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## Know Your Place

This week's parashah describes the hierarchy of the Jewish people and the formation they traveled in. It identifies the *nesi'im*, the leaders of every tribe, and then describes how the twelve tribes are divided into four different camps, consisting of three tribes each, one of which led the camp. Finally, the sons of Levi are assigned their specific responsibilities vis-à-vis the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and its vessels, as well as their place of encampment around the *Ohel Moed*, the Tent of Meeting.

The Jewish People had been in the desert for over a year. Why did God wait until the Mishkan was constructed to delineate the structure and hierarchy of the Jewish People?

When appointing an individual or tribe to a position of leadership and prestige, you run the risk of diminishing those not chosen. Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky explains that God gave instructions regarding the hierarchy of the Jewish people only after the Mishkan was built, in order to mitigate this potential drawback (*Sefer Emes L'Yaakov*, Parashas Bamidbar). The Mishkan, which brought the palpable

presence of God to the Jewish people, is the antidote to the jealousy and resentment that is often caused by organizational hierarchies.

The true measure of a person is not his position, power, or title, but rather the closeness to God he has attained through his own choices. You can be the king of Israel, the most powerful man in the nation, but still be completely evil, like Yeravam ben Nevat. Conversely, you can occupy the lowly position of wood chopper, like Hillel the Elder, and be counted among the greatest sages in Jewish history. Each person's desire to grow in his or her relationship with Hashem is completely up to them and cannot be stymied by any other person or external factor. No position, hierarchy, or lack of power can impede your spiritual growth.

By creating the Mishkan first and placing it in the center of the Jewish People, Hashem was giving the Jewish People a tangible reminder not to be distracted by the positions and prestige of others, but to focus on what really counts – our relationship with Him. To that, we all have equal access. Once that realization is in place, Hashem can implement a hierarchy of positions without impinging on anyone's sense of worth.

## Generations and their Leaders

But the fact that we are all equally obligated to come close to God does not obviate the need for strong, clearly defined leadership that is accepted by all.

Throughout Jewish history, every generation had its leaders. Many were exceptional and led the Jewish people to great heights, while others caused enormous damage to the Jewish People by leading them astray. Leaders are not infallible, but they are necessary, and every generation must appoint a leader, despite the inherent risk that a person of low

caliber will take the helm. As the *Sefer HaChinuch* explains (Mitzvah 71), the alternative – having no leader – would be far worse:

*“It is impossible for a community of people to exist and function without making one among them the head over the others, to obey his order and carry out his decrees. For people are divided one from the other in their views, and no one will agree on any one view in order to do any one particular thing. The result will be a total standstill and the death of all activities. For this reason it is necessary to accept the view of one among them, be it good or bad, that they may successfully engage in building the world. Sometimes great benefit will result from his counsel, and sometimes the reverse; but all this is better than dissension, which causes a complete standstill.”*

## Know Your Place

The formation of the Jewish people defined the place of each Jew as the nation travelled through the desert. No one was left guessing where they belonged.

Knowing your place is one of the 48 ways to acquire Torah (*Avos* 6:6). Doing so starts with understanding your personal makeup – your unique traits, talents, abilities, and knowledge, as well as your weaknesses and the limits of your knowledge. Having this requisite self-understanding helps you determine when it is appropriate for you to speak up or take action and when it is appropriate for you to remain silent or let others take the lead.

In order to respond to situations correctly, you need to know your place. Remaining on the sidelines when you are the most fitting person to take charge creates a leadership vacuum

that damages the nation. On the other hand, rashly stepping into the fray when others who are more qualified have already taken responsibility is self-centered and can wreak havoc. Today, for instance, the internet has unleashed a wave of self-proclaimed experts and pundits offering unsound and wrongheaded advice on every topic imaginable, especially when it comes to Israel and the Jewish People.

The trait of recognizing your place is integral to Jewish leadership. When Moshe saw the Egyptian beating the Jewish worker, the Torah tells us that he “turned this way and that and saw that there was no man, so he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand” (*Shemos* 2:12). The next day, Dasan and Aviram answered back to Moses, saying, “Who appointed you as a dignitary, a ruler, and a judge over us? Do you propose to murder me as you murdered the Egyptian?” Obviously, there were people watching when Moshe killed the Egyptian. What, then, does the verse mean when it says that he looked both ways and saw that there was no man?

The answer is that before Moses took action he first evaluated if there was anyone else willing and more capable to respond to the outrageous behavior of the Egyptian. Only after he determined that no one was more capable than he to take responsibility did he step in and act.

A true leader does not push himself into the limelight in order to gain attention and fame. He takes responsibility when there is a clear and definite need, but he is fully prepared to take the backseat when that is what the situation calls for. A leader who always needs to be at the forefront is driven by his ego, not by the cause. In contrast, a person who knows his place takes action when it is appropriate to do so and allows others to take the lead when that’s what’s best for the Jewish people.



## Each Of Us Counts

In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan informed the world that “the medium is the message.” He proposed that the media affect society primarily by the characteristics of the medium itself, rather than through the content that it carries.

Although this was viewed as a groundbreaking work in the field of media theory, the idea was actually expressed thousands of years before, in *Parashas Bamidbar*. God instructs Moshe and Aharon to take a census of the Jewish People. The census was the medium through which it would be known how many would be eligible for battle and, later, how the Land of Israel would be apportioned. This census, unlike our modern decennial census, was not conducted online or even through the mail. Tribe by tribe, each “head of household” appeared individually in front of Moshe and Aharon to give his name and to be counted. Each was counted not as a mere number, but as an essential component of a greater, distinctive whole. *Ramban* states that one reason for the census was so that every individual had the opportunity to benefit from the attention given them by Moshe and Aharon.

The characteristics of the medium (census) thus affected society in a much greater way than just the content (the actual number of people). Each Jew holds a designated place within the cohesive structure of the Jewish People. Embedded within the medium of the Torah’s narrative is the message that every

individual possesses inherent value. Each person is Divinely endowed with traits and specific abilities meant to be developed. Each of us has an essential role to play in a greater collective journey spanning generations.

In our digital world, many feel cut off and distanced from their spiritual roots. We’re bereft of common goals and besieged by a pervasive divisiveness. Yet, one thing is certain: a greater purpose, which transcends our immediate needs and desires, beckons us. Let’s reclaim the Torah’s model in which the inherent sanctity of each individual bestows human dignity.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, recognized the supreme importance of the individual in relation to society as a whole. Every Sunday the Rebbe stood for eight hours or more to greet and bless his international followers individually. Hundreds of people would wait patiently in line for hours, just to have the opportunity to be in the Rebbe’s presence for a few moments. These moments were both life-changing and life-affirming for them. Every person was uplifted by their brief but transformative encounter with, and heartfelt blessing from, the Rebbe. As the Rebbe modeled through example, God has placed each of us here to fulfill his or her role in making the world a better place. The Rebbe would hand a dollar to every visitor so that each could donate it to charity, thus fulfilling the mitzvah of tzedakah.

We all want and need to feel that we are valued and that we count. Feeling isolated or marginalized from society, family, or friends is painful. We begin to shut down. The fact that God wanted us to be counted should instill within each of us a sense of self-worth. The fact that we count imbues us with purpose. Just as every note and every instrument in a musical score has its designated, distinctive time and purpose, so does every person play a significant role in God’s symphony of the world.

We are only as strong as the individuals, families, and communities that constitute the collective whole.

In taking a census, such as the one described in *Parashas Bamidbar*, it is forbidden to do a literal head count of the Jewish People. The manner of counting was through each person's donation of a half-shekel coin.<sup>165</sup> Each half-shekel represented one person. The half-shekel is a reminder that no Jew is complete on his own; we must join together to achieve unity. By working together for the overall greater good, we form a totality and wholeness. Like concentric circles, this completes and expands us.

The Torah's description of the process of the census is indicative of its purpose. Rather than telling Moshe to count each person, the Torah instructs him to "*se'u es rosh*—lift the head" of all the people. Once again, rather than focusing the count on the totality of the mass, the focus was on the individual. The individual is not to be lost in the crowd or devalued. Judaism is distinguished by its emphasis on the integrity and dignity of the individual. Every human being is created in God's image. While we must join together in unity, we are not to forfeit our individuality.

We are taught in a Mishnah that every life is like an entire universe.

Therefore, Judaism insists that the dignity of each individual be upheld. We are not to lose ourselves to the alluring conformity of the latest trends and current "values." As the universe endures, so does the Jew. To retain our distinctive and distinguishing Jewish identities, we must lift our own heads above the "herd mentality" of the times. Value who you are and the special role that God wants you to assume. You can make the world a better place. Lift up your head and recognize your inner value. Realize that you truly matter and can make a difference.

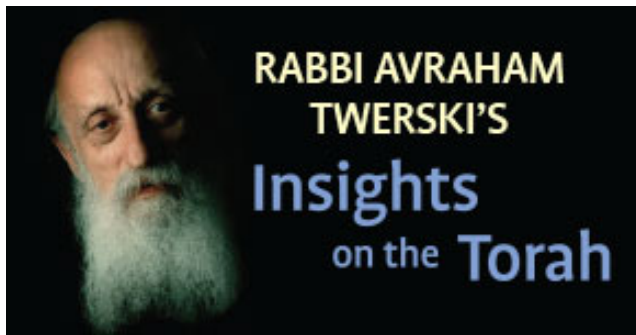
Each of us can strive to integrate these lessons into our lives. Communicating to others that we appreciate their contributions validates their dignity. There are often others who, for various reasons, are on the sidelines and often excluded. Include them, count them as valued, and lift them up. We are a nation, but we are also individuals. This is both a challenge and a strength. May we strive to view ourselves not just as separate entities but rather as valued members on the same team. Only then can we each be empowered and inspired to fully play our unique part for the greater, collective, and enduring good.

*Rambam* taught that "each of us should see ourselves as if our next act could change the fate of the world." What will be your next action? Make it count.

It took more than three thousand years for Marshall McLuhan to teach the rest of the world what the Torah taught us. The census, the medium itself, provided the message that has enduring relevance: "Lift the head." The census itself was designed not just to count each person, but to make each person count!

## Making It Relevant

1. Strive to view yourself as inherently worthy and act with dignity.
2. Practice treating others with respect and validate them.
3. "Lift the head" of someone else, especially one in need of encouragement and compassion.



## Teachers of Torah are Like Parents

*These are the descendants of Aaron and Moses ... Nadab, Abihu, Elazar and Itamar (Numbers, 3:1-2)*

Rashi remarks that although the Torah lists only Aaron's sons, they are considered to be Moses' children as well, because Moses taught them Torah. This teaches us that if one teaches another's child Torah, it is considered as though he bore him.

This is an important principle that every teacher of Torah should bear in mind. You must treat every child you teach as though he were your own child. Anything less is a dereliction of a Torah teacher's obligation.

Teaching children Torah is not the same as teaching the "three R's." A teacher of secular subjects fulfills his responsibility when he successfully transmits knowledge to his students. A dedicated teacher who has made a sincere and maximum effort at teaching his pupils algebra may go home with a clear conscience and sleep peacefully. The fact that one or more students were unable to grasp the subject does not disturb him. He has not been derelict in his duties.

This is not the case with someone who teaches Torah. The Torah places an awesome responsibility on a teacher of Torah. He must consider each child as if it were his own biological offspring. How would a father feel if

his child did not learn well or misbehaved? That, the Torah tells us, is how a Torah teacher must feel. He should have the child evaluated for a possible learning disability. He might even try to investigate whether there may be something in the home environment that inhibits the child's learning.

If a teacher were to find out that his own child had been humiliated in class, he would be irate. If he found out that his child's teacher embarrassed his child in class, he would be incensed at that teacher. If he found out that his child's teacher directed most of his attention to the brightest students and neglected maximizing his child's potential, he would certainly react. If his child was expelled for misbehaving, he would investigate what had happened and appeal for the child's reinstatement.

Parents expect their children to love them, just as they love their children. Teachers, too, should love their students and relate to them in way that will earn their love.



## What Does a Civilization Place at its Center?

In Ancient Rome, life revolved around the Coliseum. In New York City, the cultural capital of America, all roads lead to Times Square. And in London, Buckingham Palace stands as the heart of the city. These central monuments reveal the core values of each

society—spectacle, commerce, and monarchy respectively.

So, what lies at the center of the Jewish Nation?

## The Fulcrum of Jewish Life

In the opening of the book of Numbers, God instructs the Israelites to arrange themselves by tribe, giving each its assigned position, distinctive flag, and marching formation. But perhaps most significantly, these tribal designations all revolve around a single focal point: "The Israelites shall camp each man with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house; they shall encamp, surrounding the Tent of Meeting."<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, a 15th-century philosophical Torah commentator known as the "Akeidas Yitzchak", paints the full picture:

*"When one sees the tribes in their divisions, surrounding the Mishkan, with the Levite camps between them and the Courtyard of the Mishkan, and the Courtyard surrounding the Mishkan, and the curtain within the Mishkan separating between the Outer Sanctuary and the Holy of Holies, and within the Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant, and within the Ark, the Torah of God, he will understand and know that the Torah is the essence of everything; the center point around which all this majesty revolves, and he will fix in his soul that the Torah is the purpose of all actions and principles..."*

To permanently embed Torah's centrality in our collective consciousness, God placed the Ark visibly, profoundly, and distinctly in the middle of the camp. Twelve tribes in four directional groups surrounded the Levites, who encircled the Tabernacle courtyard, which encompassed the Sanctuary, which enclosed

the Holy of Holies, which housed the Ark, which contained – at the very center – the Torah itself. For 40 years in the desert, our ancestors lived this visceral lesson: just as the camp organized itself around Torah, so too must every aspect of Jewish life find its meaning and purpose in relation to this sacred center.<sup>2</sup>

## Separate Flags, Shared Purpose

This Torah-centered design reveals another profound dimension: the balance between unity and diversity. With Torah positioned at the center of the nation, we might expect uniformity or homogeneity to result. After all, if everyone orients themselves around a single purpose, wouldn't individual expression be quashed? Wouldn't diverse talents and inclinations be suppressed in favor of a single approved path?

The Torah's arrangement reveals precisely the opposite. God didn't demand uniformity but celebrated tribal individuality by giving each tribe its own flag, unique position, and distinctive mission corresponding to its particular strengths. Instead of diminishing individuality, the tribal formations enhanced and channeled it toward meaningful purpose.

The eastern encampment of Yehuda, Issachar, and Zebulun perfectly illustrates this balance. Zebulun's merchants excelled in commerce (their flag bore a ship), yet they channeled their prosperity to support Issachar's Torah study.<sup>3</sup> Issachar's scholars didn't pursue knowledge in isolation; rather, their wisdom guided Yehuda's leaders who implemented Torah principles through governance. Each tribe fulfilled its distinctive calling while simultaneously contributing to their shared Divine mission.

This ancient arrangement challenges our modern tendency to compartmentalize life.

When Torah occupies our center, the artificial boundaries between "religious life" and "everyday life" dissolve. Our careers transform into vehicles for ethical conduct and supporting sacred values. Our relationships become expressions of divine principles. Our talents and interests serve as pathways to fulfill our unique purpose within Torah's encompassing framework. Nothing remains peripheral when everything connects to the center.

## From Desert to Civilization

The impact of placing Torah at our center extended far beyond the desert. Throughout centuries of dispersion, exile, and persecution, our ancestors maintained their devotion to Torah as their central organizing principle. This unwavering commitment transformed not just the Jewish people but gradually revolutionized human civilization itself.

Today, we take for granted that we live in a society shaped by the Torah's values, but 3500 years ago, these values—equal justice, the sanctity of human life, ethical treatment of strangers—entered a world where human sacrifice was commonplace, justice varied based on social status,<sup>4</sup> and foreigners were routinely exploited or enslaved.

This extraordinary influence has been acknowledged by some of history's most influential figures, across a remarkable spectrum of perspectives:

John Adams, America's second president, declared: "I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation... I should believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing nations... to preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, Almighty Sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization."<sup>5</sup>

President Abraham Lincoln affirmed this sentiment, calling the Torah "the best gift God has given to man... but for it we could not know right from wrong."<sup>6</sup>

Even those who sought to destroy the Jewish people recognized our moral influence. Hitler himself chillingly admitted: "Conscience is a Jewish invention; it is a blemish like circumcision."<sup>7</sup>

Today, even secular Jewish communities carry Torah values in their DNA. As Albert Einstein recognized: "The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence—these are features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my lucky stars that I belong to it."<sup>8</sup>

## Getting Re-Centered

This week's Torah portion arrives just before the holiday of Shavuot, offering us a perfect time to reflect as we prepare to celebrate receiving the Torah at Sinai. At this time, we are called to ask ourselves, "How much of my life is centered around the Torah? How might my career, relationships, and personal interests better align with its path of justice and morality?" In re-centering our lives around the Torah, we take guidance from the tribal arrangement: Zebulun's business acumen sustained Torah study, Issachar's scholarship illuminated Torah wisdom, and Yehuda's leadership implemented Torah governance. Your particular strengths—whatever they may be—similarly find their highest purpose when connected to our sacred center. As we have discovered, Torah isn't just a component of Jewish identity—it defines us and the legacy we've bestowed upon the world.

May we be successful in directing all aspects of our lives towards fulfilling the Torah in all its magnificence and glory.

## Shabbat Shalom! Avraham

1. Bamidbar 2:2
2. Rabbi Mordechai Willig of Yeshiva University offers an additional explanation: A nation with 12 tribes and 600,000 unique personalities of Jews would almost definitely be fraught with conflict, intrigue, and rebellion. Only with the centralizing values of the Torah could such a nation function and prosper in harmony and unity.
3. And these values still represented the best of society! Even the Code of Hammurabi, dated to around 1754 BCE in ancient Babylon, one of the earliest and most complete written legal codes, while advanced for its time, often prescribed severe punishments without any mandate for witnesses or monetary alternatives and included social stratification where penalties varied depending on the social status of the perpetrator and victim.
4. Letter from John Adams to François Adriaan van der Kemp, February 18, 1809
5. Remarks to the American Bible Society, 1864
6. Hermann Rauschnig, "Hitler Speaks," 1939
7. Albert Einstein, from "The World As I See It," 1934
8. Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 99:9): "Zebulun would engage in commerce, and Issachar would engage in Torah, and Zebulun would support him."