



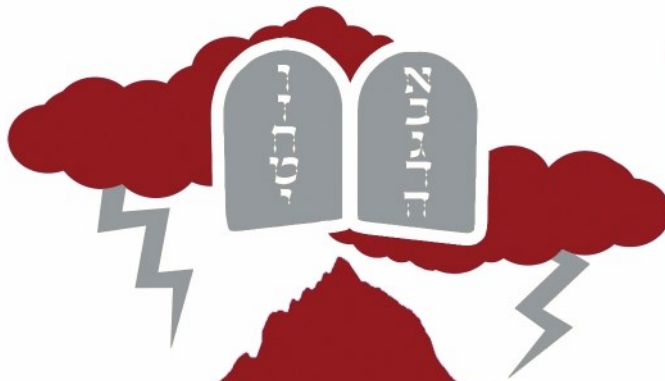
Parshat HaShavuah

במדבר

BAMIDBAR

כ"ד אייר תשע"ד
MAY 24, 2014

A PUBLICATION OF



Ashreinu

חלקינו מה טוב

Candle Lighting

7:46

S"Z Kriat Shema

9:54

Sunset

8:05

Motzei

Shabbat

8:44



Enriching and Enhancing Your Study of the Weekly Torah Portion

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Sponsored in memory of Lana (Leah) D. Goldberg

WAVING FLAG RABBI ALLAN HOUBEN

K'naan, in his famous theme song for the World Cup four years ago, used the image of "waving flags" as a symbol of freedom. The Torah, however, presents a slightly different view of flags in this week's parsha.

As we conclude the census and the description of the centrality of the Mishkan in the camp, with the uncounted Shevet Levi immediately surrounding it, the Torah drops the term *degel*, which is then repeated over and over throughout the parsha as if we have always known about this unique aspect of the camp. What are these *degalim*? What is their origin? What purpose do they serve?

There are two famous midrashim that seek to explain these flags (perhaps a better translation would be banner or standard, but I will ignore the linguistic nuances for the purpose of this D'var Torah). The first states that Hashem expresses his great love for B'nei Yisrael by giving them flags like the angels in heaven possess. The second explains that during the revelation at Har Sinai, B'nei Yisrael saw the angels bearing flags, were jealous of those flags, and so Hashem obliges and gives them flags of their own.

Aside from the fact that the midrashim seem to provide us with different points of origination (Hashem's great love for the people vs. fulfilling the people's jealous request), they also raise more questions than they answer: Why do angels have flags? Aren't flags physical objects—what purpose do they serve in the spiritual realm? What about the flags made B'nei Yisrael jealous and want them so much? Why did Hashem acquiesce? How do flags show Hashem's great love for His people?

Continued page 4





EVERY INDIVIDUAL COUNTS JESSICA GRIFF ('15)

The title of a book usually indicates some important theme or event that transpires in the story and often deepens the significance of the work as a whole. This week we begin a new sefer, Sefer Bamidbar, which is referred to in English as Numbers. The book begins with Hashem commanding Moshe to take a census of the nation, hence the title. This is the third time Hashem commands that His nation be counted. Because it is the third time, this census seems unimportant, and yet the entire sefer is named after this one event. Therefore, there must be some deeper message that is conveyed through the idea of this counting. Instead of using common verbs that mean to count, Hashem tells Moshe to “lift the head” of each individual. This is not normal jargon and therefore begs the question: what is there to learn from this special wording of the commandment?

Notoriously, crowds have the effect of tending to make the individual lose his independent judgment and follow what others are doing. In crowds, people lose their sense of significance, thinking that their opinions do not matter. Censuses are conducted to find the total value; they rather ignore the simple individuals that make up the big final number. However, in Judaism, we pride ourselves on the dignity and integrity of the individual. We believe that every human is created in the image and likeness of God. The sages say that every life is like an entire universe. The Rambam writes that each of us should see ourselves as if our next act could change the fate of the world. No voice, no view, no opinion is silenced. Judaism never allows us to lose our individuality in the mass.

By Hashem instructing Moshe to “lift the heads,” Hashem is in fact warning Moshe against the dangers of counting the nation as a whole entity. If one simply views himself as part of a group, he will inevitably think he makes no significant difference and has no way of impacting the entire group. He would be a mere wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the seashore, or a speck of dust on the surface of infinity. In Judaism, taking a census must always be done in such a way to signal that we are valued as individuals. We each have unique gifts. There is a contribution only you can bring. To lift someone’s head means to recognize him. It is a gesture of love.

While every individual needs to be personally addressed, there is a major difference between individuality and individualism. Individuality means that one is unique and valued member of a team. Individualism, however, is one who is interested in oneself alone, not the group. Judaism values individuality, not individualism. As Hillel declares, “If I am only for myself, what am I?” (Pirkei Avot 1:14).


The census that seems unimportant and simple on the surface is truly there to teach future generations the invaluable lesson of individuality. Hashem teaches us that it is not enough to be part of the crowd. We must all remember our uniqueness and contribute our individual talents to better the whole. As part of a school and community, it is imperative to translate this notion into our everyday lives, whether taking a position on student council or volunteering at our local shul. We all can make a difference because each and every one of us has our own niche to contribute.

Thank you, Jessica, for all of the hard work, time, and devotion that you have given to Ashreinu. Your ability to ensure that everything runs smoothly and gets done is truly remarkable. We wish you only success in all your future endeavors. Your love of Torah should continue to grow. Thank you for helping continue spread Torah throughout our communities.

RESPECT EVERYONE MATTHEW CLEEMAN ('16)

In this week’s Parsha, Parshat Bamidbar, Hashem asks Moshe to take a census of the Jewish people. One might interpret this to mean that Hashem does not attribute significant value to any single Jewish person; instead it seems like individual Jews are anonymous and meaningless.





Cleeman continued

However, to understand Hashem's true intentions, one must first delve deeper into how Moshe is instructed to conduct the count. Hashem told Moshe to first separate people into their specific tribes and then to count each individual one by one. Viewed in this light, we now understand that Hashem actually ascribes tremendous value to each and every Jew. We also understand from this directive that the census in this fashion means that each tribe is unique and that each person has a specific role.

One might ask then why the Torah specifically singles out the Levi'im for their task and not any other tribe. It almost seems as if God is stating that one tribe is better than the others. The answer to this is simple. While some might be stronger and others might be smarter, no tribe is inferior to another; each one simply has different traits and responsibilities, making every shevet valuable.

The story is told of the great sage of Jerusalem, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. One evening he asked his congregation to wait to begin prayers until the street sweeper had arrived. Rabbi Auerbach explained: "This man is totally devoted to beautifying the streets of Jerusalem. I only wish that my own work would be performed with such pure intentions!" What Rabbi Auerbach is trying to point out is that each person, no matter how seemingly menial his task, is still valuable and should be held in high regard. As you enter the upcoming week, remember that every person has a purpose and every person deserves the same amount of respect as the next!

MARRIAGE IS THE ULTIMATE CON"CEUS"

MAYA BORZAK ('16)

As this week's parsha begins with God's command to Israel to perform a census of the Jewish people, Rashi infers that there are, interestingly, three counts taken in the first thirteen months since Bnei Yisrael's exodus. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks alludes to the Lubavitcher Rebbe's teachings and asks the following questions (based on Rashi's inference and the overall significance of census): What is the meaning of the count, and why specifically three counts? What is the connection between Parshat Bamidbar, which is usually read the Shabbat before Shavuot, and Shavuot?

Generally, when things are numbered and counted, they are placed in equal ranking. Regarding the counts in Bamidbar, "all the congregation of the Children of Israel" (1:2) are counted with equal standards, notwithstanding one's social or noble status. Rashi explains that the census is a manifestation of God's love for the Jewish people, as each Jew is counted once. Rabbi Sacks further examines Rashi's position and says that the counting demonstrates God's love for each Jew's essence—his/her Jewish soul—and is done to reveal the quintessence of each Jewish soul.

Gemara Taanit (26b) describes Shavuot as the marriage of Israel and God. On the Shabbat before a wedding, the groom recites a bracha and has an aliyah as a preparation for his marriage. So too, Bamidbar is a preparation for the similar union between B'nei Yisrael and Hashem, as well as God's ultimate revelation to the Jewish people—the receiving of the Torah on Shavuot.

In fact, the three counts that Rashi mentions are progressive steps that lead the Jewish people to their union with God and His revelation to them, each being a greater form of self-sacrifice and love than the next. This began with rushing out of Mitzrayim, progressed to building the Mishkan, and culminated with bringing God into their midst by virtue of their own actions through korbanot and other mitzvot. Then, as Rabbi Sacks beautifully states, "all their actions were a testimony to the union of the Jewish soul and God." Only once the love of G-d is embedded in their actions can they bring about the revelation of Hashem.

The parallel between Bamidbar and Shavuot is now apparent. In Parshat Bamidbar, the Jews are counted in evolutionary stages in order to deserve His revelation at Har Sinai; at each stage they are counted as Jewish souls, whereby God demonstrates his love for the people and further prepares them to receive the Torah. By taking the census as a notion of love, only then can we understand Shavuot as the ultimate union (marriage) between each Jewish soul and God and the Jewish people's ultimate agreement to follow the Jewish path—accepting the Torah.



The Slonimer Rebbe, in his sefer *Netivot Shalom*, suggests that the purpose of a flag is to identify one's individuality and differentiate one from another. Countries have flags that represent, in colors, symbols, and even words, the unique character of their nation. So too, subsets often have their own flags, as the individual states of the US and even different groups or battalions of a national army. The Slonimer Rebbe suggests that this is what the midrash means when it talks about angels bearing flags. Since flags can connote one's specific identity or even their specific role and responsibility, we can derive that each angel had a function and a mission that distinguished him from his fellow angel.

Armed with this understanding, the midrashim seem to fall into place, and the greater context of the encampment gains a layer of depth perhaps overlooked before. The people sought specialization. They saw the rank and file of Hashem's messengers each categorized by a mission, a purpose, and desired direction in a similar fashion. Man has long yearned for clarity of purpose, and B'nei Yisrael was no different. Hashem sees the longing of his beloved people, and in a show of great love bestows upon them *degalim*. Each tribe will be represented by a color, an icon, that approximates their charge, their unique *chelek* in avodat Hashem (12 tribes, 12 roles...perhaps Suzanne Collins derived some inspiration from our parsha in creating the districts of Panem!).

The *degalim* of B'nei Yisrael, however, are not simply devices of distinction. In addition to each tribe's personal flag, whose color matched his stone on the Kohen's breastplate and whose symbols are often depicted in Jewish religious artwork, each group of three tribes also had a joint flag representing their encampment, a flag which combined the colors of all three. In a show of great unity, these joint flags clearly conveyed two important messages:

First, that to achieve one's desired goal, to fulfill one's purpose, it is sometimes, even often, necessary to work together. Second, while each tribe had their own *derech* and *degel*, they respected the *derech* of their fellow tribes, different and distinct as they might be.

One of the amazing things about WYHS is its ability to cater to the needs of its individual students, offering a wide range of classes, clubs, and committees that attract students under the flag of a shared love, a shared interest, a shared purpose. While clearly expressing the value of diversity, the importance of coming together, the power of the grade or school as a whole, plays a prominent role in many programs run throughout the year.

I have been privileged to teach and work with students from the many "tribes" represented in our student body, and seeing the culture of respect for students of different academic penchant and ability, for students with varied talents and desires, is one of the many lasting impressions I will take with me. "*Ashreinu, ma tov chelkeinu*" that we have such a talent-rich and *menschlich*-laden student population. To all the students and alumni whom I have taught and interacted with over the past nine years, may you continue to enrich the lives of those around you, and may you ultimately know the *nachat* I have from you in your own children.

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