Leviyim* from the age of thirty, stating that *Leviyim* begin serving at that age, it appears that an exception is made when it comes to the role of guarding the *Mikdash*. Rashi apparently understood that infants were included in the initial census of the *Leviyim* because even a child is allowed to serve as a “*shomer mishmeret ha-kodesh*” – a guard in the Temple. This observation was made by, among others, Rav Aryeh Tzvi Frommer of Kozhiglov, in his *Eretz Tzevi*.

If so, then Rashi’s comments resolve a difficulty raised by many regarding the first Mishna of Masekhet Tamid, which refers to the *kohanim* who guarded the Temple as “*rovim*” – “youngsters.” The *mefaresh* (the anonymous commentary to Masekhet Tamid) explains that this term is used because the guards were boys who had not yet reached the age of bar-mitzva. Many later commentators wondered how it is possible that minors could fulfill the Biblical command of *shemirat ha-mikdash* (guarding the Temple). Some have pointed to Rashi’s comments here in Parashat Bamidbar as providing the answer. According to Rashi, it appears, children were included in the census of the tribe of Levi because they were suitable for guarding the *Mikdash*. Meaning, the Torah itself established this extraordinary measure, allowing youngsters to serve in this capacity, and thus *shemirat ha-mikdash* is an exceptional instance of a *mitzva* which can be fulfilled even by youngsters.

How might we explain this extraordinary feature of *shemirat ha-mikdash*? Why is specifically this *mitzva* capable of being fulfilled by children?

Perhaps the answer can be found in the famous comments of the Rambam in *Hilkhot Beit Ha-bechira* (8:1), where he writes that the Torah requires guarding the *Beit Ha-mikdash* not to protect it, but rather to give glory to God. In the Rambam’s words, “A palace with guards is not the same as a palace without guards.” The guards serve no practical function; all this is needed is their presence, which itself brings honor to the Almighty. In light of the Rambam’s comments, we can perhaps understand why even youngsters are suitable to fill this role. The guards of the *Mikdash* do not need any skill or training, because simply by being present they serve the purpose of honoring God. God receives honor through anybody who seeks to be His servant, by anybody who is present at the “*Mikdash*,” anybody who “shows up” with the desire to grow closer to Him. God takes pride, as it were, in all those who serve Him, even if they are “children” – whether literally or figuratively. Of course, not everybody is suitable to fill roles that require particular skills or expertise. But when it comes to giving God honor – this is something we can all do. Even if we are still “children,” with little knowledge or experience, we bring honor to God by being present, by showing genuine interest, by seeking to connect to Him and faithfully serve Him.

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