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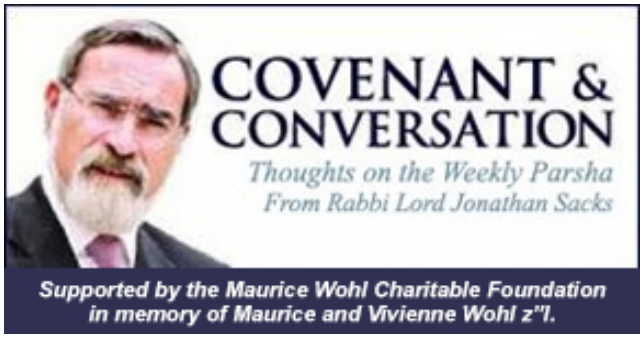

Leading a Nation of Individuals

The book of Bamidbar begins with a census of the Israelites. That is why it this book is known in English as *Numbers*. This raises a number of questions: what is the significance of this act of counting? And why here at the beginning of the book? Besides which, there have already been two previous censuses of the people and this is the third within the space of a single year. Surely one would have been sufficient. Additionally, does counting have anything to do with leadership?

The place to begin is to note what appears to be a contradiction. On the one hand, Rashi says that the acts of counting in the Torah are gestures of love on the part of God:

> *Because they (the Children of Israel) are dear to Him, God counts them often. He counted them when they were about to leave Egypt. He counted them after the Golden Calf to establish how many were left. And now that He was about to cause His Presence to rest on them (with the inauguration of the Sanctuary), He counted them again. (Rashi to Bamidbar 1:1)*

When God initiates a census of the Israelites, it is to show that He loves them.

On the other hand, the Torah is explicit in saying that taking a census of the nation is fraught with risk:

> *Then God said to Moses, "When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each must give to God a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them." (Ex. 30:11-12).*

When, centuries later, King David counted the people, there was Divine anger and seventy thousand people died.[1] How can this be, if counting is an expression of love?

The answer lies in the phrase the Torah uses to describe the act of counting: *se'u et rosh*, literally, "lift the head."(Num. 1:2) This is a strange, circumlocutory expression. Biblical Hebrew contains many verbs meaning "to count": *limnot, lifkod, lispor, lachshov*. Why does the Torah not use these simple words for the census, choosing instead the roundabout expression, "lift the heads" of the people?

The short answer is this: In any census, count or rollcall there is a tendency to focus on the total - the crowd, the multitude, the mass. Here is a nation of sixty million people, or a company with one hundred thousand employees, or a sports crowd of sixty thousand. Any total tends to value the group or nation as a whole. The larger the total, the stronger the army, the more popular the team, and the more successful the company.

Counting devalues the individual and tends to

make him or her replaceable. If one soldier dies in battle, another will take their place. If one person leaves the organisation, someone else can be hired to do their job.

Notoriously, too, crowds have the effect of tending to make the individual lose their independent judgment and follow what others are doing. We call this "herd behaviour," and it sometimes leads to collective madness. In 1841 Charles Mackay published his classic study, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, which tells of the South Sea Bubble that cost thousands of people their money in the 1720s, and the tulip mania in Holland when entire fortunes were spent on single tulip bulbs. The Great Crashes of 1929 and 2008 had the same crowd psychology.

Another great work, Gustav Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895) showed how crowds exercise a "magnetic influence" that transmutes the behaviour of individuals into a collective "group mind." As he put it, "An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will." People in a crowd become anonymous. Their conscience is silenced. They lose a sense of personal responsibility.

Crowds are peculiarly prone to regressive behaviour, primitive reactions and instinctual behaviour. They are easily led by figures who are demagogues, playing on people's fears and their sense of victimhood. Such leaders, Le Bon noted, are "especially recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous excitable half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness,"[2] a remarkable anticipation of Hitler. It is no accident that Le Bon's work was published in France at a time of rising antisemitism and the Dreyfus trial.

Hence the significance of one remarkable feature of Judaism: its principled insistence – like no other civilisation before – on the dignity and integrity of the individual. We believe that every human being was created in the image and likeness of God. The Sages said that every life is like an entire universe.[3] Maimonides wrote that each of us should see ourselves as if our next act could change the fate of the world.[4] Every dissenting view is carefully recorded in the Mishnah, even if the law is otherwise. Every verse of the Torah is capable, said the Sages, of seventy interpretations. No voice, no view, is silenced. Judaism never allows us to lose our individuality in the mass.

There is a wonderful blessing mentioned in the Talmud to be said on seeing six hundred thousand Israelites together in one place. It is: "Blessed are You, Lord… who discerns secrets."[5] The Talmud explains that every person is different. We each have different attributes. We all think our own thoughts. Only God can enter the minds of each of us and know what we are thinking, and this is what the blessing refers to. In other words, even in a massive crowd where, to human eyes, faces blur into a mass, God still relates to us as individuals, not as members of a crowd.

That is the meaning of the phrase, "lift the head," used in the context of a census. God tells Moses that there is a danger, when counting a nation, that each individual will feel insignificant. "What am I? What difference can I make? I am only one of millions, a mere wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the sea-shore, dust on the surface of infinity."

Against that, God tells Moses to lift people's heads by showing that they each count; they matter as individuals. Indeed in Jewish law a *davar she-be-minyan*, something that is counted, sold individually rather than by weight, is never nullified even in a mixture of a thousand or a million others.[6] In Judaism taking a census must always be done in such a way as to signal that we are valued as individuals. We each have unique gifts. There is a contribution only I can bring. To lift someone's head means to show them favour, to recognise them. It is a gesture of love.

There is, however, all the difference in the world between *individuality* and *individualism*. Individuality means that I am a unique and valued member of a team. Individualism means that I am not a team player at all. I am interested in myself alone, not the group. Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam gave this a famous name, noting that more people than ever in the United States are going ten-pin bowling, but fewer than ever are joining bowling teams. He called this phenomenon "Bowling alone."[7] MIT professor Sherry Turkle calls our age of Twitter, Facebook, and electronic rather than face-to-face friendships, "Alone together."[8] Judaism values individuality, not individualism. As Hillel said, "If I am only for myself, what am I?"[9]

All this has implications for Jewish leadership. We are not in the business of counting numbers. The Jewish people always was small and yet achieved great things. Judaism has a profound mistrust of demagogic leaders who manipulate the emotions of crowds. Moses at the Burning Bush spoke of his inability to be eloquent. "I am not a man of words" (Ex. 4:10). He thought this was a deficiency in a leader. In fact, it was the opposite. Moses did not sway people by his oratory. Rather, he lifted them by his teaching.

A Jewish leader has to respect individuals. They must "lift their heads." If you seek to lead, however small or large the group you lead, you must always communicate the value you place on everyone, including those others exclude: the widow, the orphan and the stranger. You must never attempt to sway a crowd by appealing to the primitive emotions of fear or hate. You must never ride roughshod over the opinions of others.

It is hard to lead a nation of individuals, but this is the most challenging, empowering, inspiring leadership of all.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think a census was taken just before the inauguration of the Mishkan?
2. What is the difference between a great leader who gives inspiring speeches to crowds, and a dangerously dictator who gives stirring oratories to the masses?
3. Jewish law follows the majority rule – how can it do this while also valuing every individual's opinion? (Hint: how are halachic decisions made and recorded in the Gemara?)

NOTES

1. 2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21.
2. Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd*, London, Fisher Unwin 1896, 134.
3. Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:4.
4. Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4.
5. Brachot 58a.
6. Beitsah 3b.
7. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000.
8. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, New York, Basic Books, 2011.
9. Mishnah Avot 1:14.

A Leap of Love

All new beginnings are charged with hope; the beginning of a new book of the Torah is no exception. As the book of Bamidbar opens, there is hope that the journey upon which the Jews embarked as they left Egypt would finally bring them to the Promised Land. The book of Vayikra did not document any movement toward their destination: Throughout the entire book, the nation seemed rooted to one spot;

their location remained unchanged. Now, we begin again. The journey resumes.

From this perspective, though, the name of the book – "Bamidbar" – 'in the desert' – is ominous. The desert is a foreboding, even frightening place; might not the name itself give us reason to suspect that the events this book describes will be less than successful? Those of us who know how the book ends are aware that there is progress, and a great deal of movement: At the book's conclusion, we are poised at the cusp of the Promised Land, yet the trip is far longer and more difficult than we had anticipated. The path is circuitous, and the people stumble and fall many times along the way. The Land of Israel, while much closer, remains out of reach.

Is there something about the desert itself that makes this so? The desert is mentioned many times in the early books of the Torah, in many different contexts, but time and again, the desert imparts a sense of fear, dread and danger. The desert is not a forgiving environment; the basic resources required for human existence are severely limited. Certainly in antiquity the desert was associated – if not synonymous with – death. An *en masse* journey through the desert would have been considered an absurdity. Perhaps the name of the book is a foreshadowing, a premonition that this endeavor will not work out well.

Why, then, did God choose this route? Moshe explained the plan and purpose of the journey through the desert:

> *Remember the entire path along which God your Lord led you these forty years in the desert. He sent hardships to **test** (or uplift) you, to determine what is in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not... But your heart may then grow haughty, and you may forget God your Lord, the One who brought you out of the slave house that was Egypt. It was He who led you through the great, **terrifying desert, where there were snakes, vipers, scorpions and thirst.** When there was no water, it was He who provided you water from a solid rock. In the desert He fed you Manna, which was something that your ancestors never knew. He may have been sending hardships to **test** you, but it was so **He would eventually do [all the more] good for you.** [When you later have prosperity, be careful that you not] say to yourself, 'It was my own strength and personal power that brought me all this prosperity.' You must remember that it is God your Lord who gives you the power to become prosperous. He does this so as to keep the covenant and the oath that He made with your fathers, even as [He is keeping it] today. (Dvarim 8:2-18)*

The difficulties of the desert are not whitewashed, but a rationale is provided: The trek through the desert is a necessary stage of development, designed to put the people's commitment to the test, and, as a result, to uplift them, to make them stronger and help them create a new type of relationship with God, a relationship based on trust.

The prophet describes the desert experience in the most romantic terms:

> *Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus said the Almighty: I remember you, the devotion of your youth, your love like a bride, when you went after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. (Yirmiyahu 2:2)*

The Midrash[1] apparently picks up on this theme and explains the deeper significance of the opening verse of the book of Bamidbar:

God spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert, in the Communion Tent on the first [day] of the second month in the second year of the Exodus, saying: (Bamidbar 1:1)

While this verse seems prosaic, it should strike us as somewhat unusual in that it provides the precise date of an event – the month, the day of the month, and the year. Precise dates such as these were totally absent in the book of Vayikra; in fact, no such markers were provided in the Torah as far back as the middle of the book of Shmot. The Midrash takes note of this very this particular form, and draws a parallel with the laws of writing a *ketubah*: Marriage contracts, more than any other type of document, must specify the place and precise date on which they are written. Thus, the opening sentences of the book of Bamidbar, according to the Midrash, are an expression of the blossoming relationship between God and the Jewish People. This relationship is precious to God; He values it, and by writing a "*ketubah*" He expresses the seriousness of the relationship. This "*ketubah*" honors the Children of Israel, by proclaiming that this is no passing infatuation. The "groom," God Himself, aware as He is of the "bride's" lineage, cognizant that she is the descendant of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, creates an eternal bond of commitment.

This formalization of their mutual commitment comes on the heels of a whirlwind romance: The Exodus is described as eloping to the desert. The groom, a knight in shining armor, swooped in to save the damsel in distress, who had been enslaved and abused. Would the bride take the enormous leap – of faith, but more importantly, of love, and follow her rescuer out into the unknown, to a place with no resources and no other options? Yes, she responds: I will follow you to the ends of the earth, even to the foreboding desert. God responds; he writes a formal ketubah between Himself and His loving bride, the People of Israel.

Mystical tradition[2] teaches that in the future, when all other merit is exhausted, it will be this "leap of love" that God will recall. Our willingness to follow Him through the desert is the foundation stone of our relationship, and it is what compels God to forgive our lapses and to maintain our special relationship throughout history.

1. Bamidbar Rabbah 1:5.
2. *Tomer Devorah*, chapter 1.

Under Pressure

According to the Midrash, Moshe was concerned about the flag system Hashem had told him to institute. He was afraid it would bring trouble and lead to “divisions and disputes among the tribes.” He was afraid that if he told this tribe to travel on the west, they would insist on traveling on the east, that those he sent to the north would clamor for the southern flank. Whatever he did would not be good enough. The tribes would bicker and fight with each other as they jockeyed for position, and strife would reign in the Jewish encampment.

But Hashem reassured him that all would go well. Yaakov had already established the pattern of the travel formations by assigning specific positions to his sons when he gave instructions for his funeral procession from Egypt to Canaan. The positions around Yaakov’s coffin were the same as those around the Mishkan. Therefore, the people were already accustomed to their assigned

positions.

But questions still remain. Why would the people be willing to accept formations based on funeral formations hundreds of years in the past? How would the pattern of Yaakov's funeral procession prevent dissension and strife in the travel formation in the desert?

Rav Mordechai Rogov explains that human nature is very sensitive to the environment. When things are going well in society, when peace and prosperity reign in the land, people are more inclined to be civil, even genteel to each other. But when the going gets tough, the veneer of politeness thins very quickly. Nerves fray. Tempers grow short. Before you know it, all civility is gone, and people are at each other's throats.

Moshe was concerned that the Jewish people would not react well to the rigors of traveling through the desert, a place rife with feral animals and ringed by hostile nations. Despite the protection of the Cloud Pillars, they would feel apprehensive. This would lead them to discard their civil manners and jockey for better positions. It's one thing to be civil in ordinary times and quite another in times of war and famine.

You don't need to worry, Hashem assured Moshe. The death of Yaakov was also a crisis for the fledgling Jewish nations. It could easily have led to bickering and dissension among the brothers. Under pressure of the situation, they could have jostled for positions around the coffin. But Yaakov gave them specific instructions about their positions around his coffin, and by following those instructions, they learned to get along in times of crisis. This lesson sank deep into their consciousness and became part of the national character. Therefore, Moshe, you don't have to worry that the Jewish people will break down and fight among themselves. They have been conditioned to keep to a higher standard. Not only now but also throughout history, throughout the worst pogroms and inquisitions and massacres, the Jewish spirit will retain its refinement and nobility. You don't have to worry, Moshe.

We have all heard many stories about the conduct of Jews during the Holocaust, the quiet heroism, the indomitable spirit. There is one simple story I heard not long ago. It is not especially dramatic, but it illustrates the point of the Midrash very sharply.

Many Holocaust memoirs devote an inordinate amount of attention to bread, because at the time, bread consumed all their thinking hours. To a concentration-camp inmate, a piece of bread was life itself. Each inmate was given a piece of bread once a day, and he had to decide what to do with it. What should he do? Should he eat the bread right away or should he perhaps nibble at it all day? Should he save it until he is very tired and hungry at the end of the day so that he would not have to go to sleep on an empty stomach? Difficult questions. Weighty questions.

A Jew in a concentration camp was summoned to the commandant's office. This could mean only one thing. His time was up.

Every Jew was aware that the moment of death could come at any time, and this Jew was no different. He sighed and said *Vidui*, making peace with his Maker. Then he exchanged his clothes with the other inmates. He gave his shoes to a man whose feet were swaddled in rags. He gave his coat to one friend. And the precious piece of bread in his pocket, the piece of life he was saving all day, what was the point in wasting a good piece of bread when he had maybe minutes to live? He gave the bread to another friend and set out for the commandant's office.

Wonder of wonders, the commandant needed something trivial and had no intention of killing him, at least at that particular time. As the man walked back to his barracks, he felt

certain he would get his clothing back, but what about the bread? The friend to whom he had given it could easily say he had already eaten it.

In the barracks, the first person to greet him was that friend. “You’re alive!” he shouted ecstatically. “They didn’t kill you. Here, take back your piece of bread. You must eat it; it is yours. Oh, thank Heaven, you are still among the living, not among the dead.”

Where does a Jew get the strength to behave like an angel when he is being treated like an animal? It dates back to Yaakov’s funeral procession from Egypt to Canaan, when his sons learned to conduct themselves on the highest levels of humanity in the midst of terrible tragedy.

The Torah's Three Elements

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

This week's parsha is always read before Shavuot, the festival of receiving the Torah. What is the connection is between the two? How does Parshat Bamidbar prepare us for the festival of Shavuot?

The first verse in this week's portion tells us that God spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert (Numbers 1:1). The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 1:7) questions why it is necessary for the Torah to specify the location in which God spoke to Moses. According to the Midrash, our Sages derive from this detail that three elements were present when the Torah was given: fire, water and desert.

We learn about fire from the verse, "All of Mount Sinai was smoking because God descended upon it in fire" (Exodus 19:18). Water is specified in the verse, "The heavens dripped with water" (Judges 5:4), which describes the giving of the Torah. Finally, we learn about the desert from the phrase "in the Sinai desert" in this week's portion. What message is the Torah trying to convey by listing the weather conditions at the time we received the Torah?!

There are three primary keys to success in Torah learning:

1. **Hard work** and intense involvement in study.
2. **Happiness** and joy while studying.
3. **Humility** coming from the knowledge that, ultimately, our achievements in learning are not a result of our own efforts, but due to the kindness of God who gives us Torah.

We see a hint to these three attributes in the Talmudic opinions regarding the blessings one must recite before studying Torah (Brachot 11b). The Talmud lists three opinions:

1. Rav Yehuda, in the name of Shmuel, claims that one must recite the blessing, "...who has commanded us to **be involved** in the study of Torah."
2. Rebbe Yochanan claims that we should say instead, "May You make the words of Torah be **sweet** in our mouths."
3. Rav Ham'nuna claims that we should say, "Blessed are You, the **One Who gives** Torah."

The Talmud concludes that we should follow all of these opinions, and recite all three blessings before beginning Torah study.

Making a blessing over a mitzvah prepares us to fulfill the mitzvah. Thus, making a blessing before we begin to study Torah prepares us for the mitzvah of learning Torah. Once we understand this, we can see that these three blessings mentioned in the Talmud correlate exactly to the three keys for successful Torah learning that we listed initially:

- The blessing, "to **be involved** in the study of Torah" corresponds to the **hard work** that is necessary to invest in studying.
- The blessing, "make the words of Torah **sweet** in our mouths" corresponds to the **happiness** and joy we must feel when engaged in study.
- The blessing, "the **One Who gives** Torah" corresponds to the **humility** that results when we realize that our achievements are not due to our own effort, but are actually a result of Divine benevolence.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Based on the Shem MiShmuel, we can now understand the deeper message of the Midrash in listing the three elements that were present at the giving of the Torah:

1. **Fire** symbolizes **hard work.** We see this explicitly in the Yiddish word "*farbrent*" (literally, "on fire"), which is used to describe intense effort in Torah learning. As we mentioned above, the idea of hard work corresponds to the blessing, "to **be involved** in the study of Torah."
2. **Water** symbolizes **happiness**. In the Land of Israel, rain is considered a blessing and a benefit. We should all be happy when it rains, since almost every aspect of our lives depends on water. This idea corresponds to the blessing, "make the words of Torah **sweet** in our mouths."
3. The **desert** represents **humility**. It is low and flat, and people walk all over it. This corresponds to the blessing, "the **One Who gives** Torah" - since, as we mentioned, it takes humility to recognize that our own efforts are not the ultimate cause of our success.

Now we can finally understand why Parshat Bamidbar is read right before Shavuot. On Shavuot, we do not simply commemorate the original acceptance of Torah, but we accept the Torah upon ourselves anew. In order to prepare ourselves to truly receive Torah on this day, Parshat Bamidbar gives us the keys that will enable our Torah learning to succeed.

May we all be triply blessed: to work hard in learning the Torah that was given at Mount Sinai in fire, with sweet happiness that feels as good as cool water, so that this Shavuot will be a humble, down-to-earth acceptance of God's extraordinary gift.