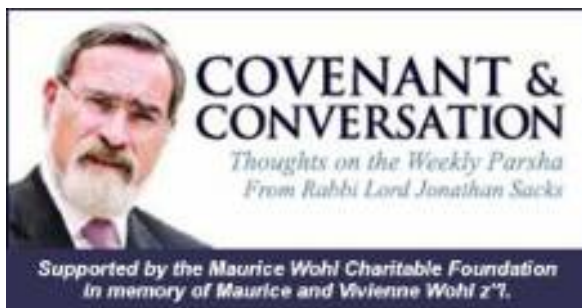


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On Leadership: Leading a Nation of Individuals

The book of Bamidbar begins with a census of the Israelites. That is why it is known in English as *Numbers*. 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. And does counting have anything to do with leadership?

The place to begin is to note what looks like 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 70,000 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.” 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, choosing instead the roundabout expression, “lift the heads” of the people?

The short answer is this. In any census, count or roll-call there is a tendency to focus on the total: the crowd, the multitude, the mass. Here is a nation of 60 million people, or a company with

100,000 employees or a sports crowd of 60,000. Any total tends to value the group or nation as a whole. The larger the total, the stronger is 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 his place. If one person leaves the organisation, someone else can be hired to do his or her job.

Notoriously, too, crowds have the effect of tending to make the individual lose his or her 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 their money in the 1720s, and the tulip mania in Holland when 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 sense of victimhood. Such leaders, he said, 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 civilization before – on the dignity and integrity of the individual. We believe that every human being is in the image and likeness of God. The sages said that every life is like an entire universe.³ Maimonides says 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 600,000 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 teams. He called it “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.” He thought this was a failing 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. He or she must “lift their heads.” However 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.

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, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3: 4.
5. Berakhot 58a.
6. Betsah 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.



Shavuot: Combining the Spiritual with the Physical

Shavuot is described as the time of the Giving of the Torah. Why isn't it called the time of the Receiving of the Torah?

One reason given is that the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments, which were given on Shavuot, were eventually destroyed during the sin of the Golden Calf; the second tablets that we have were given on Yom Kippur. Hence, there is more focus on the fact that God **gave** the Torah, because we did not in fact receive it on that day.

This begs the question of why is it so significant that God gave us the Torah, when in practice we did not even receive it at that time. One answer is that we are focusing on God's immense kindness of giving us the Torah. A different, but not contradictory approach will be suggested here: The act of the Giving of the Torah completely changed the nature of existence on this day, and this is a major aspect of what we are celebrating.

In what way did the nature of existence change? In order to explain this, it is instructive to first understand about the relationship between physicality and spirituality. The human being comprises of a body and a soul. The body is a tangible entity represents a person's physical drives and desires whereas the soul is an

intangible entity which yearns for spiritual connection. These two entities seem to be total opposites with regard to their desires, goals and pleasures. Accordingly, the 'natural' way of things is that a person can either focus on his body or his soul but not both at the same time.

Indeed, a cursory look at the non-Jewish approach throughout history to the body and soul amply demonstrates this point. In the course of history, it appears that there have been two general approaches. One approach is to totally embrace the body and its desires, with total obliviousness to the desires of the soul. The other is to strive to focus on the soul to the exclusion of physical pleasure.¹

In a broad sense, the Western world has adopted the first approach. People spend most of their lives in the pursuit of physical pleasure and material success. In contrast, the Eastern religions have strived to separate a person from his body and to develop his spiritual side through meditation and abstinence from physical enjoyment.

It is interesting to note that both approaches do not seem to have attained success. In the Western world, many people enjoy great wealth and can indulge in numerous enjoyable activities, and yet they are plagued by a sense of emptiness and lack of true purpose. Indeed, many Westerners spend time in the East in an attempt to attune themselves to their spiritual sides. On the other hand, most people are unable to sustain the extreme lives of separation that some of the Eastern religions propound.

Yet, it is understandable that a person would have to choose between the body and soul and could not combine the two, because of their incongruent natures. Yet, we know that Judaism

does stress such a combination. On the one hand, Judaism puts great stress on spirituality, through Torah learning, prayer, and contemplation. However, we also involve ourselves in the spiritual through physical activities, such as acts of kindness, shaking a lulav and esrog, eating matzo and so on. Moreover, Judaism does not promote ascetism to the degree of the Eastern religions. For example, Judaism greatly encourages getting married and having children, eating well (for the right reasons), and it does not automatically disdain material attainment. However, it couches all these things in a spiritual context as ways to connect to God.

How can a Jew achieve this seemingly paradoxical combination? The answer is because of the Giving of the Torah. This was the seminal event in history in that it brought down spiritual concepts into the finite world in the form of the Torah. This is in itself a paradoxical event, yet the fact that it took place, means that there is now the ability to combine body and soul. Yet this ability was only given to the Jewish people when they were the only Nation who accepted the Torah. It is through the Torah that the body and the soul can work together to attain completion. Since the other nations did not receive the Torah, they do not have the ability to combine the body and soul, and have to choose one or the other.²

There are a number of sources that demonstrate that Shavuot in particular stresses this combination of body and soul. For example, the Maharal notes that Shavuot is the only festival in which we offer a Communal Peace Offering³. He explains, writing that "on this day there is peace and a strong connection between the

upper and lower worlds."⁴

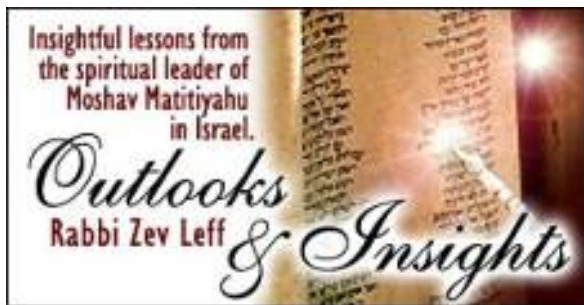
Likewise, there is a dispute among the Rabbis with regard to how a person should conduct himself on the Jewish holy days. Rebbe Yehoshua holds that one should devote part of his time to spiritual pursuits, and the rest of his time to physical enjoyment. Rebbe Eliezer argues that it is impossible to be involved in both spirituality and physicality, rather one must choose to totally focus on one or the other. The implication of Rebbe Eliezer's approach is that one should focus purely on spiritual activities such as learning and praying, to the exclusion of physical pleasures such as eating and drinking. However, the Talmud then points out with regards to Shavuot, even Rebbe Eliezer agrees that one should also involve himself in eating and drinking. The reason given is that this is the day that the Torah was given⁵.

One would have thought that Shavuot in particular should be solely devoted to spiritual pursuits given that it is the day that the Torah was given. The answer is that while Rebbe Eliezer argued that on other holidays one cannot combine spiritual pursuits with physical involvement, he held that Shavuot is different. The reason for this is that on Shavuot there is a special energy whereby physicality and spirituality need not contradict each other, rather they can work together to bring about a greater revelation of God to the world.

We have seen how Shavuot enables us to live a spiritual life without totally disdaining the physical world. This is no easy task, but the Festival of Shavuot is an ideal time to work on this area – may we all succeed in this endeavor.

1. This idea was heard from *Rav Akiva Tatz shlit'a*.
2. Needless to say, if a non-Jew chooses to convert, then he gains a Jewish soul is able to combine the two. Moreover, the

- Kabbalistic sources teach that the souls of converts were actually present at *Mattan Torah*, hence their ability to join body with soul.
3. This is a sacrifice - part of it is eaten by those who offer it. In contrast, a *Korban Olah* is completely given over to *Shamayim*.
 4. Tiferes Yisroel, Ch.25.
 5. Pesachim, 68b.



Like a Desert

"And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert": Anyone who does not make himself *hefker* (ownerless) like the desert cannot acquire wisdom or Torah, and therefore it says, "...in the Sinai desert." (Midrash – Bamidbar Rabba 1:7)

A *hefker* object is one of such little value to its owner that he formally abandons it and makes it available to all. Let us consider what is meant by making oneself *hefker*.

One must be prepared to forsake, if necessary, all worldly pleasures for the sake of Torah (see commentary of the Maharzav to the Midrash). "Torah can only be preserved in one who kills himself for it" (Talmud – Sotah 21a).

And as the Mishnah says (Avot 6:4):

This is the way of Torah: Eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure, sleep on the ground, and live a life of deprivation – but toil in the Torah! If you do this, "You are praiseworthy and all is well with

you." You are "praiseworthy" in this world, "and all is well with you" – in the World to Come.

Material deprivation may not be a necessary condition for learning Torah, but only one who is *prepared* to forego every pleasure and comfort for his Torah learning will ever achieve a deep understanding of Torah.

The true student of Torah must be as obsessed with Torah, as the lover with his beloved (see commentary of Rashash to the above Midrash; Maimonides – Teshuva 10:6). Just as the lover's thoughts are always of the beloved, so, too, one who truly wishes to plumb the depths of Torah cannot make his learning contingent on time, place or circumstance. Only when one feels that the Torah alone gives meaning to his life, will he be able to forego all other comforts and pleasures for its sake.

After relating that the Jewish people came to Sinai, the Torah repeats itself and says that they left Refidim and came to Sinai. From this repetition, the Sages learn that just as they came to Sinai in repentance, so did they leave Refidim in repentance. The Jewish people were attacked by Amalek at Refidim precisely because of their weakness in Torah learning. After that attack, they might have reasoned that Refidim was not spiritually conducive to *teshuvah* and waited until they reached Sinai to strengthen themselves in repentance.

The Torah emphatically negates such an attitude. If a person waits for the perfect time or place to undertake a new course in Torah, that ideal moment or place will never materialize. Had they not done *teshuvah* in Refidim, they would not have done *teshuvah* in the Sinai desert either.

HUMBLE STATUS

There is another aspect to the requirement of abandoning oneself to Torah that is even more difficult than the forfeiture of material comforts – the attainment of humility. One must both be humble enough to learn from every person and to teach everyone, regardless of status.

Even more importantly, he must be prepared to divest himself of all his preconceived ideas and beliefs. Only if one is prepared to let the Torah possess him and guide him totally, will its secrets be revealed.

"All are blind until God opens their eyes" (Midrash – Bereishis Rabba 53). When we view the world through our own eyes we are subject to our material desires and the distorting effects of passion and bias. Only when we let the Torah mold our thought processes can we view the world in its true perspective. There is no truer humility than subjugating one's most precious possession, his mind, to the Torah.

In order to serve on the Sanhedrin, one had to be able to prove that a *sheretz* (species of reptile) does not cause ritual impurity, even though the Torah explicitly says that it does. The judges had to recognize that with their own great mental acuity they could convince themselves of almost anything, and therefore needed to subject their own thinking to that of the Torah.

The Rogachover Gaon once gave a lecture to his students in which he proved that *chametz* is permitted on Passover. He then asked his students to refute his proof. They tried in vain to do so. When they gave up, the Rogachover opened the Bible and read them: "*Do not eat chametz*" (Exodus 13:3). That, he said, is the only refutation necessary. All the intellectual

gymnastics in the world cannot alter one sentence in the Torah.

DA'AS TORAH

"The words of the wise are like prods." (Ecclesiastes 12:11)

Just as the prod directs the ox to plow in a straight line, so, too, does Torah guide and condition one to think in the paths of life (Talmud – Chagiga 3b).

The commentator Smah (to Choshen Mishpat 3:13) comments that the thinking of laypeople is opposite to that of Torah thinking. The intention is not to denigrate the layperson, but to point out that when we rely on our own reasoning, distortion is the inevitable result. When we seek the guidance of Torah sages, we are seeking a mind so steeped in Torah – to the exclusion of all personal biases – that everything that they say or do is solely a reflection of their understanding of the Torah, i.e., *Da'as Torah*. Only a mind conditioned to thinking from God's point of view, as revealed in the Torah, can view the world without distortion.

After their Exodus from Egypt, the Jewish people needed to follow God into a harsh, howling desert, and place themselves totally in His care, before they could receive the Torah. And after the gift of the Torah, they still needed to be chastised time and again, as we read throughout the Book of Numbers, until they molded their attitudes and opinions to a Torah perspective.



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 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.

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