

Count Me In

By Rabbi Joshua (numerically known as The Hoffer) Hoffman
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In memory of Rabbi Binyamin Zev (Benji) Schmeltz, z'l, a dear friend and study partner, whose third yearzeit is this Shabbos. Netvort was originally written for the website of The Muray Hill Synagogue, which Rav Benji helped found and where he served as rabbi when he was suddenly taken from among us. May his memory be a blessing.

As we mentioned last week, the Talmud tells us to read the section of blessings and curses in parshas Bechukosai before Shavuot to indicate our hope that the current year and its curses should end and the new year and its blessings should begin. Actually, we do not read this section on the Shabbos immediately preceding Shavuot, but two Shabbas before. The medieval Talmudic commentators explain that this is so because we do not want to enter Shavuot immediately after having read the section of curses. Therefore, we intervene with the reading of Bamidbar on the Shabbos immediately preceding Shavuot. However, as Rav Zadok HaKohen of Lublin points out, if all that was needed was an interruption, then the days between Shabbos when Bechukosai is read and the day on which Shavuot begins would have been sufficient. Why is there a need to have a Shabbos intervene? Rav Zadok explains, because we want the blessings of the new year to take effect, and the Zohar tells us that the days of each week receive their blessings from Shabbos. Therefore, we specifically want Shabbos to intervene between the reading of the curses and Shavuot, so that the blessings of the new year take hold. Apparently, then, parshas Bamidbar, which is read on that intervening Shabbos, carries within it a message that facilitates the realization of the blessings of the new year during Shavuot. What is that message? Although Rav Zadok presents his own answer to this question, I would like to suggest a different approach.

As parshas Bamidbar begins, we find the nation in the wilderness of Sinai, in the second month of the second year after being taken out from Egypt. The Midrash Tanchuma on this first verse of the parsha notes that the Torah can only be acquired by a person who makes himself 'hefker,' or ownerless, as the wilderness. This midrash seems to be saying that in order for Torah to become part of a person, he must have a diminished sense of self. With such a beginning to the book, we are surprised that in the very next verse the Torah begins to describe the census of the people that was commanded to be taken at that time. This counting, as Rashi brings from the midrash, was a means of showing God's love for his people, by demonstrating that he always wanted to know how many of them there are. The Ramban, in his commentary to the Torah, points to the word 'seu,' meaning literally lift up, used to describe the count. He says that the count was a means of showing the importance of each individual Jew in God's eyes, in that each person is worthy of being counted separately. This message, on its face, seems to contradict the statement that a person must treat himself in a humble way, making himself ownerless as the wilderness, in order to acquire the Torah. Should a person play down his self-importance, or should he emphasize it, in attempting to make an acquisition of the Torah? A look at the very end of the parsha will help answer this question.

At the very end of the parsha, the Torah tells us that it is forbidden for members of the Kehasite families to gaze at the ark of the covenant as it is being covered up in preparation for travel. The purpose behind this prohibition, explains Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, is to assure that the ark should be viewed in a spiritual, not a physical way. Gazing at it while it is being packed away for travel would tend to emphasize its physical dimensions, while its real significance is its spiritual nature, defined by the tablets of the Torah encased in it. The Talmud, in fact, notes that there was not enough room in the holy of holies to contain the ark, and that it sat there miraculously. Since it was essentially a spiritual entity, its physical aspects did not really matter. This specific prohibition was given to the limited group of the Kehasites, or, according to other opinions, all of the Levites, and according to still others, the

Kohanim, as well. However, the Talmud in tractate Sanhedrin derives from this verse another prohibition, which has relevance to everyone, namely, the prohibition of stealing a vessel used for service in the sanctuary (see the Minchas Chinuch to parshas Bamidbar). The Sefas Emes explains this prohibition in a way similar to Rabbi Hirsch's explanation of the core prohibition. A person who steals a holy vessel is viewing it primarily as a physical, utilitarian object, rather than recognizing it as the spiritual instrument that it really is.

The prohibitions included at the very end of our parsha, as understood by Rabbi Hirsch and the Sefas Emes, can help us reconcile the seeming contradiction that we encountered at the very beginning of the parsha. When the midrash tells us that a person should make himself into a wilderness in order to acquire the Torah, it is speaking in terms of personal, physical interests. In regard to physical matters, a person needs to minimize his interests in order to concentrate on Torah. The Israelites in the wilderness were provided with their physical needs and had no cause to provoke quarrels in taking care of their needs. We, of course, do not receive manna today. Still, our attitude to physical matters should be similar to the attitude of those who did receive it, if we want to make an acquisition in the Torah. These needs are not an end in themselves, but a means towards achieving a higher purpose. Moreover, the strongest form of personal desire is actually the desire for honor, and it is specifically in this area that the Talmud says we must curtail our desires, and be humble, as Moshe was, in order to learn Torah properly.

In what way, then, is the value of the individual emphasized through the count recorded at the beginning of our parsha? We have pointed out many times that each individual has a unique portion in Torah, that only he can teach. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, of blessed memory, has explained that this is the message behind the Talmudic account of an angel teaching all of the Torah to a fetus while it is in its mother's womb, which is subsequently made to forget this material before birth. The Vilna Gaon, in fact, says that at the end of a person's life, he is greeted by that very angel who taught him Torah, to check whether, in his lifetime, he retrieved and actualized that Torah. Corresponding to each person's unique portion in Torah, he also has a unique mission to fulfill in life. In regard to one's portion in Torah and mission in life, there is no room for humility. One must be tenacious in his efforts to make his unique contribution. According to Rabbi Yochanan Zweig of Miami Beach, this is the reason that Mordechai made a point of coming to public events where Haman made an appearance. Mordechai descended from Binyamin, who was distinguished from his other brothers in that he did not bow down to Eisav. Mordechai, following in Binyamin's path, made a point of showing that he would not bow to Haman, a descendant of Eisav. Rabbi Zweig added that each person, in regard to his unique mission, must exhibit the same tenacity as did Mordechai did in regard to his.

The count made in the beginning of our parsha, then, is preceded by an allusion to the necessity of being humble, of de-emphasizing physical, mundane matters, so that we concentrate our thoughts on our spiritual duties. When we look at a fellow Jew, we need to see the spiritual treasures he holds within. Even while studying Torah, it is possible to let the personal element come into play, and refuse to be open to another opinion, because our pride prevents us from accepting someone else's unique contribution. Standing on our personal honor, concentrating on physical matters rather than on the spiritual, is akin to viewing the ark as it is being covered, looking at its physical dimensions. By viewing each Jew in the proper way, we will be able to benefit from the unique portion of Torah they each have to offer, and the unique mission they are charged to fulfill.

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