

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

כט במדבר הנה יפלו פגריכם וכל-פקודיכם, לכל-מספרכם, מן עשרים שנה, ומעלה: אשר הלינתם, עלי. Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness, and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, ye that have murmured against Me.

In his commentary on the verse above, Rashi picks up beautifully and brutally on the role the “numbering” plays in their fate: “Anyone who was included in any census in which you were counted, like the military census or the shekalim census, anyone included in any of these numbers will die...” It is precisely those gloriously arrayed and carefully numbered ranks from Parshat Bemidbar who will be lost forever, their ashes blended imperceptibly into the desert sands.

And yet, when Bnei Yisrael enters the land 40 years later, there is still a full complement of soldiers. How can this be? Herodotus writes about the “ten thousand immortals” of the ancient Persian army who were so called because their unit’s strength was kept constantly at exactly 10,000 men; every killed, seriously wounded or sick member was immediately replaced. They were “immortal” precisely because of their facelessness and replaceability. This is how the the Netziv, Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (Poland, 1816-1893) reads Bemidbar in his great work Ha’Emek Davar: the number of soldiers remained constant through the 40 years because they were utterly replaceable. Counting people, it turns out, cuts both ways - either expressing the absolute significance of each individual, or erasing it.

In this day and age, we are profoundly invested in the idea that each individual is a being of infinite value who has a unique and important role to play in the world. Indeed our tradition calls individuals an “olam katan” - a small universe. Religion plays an essential role in impressing upon us the sanctity and infinite worth (Tzelem Elokim) of human life.

But it is also religion’s role to give us a sense of the bigger picture, so that we can see how we are pieces of the whole, not the whole itself. Some may even find it calming, or even comforting, to know that we are cogs in a machine - expendable in the extreme. Our immortality, so to speak, lies in our participation in the broader scheme of things, a scheme that we can barely glimpse.

As Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peschischa taught: In our pockets, we should carry two notes, one that says: "For my sake was the world created" and one that says: "I am but dust and ashes." The trick is in knowing which to take out when.

For Discussion: What personal and societal problems are caused by erring too much to one side or the other? How do we find a healthy balance?



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Bemidbar

Erev Shavuot

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Annual | Numbers 1:1-4:20 (Etz Hayim p. 769-785; Hertz p. 568-580)
Triennial | Numbers 2:1-3:13 (Etz Hayim p. 774-779; Hertz p. 572-575)
Haftarah | Hosea 2:1-22 (Etz Hayim p. 786-790; Hertz p. 581-585)

D'var Torah: People & Counting

Rabbi Joel Levy, Rosh Yeshiva, Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem

The book of Numbers begins with a great census listing the numbers of all the male Israelites of military age according to their tribes. Parshat Bemidbar continues by describing the tribes arrayed on the plain, a great army of Israelite warriors in precise formation around the tent of meeting, each tribe around its fluttering ancestral banner (2:2).

ב איש על-דגלו באתת לבית אבתם, יחנו בני ישראל: מנגד, סביב לאהל-מועד יחנו. 'The children of Israel shall pitch by their fathers' houses; every man with his own standard, according to the ensigns; a good way off shall they pitch round about the tent of meeting.

Rashi (France, 1040-1105) comments that this great act of counting comes to demonstrate God’s love for Israel and to establish the significance of each and every Israelite. Anyone who has ever accompanied a group of children on a school trip and who has feverishly counted them over and over again will know the deep anxiety of losing even one precious child.

But sadly, instead of marching into Canaan, this great cohort of warriors perishes in the desert - every last one of them except for Caleb and Joshua! Following the sin of the spies, God delivers their sentence:

D'var Haftarah: Finding the Meaningful

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After the first chapter of Hosea opens with a scathing reproof of the Israelite nation for disloyalty to God, the second chapter, which opens this week's *haftarah*, brings a message of hope to the small beleaguered people. Its numbers diminished and its people exiled and its prophets railing against the societal ills which brought on these conditions, Hosea offers his people a message that their population would be replenished, the unity of the nation restored and that God would end His people's exile from their home: "The people of Judah and the people of Israel shall assemble together and appoint one head over them, and they shall go up from the land (*v'alu min ha'aretz*) – for marvelous shall be the day of Jezreel." (1:11)

The phrase "*v'alu min ha'aretz*" is difficult. This same expression was used by Pharaoh to describe his concern that the Israelite slaves might rebel and "go up FROM the land". (Exodus 1:10 – Robert Alter translation) There, this translation seems totally justified. In Hosea, however, it seems less clear. Does it refer to God's exiled children leaving their countries of exile or does it mean something else? The verb "*ayin lamed hey*" in rabbinic parlance usually refers to going up TO the land of Israel, while, on the other hand, the word "*eretz*" usually connotes "the land of Israel." So why would it say that they go up FROM the Land of Israel?

This difficulty seems to have prompted the composition of the following late medieval midrash: "In this world, where people do not join together one with another, but rather, are jealous of one another – all the while that they act out their jealousy, their humanity is diminished (*yerida*), but, in the future, when they join together their humanity will be ascendant (*mitaleh*). [This is what is meant by the verse:] '*v'alu min ha'aretz*'. (adapted from Agadat Bereishit 64:2 Buber ed. p. 129)

Perhaps inspired by this midrash, the New JPS translation renders "*v'alu min ha'aretz*" literally as "they shall rise up from the ground" but adds a note that it should possibly be read as "from their wretched condition" and "to ascendency over the land". NJPS recognizes that the *drash* here makes more sense than the *peshat*. And in this lies an important lesson. There are both times, and texts, that are confusing, that don't readily lend themselves to interpretation. It lies with us to search for and determine their deeper meaning, so that they can inspire us and teach us positive lessons.

For Discussion: Do texts and events have their own meanings? How much responsibility lies with us to "do *midrash*" and extract from texts and events that which promotes the life?

Parashat Bemidbar / Shavuot Self-Study

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This parasha, the start of the fourth book of the Torah, recounts the census taken one year after leaving Egypt in preparation to entering the Land of Israel, as well as subsequent travel in the desert. And right on the heels of Shabbat we have Shavuot, during which the book of Ruth is read.

Questions on Bemidbar:

- 1) The Levites are not included in the census that is carried out in the beginning of this Parasha of those fit for the army. What is the Levites job? (1:50-51) Do you think that this job means that they are safe in times of war? Why?
- 2) The People of Israel were camped around the Mishkan on 4 sides, and travelled according to this order (2:1-31). What is the advantage of this format?

Questions on the Book of Ruth:

- 3) Naomi was once a well off lady from Bethlehem in Judah. As the story opens, she seems to have lost her wealth, but more importantly, she has lost her family. Only her two Moabite daughters-in-law are left. Naomi decided to return to Judah (Ruth 1:1-6). What might be going through her mind as she sets out to go?
- 4) Ruth insists on going with Naomi, despite being a Moabite and having nothing to look forward to in Bethlehem, a Judean town. What do you think motivated Ruth? Ruth declares to Naomi "your nation is my nation, your God is my God..." (1:16-17). What is she telling Naomi?
- 5) When Ruth meets Boaz, the owner of the field in which she is gathering leftovers (and who turns out to be a relative) he declares that he has heard that she left her father and mother and the land of her birth and gone to a nation she did not know previously (2:11). What other biblical character did a similar thing? (Hint: Bereshit 12) Why does the narrator want us to think of that person when we read about Ruth?

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.