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פרשת במדבר
Parshat Bamidbar

Ashreinu | אשרינו

ENHANCING YOUR STUDY OF THE WEEKLY TORAH PORTION



WE'VE GOT THIS
RABBI AVI LEVITT

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MORIAH ROSENTHAL ('20)

BATSHEVA SHEKHTER ('20)

REBECCA HENNER ('22)

YONI KURTZ ('20)

During the past nine weeks, much has been written about the destructive impact that stay-at-home governmental orders have had and will continue to have on the U.S. econ-

omy. Unemployment is rising at accelerated rates and dire predictions are being made about the deep recession that is yet to come. It is very timely then that we read about *shemita* and *yovel* in Parshat Behar, the first of the two parshiyot assigned to last week's Shabbat.

During the seventh year of every cycle, the Jewish agrarian economy comes to a halt and the farmers and the orchard keepers leave their fields and trees uncultivated. The *parshanim* emphasize that the

purpose of this mitzvah is to remind everyone that Hashem is the owner of the land and we do not actually possess the property we hold. A second major purpose stated by the parshanim is to learn, to change up the pace of drudgery of life, and to reacquaint with family and friends.

The economic worry in the Torah is not ignored and, in fact, when *yovel* follows the seventh *shemita* in the cycle, the *pshat* provides the worry of everyman who wonders how there will be enough not only for the 49th year, but the 50th year as well, since two back-to-back fallow years are anticipated. The Torah's response is that the sixth year of that last cycle will provide enough harvest to carry everyone through until the year one of the cycle after *yovel*. Hashem expects that if people trust the system, the system will yield more than enough to provide for people's needs.

Rav Shimshon Rephael Hirsch analogizes to the Shabbat of the Midbar and reminds us that the

Mun served a similar function. The provisions of the sixth day were enough to carry Bnei Yisrael through Shabbat despite the lack of material productivity on that day. We are supposed to direct our efforts elsewhere, and our food and monetary needs will be addressed.

It is not easy for business people who have lost thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars to feel very confident in this moment that their needs are being addressed. As a school community we appreciate that there are real costs to families, even though the opportunity to learn and reacquaint with family have been part of the past nine weeks. Of course, coronavirus is very different from *shemita* in that the latter is planned and cyclical and the former is random and frighteningly uncontrolled. Hopefully, people are able to look at the Torah and draw strength from a message that tells us that even if we do not know exactly how the money, the food, and the material will come, if Hashem can help people get through years six, seven, and eight of the last *shemita* cycle including *yovel*, we can have confidence that with *emunah* and with *shemirat hamitzvot* we can make it through 90 or 180 or 270 days of COVID-19.

May everyone's family find their way to prosperity, health, and economic security, as well as enhanced learning and family connectedness on the other side of social distancing.

GROWTH IN THE DESERT

MORIAH ROSENTHAL ('20)

Parshat Bamidbar begins:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי

“Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Desert of Sinai” (Bamidbar 1:1). The Desert of Sinai does not seem to be a befitting place for the tremendous revelations that Moshe experienced. The desert is empty, unpopulated, and lacks natural resources. But some of the most auspicious Jewish events took place in the desert: the giving of the Torah, the building of the Mishkan, and Hashem speaking to

Moshe.

The Mechilta de Rashbi explains that the desert is an appropriate setting for the giving of the Torah to Bnei Yisrael. Just as the empty desert was the setting for Matan Torah, so too anyone who may feel spiritually empty is capable of having their own spiritual awakening. Moreover, nobody owns the desert. Similarly, the Torah and a relationship with Hashem are available for anyone who wishes to partake.

The world might not seem like a spiritual place. We are born without the capacity to believe in Hashem and we must work throughout our lives to develop our own personal faith in Hashem. Nothing is handed to us in life. The Jewish response to being in a desert is not to fear the uncertainty and the lack of protection from the elements, but rather to build a Mishkan.

The Jewish people's convictions are resolute regardless of our surroundings. Despite being 60% desert, Israel was the only country to enter the 21st century with a net gain of trees. When life gives you desert, make a Kiddush Hashem for the entire world to see and be a happy and proud *eved Hashem*. Wishing you all a Shabbat Shalom!

COUNT THE HEADS

BATSHEVA SHEKHTER ('20)

This week's parsha, Parshat Bamidbar, discusses the census that took place during the second year of Bnei Yisrael's journey in the desert. Hashem instructs Moshe to count the people and appoints leaders to help him and Aharon count. They do so and then list the number of men over age twenty in each tribe. The pasuk states:

שָׂאוּ אֶת רֹאשׁ כָּל עֵדוּת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם
לְבַיִת אֲבוֹתָם בְּמִסְפַּר שְׁמוֹת כָּל זָכָר לְגִלְגֻלְתָּם

“Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head” (Bamidbar 1:2).

Though most translations define the phrase as,

“take a census,” שָׂאוּ אֶת רֹאשׁ more directly translates as, “lift the heads”. Why does the pasuk use this phrase, as opposed to any other verb in the Hebrew language that means to count?

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks explains that censuses are often dangerous because they focus on the group and not the individual. The emphasis is on the total number of people and makes it seem that each individual is easily replaceable. Each person becomes anonymous and has little power within the larger group. They are pushed to follow the ways of the collective and are easily swayed by persuasive leaders.

However, Judaism is the opposite; it works to promote the individual through an appreciation for individual interpretation and disagreeing opinions. Hashem’s goal in counting Bnei Yisrael is to “lift the heads” of the people, to make them feel significant, special, and recognized. Each person has unique talents and abilities that allow them to impact the world. Our gifts give us the opportunity to change the group in a way that no one else can.

The census reminds Bnei Yisrael that each person is special, but they must work to better the community. Even though we are individuals, we cannot look out only for ourselves, but also for our group. Individuality emphasizes the individual, but also focuses on the individual’s role within the greater environment. May we all learn to identify our strengths and use them to better our communities.

LIFT UP YOURSELF

REBECCA HENNER ('22)

In this week’s parsha, Parshat Bamidbar, Hashem commands Moshe to take a head count of Bnei Yisrael and He also describes the organization of the camp and how each tribe will arrange itself as they travel through the Midbar.

שָׂאוּ אֶת רֹאשׁ כָּל עֵדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם
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“Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head” (Bamidbar 1:2).

Rabbi Sacks offers a great explanation of this pasuk, giving deeper meaning to what seems like a simple commandment. He states that in a typical situation, for example in an army, a company etc., unless you are the CEO or the commander, you as an individual do not necessarily have a lot of importance and are often replaceable. When the boss of a company counts his staff, he does not do so because he cares about each person, rather because he needs a certain number of people for his business to properly function. If one staff member leaves, the company will continue to run, and can quickly hire another person. Therefore, when people who are part of a large organization are counted, they may begin to feel insignificant. This is exactly what Hashem did not want to happen when commanding Moshe to count His beloved nation. This, explains Rav Hirsch, is why He uses the words שָׂאוּ אֶת רֹאשׁ as opposed to the more common words for “count”. The phrase used has the connotation that the person being counted is important. שָׂאוּ means to lift. When counting the people, Moshe is “lifting” their spirits and making it clear that they have a specific role to play in the nation.

Even when we are not in school, shul, work etc. we must remember that we need to continue fulfilling our roles, and try to find meaning in each day. Hashem looks at every single one of us as important, and we must recognize what we are meant to do in this world. Every Jew is unique and can do something that no one else can. May we take this time to focus on what our role is so that when we get back we can be conscious of our goals.

VALUE KEDUSHA

YONI KURTZ ('20)

The start to the book of Bamidbar is not especially “exciting,” as parshiyot go. We find a counting of Bnei Yisrael, something that occurs several other times in the Torah, and is seemingly devoid of

any powerful narrative storytelling. As is often the case, we must look deeper within Parshat Bamidbar to find an impactful lesson.

In Revi'i (the fourth *aliyah*) of Bamidbar, the Torah references the aforementioned story of Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's sons, offering a "strange fire" and being punished with death. The Torah states:

וַיָּמָת נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא לִפְנֵי ה' בְּהִקְרָבָם אֵשׁ זָרָה
לִפְנֵי ה' בַּמִּדְבָּר סִינַי וּבָנִים לֹא הָיוּ לָהֶם וַיִּכְהֹן
אֶלְעָזָר וַיִּתְמָר עַל פְּנֵי אֶהֱרֹן אָבִיהֶם

"And Nadav and Avihu died before Hashem when they brought a strange fire before Hashem in the Sinai desert, and they had no children. Elazar and Itamar served as kohanim in the presence of Aharon, their father" (3:4).

This story is often deeply troubling to me. Nadav and Avihu certainly made a mistake, but death always seemed extreme as a punishment. Though we will never know HaShem's motives, we can at the very least attempt to learn something from this harrowing episode. Regarding the above pasuk, the Seforno notes that the Torah adds in the specific reason for Nadav and Avihu's death, even though we learned it relatively recently and surely remember how Nadav and Avihu died. The Seforno posits that this is added to teach us that the sin of offering an unwanted offering was the only sin Nadav and Avihu had been guilty of in their entire lives. While this is clearly an unattainable standard for us, it reaffirms the shock of people of such high spiritual standing committing such a grievous sin.

This episode is particularly helpful when thinking about how we treat kedusha, and the other things we hold as sacred in our lives. Both in a religious and personal setting, it is important to safeguard the people and things Hashem has taught us to hold most dear. Even great people, such as Nadav and Avihu, were punished for forgetting this important message. During these extremely challenging times, remembering to value kedusha and those closest to us can bring comfort. May we all merit to integrate this powerful lesson into our lives, and with Hashem's help, remain healthy and religiously and interpersonally connected as we battle the coronavirus together. Good Shabbos.



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