

Main Identity

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Coming of Age

By Rabbi Joshua (agelessly known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In parshas Bamidbar, the Jewish nation is counted and arranged in the formation that it was to travel in on their way to the Holy Land. The wider camp of the nation is divided into four separate camps, each with three tribes, while the tribe of Levi is counted separately from the rest of the nation, and constitutes its own, separate camp, surrounding the aron hakodesh, or holy ark. Menashe and Ephraim are here counted as two separate tribes, so that there are still twelve tribes in formation, even though the tribe of Levi is separate. Rabbi Avrohom Korman, in his Haparsha Ledoroseiha, points out, based on comments of the Vilna Gaon and the Netziv, that the census of the twelve tribes constituted the formation of an army. In fact, the nation was readying itself to capture the Holy Land from its Canaanite inhabitants when it entered. Had they remained true to the Torah, and not succumbed to the slander of the spies, in fact, they could have captured the land without a fight. This, however, was not to happen. In any case, aside from the tribe of Levi, which was exempt from war and whose members were counted from the age of one month and up, the census was made of men who were age twenty and up, as they were eligible, from that age, to go out to war. Interestingly, the midrash tells us that, although a Jewish male becomes obligated in the mitzvos, and punishable by a human court, at age thirteen, he is only punishable by the heavenly court from age twenty. This would have relevance in cases which a human court is not able to judge. Why is it that this level of culpability is set at the age at which a person is eligible to wage war? What is the connection between these two factors?

The compendium Otzar HaTorah, or The Torah Treasury, cites an explanation from the Chassidic work Imrei Emes, which I was not able to find in the actual text of that work. The explanation cited is that the two factors converge in order to impress upon a person how serious his daily battle with the evil inclination really is. Since the purpose of a Jew in this world is primarily to combat the evil inclination, and a soldier fights with greater ferocity when he knows that the stakes are high, the Jewish soldier will invest more energy into his battle with the evil inclination when he knows that he is liable to punishment through the heavenly court. This comment is in line with the well-known parable of Rabbi Bachya Ibn Pekudah in his work Chovos Halevovos, or duties of the Heart, in which a sage tells a warrior who has returned victorious from a war that now the real battle, meaning the battle of life, to maintain one's moral balance, begins. I once heard from the Franco-Jewish scholar, Dr. Paul Fenton, that the origin of this parable is actually in Islam, stated by its founder Mohammed. Still, as Rav Avrohom Yitzchok HaKohen Kook said of similar instances found in the Rambam's works, in which he incorporates teachings of non-Jewish origin in his own works, the Rambam did so only after being convinced that the statement or teaching was, in fact, compatible with Torah. However, while this teaching in itself is important and meaningful, I do not believe that its application to the question we are dealing with is correct, because it does not relate to the simple meaning of the parsha, which is that the nation was now preparing for its entrance to the Holy Land, and the participation of its males over the age of twenty in its capture. It is in this context that we need to understand the choice of that age as the age of eligibility for warfare. I would, therefore, like to suggest a different explanation, which focuses on the Torah's attitude toward the battle to capture Eretz Yisroel.

The function of Eretz Yisroel is to provide a setting upon which the Jewish nation can fulfill its task of being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, as they were charged at Mt. Sinai. This entails following God's ways in all areas of life, as realized within the context of a fully functioning national entity, with all of the various areas of life which it entails. By fulfilling this charge, they would serve as an example for all humanity, that it is possible to live a fully functioning life, on a national scale, while remaining, at the same time, true to God and His ways. As the Ramban points out many times, Eretz Yisroel is the seat of God's presence in this world, and any violation of His directives brings strict punishment. The Canaanite inhabitants of the land, because of their immoral behavior, were doomed to be evicted from the land, and the Jewish nation was to take its place. Therefore, when waging war, the soldiers had to make sure that they did so with the right intent, and that they would follow all of the directives of the Torah in regard to the details of warfare. I believe it was for this reason that these two factors, the age when one is eligible for warfare, and the age when one is punishable by the heavenly court, converge.