

PARSHAS BAMIDBAR

תשפ"ג

Parshas Behar ends with the statement that all Jews are Hashem's slaves. It begins with the statement that the entire world belongs to Hashem. He lets us use His world and enjoy His world, on condition that we recognize that it belongs to Hashem and not to us. He gives us tremendous latitude, but we have to use it according to the rules Hashem sets down for us. This is a very deep psychological attitude we have to apply to everything we have – money is just one example, but it is true about everything we have in life.

In the end of Shemoneh Esrei of Neiloh of Yom Kippur, we say that the goal of the whole process of teshuvoh on Yom Kippur is to cease stealing. Why is this one sin chosen out of all the others?

At the beginning of Yom Kippur we say tefilloh zakkoh – it is a beautiful tefilloh. In it, we describe how Hashem gave us all our senses and limbs of our physical body to be used for Torah and mitzvos, but instead we used them for aveiros. We admit that we mishandled all the abilities Hashem gave us and used them in ways that went against His will. This is the theft which we speak about in Neiloh which we need to stop.

We are living in Hashem's world to use things according to His purposes. We can't just do whatever we want. On the other hand, as I have mentioned many times before, Hashem is not out to deprive us of enjoyment. Yalta, the wife of Rav Nachman, pointed out that for every kind of forbidden pleasure, there is a version of that pleasure which is permitted. There have to be limits to pleasure and we can't get obsessed and lose control.

The second point is that living a Torah life gives me the ability to become a superior person. The Mishna says in Pirkei Ovos that Torah elevates us above everything in the world. It is an opportunity that we need to take advantage of. Otherwise, we go down and we can become worse than the animals. The more potential something has for good, the more potential it has for evil when it is not being used for good. A plant while still in the ground is not mekabel tumoh and does not convey tumoh. A vessel can contract tumoh because it is useful and has more potential. A dead animal is metamei through contact and lifting it. A human being is metamei in an additional manner – tumas ohel. The more potential for kedushoh means there is more potential for tumoh.

There are brochos and k'loles that come along with accepting the Torah. We made the bris with Hashem and we accepted the consequences of that bris.

The last lesson we learned is Hashem is running the world hands-on. There is no such thing as a random event. Wars between nations like Russia and Ukraine and the destruction from Arab terrorists we see today in our world, all come about from Hashem's infinite cheshbon of s'char and onesh. We do what we have to do. Nothing happens by chance.

This is the recap of Parshas Behar and Bechukosai.

Finally, we come to Parshas Bamidbor. Our custom is that this parsha must also be read before Shavuos.

There are different holidays for different reasons. Succos is to remind us that we once dwelled in Succos when we were in the desert. The seventh day of Pesach is to commemorate the miracle of kriyas Yam Suf. But Shavuos is not simply a commemoration of the original kabbolas haTorah. Chazal have shown us in many different ways that we are reaccepting the Torah again on Shavuos every year.

When reading the Aseres Hadibros in Parshas Yisro and Vo'eschanon throughout the year, there are two different minhogim – to read them with the ta'am elyon or the ta'am tachton. But on Shavuos, every community reads it with the ta'am elyon. Why? Rav Chaim explained that the difference between ta'am elyon and ta'am tachton boils down to what is the unit. Is each posuk the unit, or is each dibroh the unit? If we are reading the Torah in shul as an act of limud Torah throughout the year, then the unit is a posuk and then it is read with the ta'am hatachton. But if the Torah reading in shul is a re-acceptance of each parsha throughout the year, then the unit is each dibroh – which is the ta'am elyon.

But on Shavuos, everyone agrees that we are reaccepting the Aseres Hadibros when we read them in Shul and every community reads them with the ta'am elyon. The midrash says when we read Parshas Yisro on Shavuos, we are being mekabel the Torah all over again. The Gemara says the world is standing in abeyance to see if Klal Yisroel will accept the Torah again – otherwise the world will revert to tohu and bohu. Don't do a dangerous operation before Shavuos because the world is imperiled during this time of year.

The minhag of staying up all Shavuos night is to show our eagerness to accept the Torah at the earliest possible moment.

Then we have Parshas Bamidbor – a very strange parsha.

It begins with a counting of Bnei Yisroel. Rashi says Hashem counts us regularly as a sign of affection for us. In the beginning of Parshas Shemos, Rashi says that Klal Yisroel are compared to stars. Hashem counts the stars and calls them by their names.

The problem is that we are not supposed to count Jews. So, why does Hashem count us? The reason why we don't count Jews is because each Jew is unique and special. By counting Jews, you reduce each Jew to a number and remove all his uniqueness. Only Hashem has the ability to count and still maintain each person's individuality.

The Midrashim talk about the way Klal Yisroel were counted. The pesukim say Moshe and Aharon went to the fathers – the heads of the families – to get a tally of the members of each family. It implies that all their children were legitimate offspring. But weren't the Jews under total Egyptian rule? If the Egyptians were in complete control of their bodies, doesn't that mean they also had their way with their wives? To counter this suspicion, the Torah itself testifies that all the Jewish couples in Egypt maintained total fidelity, and all their children were legitimate. Even though the whole culture of Egypt revolved around arayos, Klal Yisroel set up fences and maintained their kedushoh. Only one woman out of a nation of millions was mezaneh.

Another interesting feature of this census is that the names are all very Jewish and spiritual names. Elitzur – Hashem is my strength, Shedeiur – Hashem is my light, etc. There are no Egyptian names listed, even though the Jews wanted to integrate into Egyptian society. Chazal noticed that Klal Yisroel at their core maintained their distinct Jewish identity, which is reflected in how they called themselves.

Another interesting feature – the flags. The Midrash says a very puzzling thing. The day Klal Yisroel received their flags was as joyous as the day they received the Torah. What is such a big deal about a flag? Why did it cause such joy?

The answer is that the flag symbolized the unique derech avodoh that each shevet had. These different ways of avodoh were designated

by Yaakov Ovinu and Moshe Rabbeinu when they gave them their brochos. The Ari z"l says each shevet had their own nusach tefillah – because it was their unique way of connecting to Hashem. They were all equidistant around the Mishkon – to symbolize that each shevet's derech is equally valid and important.

The gemara says that in the future, the tzaddikim will form a circle around the Shechinoh. Why a circle and not a square? Because now people think only their derech is the true correct one. In the future, Hashem wants to convey the idea that each tzaddik's derech avodoh is just as important as the other one.

So too in the desert, the shevotim were equidistant surrounding the shechinoh in the middle – each one with their unique flag and their own equally valid derech avodoh.

But in the middle was not just the Shechinoh – shevet Levi was also in the center. Why was that? Their derech avodoh made them closer to Hashem than the other shevotim.

We also have to understand another thing – the differences in darkei avodoh between each shevet are fixed and permanent. A member of shevet Reuven can't become a member of shevet Shimon and Shimon can't become Reuven. But shevet Levi is the exception in the sense that any individual from any shevet can join shevet Levi's derech avodoh. Why is that? It is because any Jew can move from the outer edge of the circle to the center of the circle and become inspired to dedicate his life to avodas Hashem.

Shevet Yehudoh was bestowed with the qualities of leadership. Yehudoh himself was a leader and passed on his leadership qualities to his shevet. We read about Yehudoh's leadership qualities in the brochos of Yaakov. Yehudoh merited to receive malchus – and all the shevotim recognized this. Yehudoh was the first shevet to jump into Yam Suf. Which middoh of his granted him this gift?

The midrash explains that after the brothers were disappointed in Yehudoh's leading role in the decision to sell Yosef, which caused their father tremendous pain, Yehudoh was demoted from his position of authority. He went to live elsewhere to start a family. The incident with his daughter-in-law found him in a very compromising situation. Yehudoh publicly accused Tomor of being a zonah and was about to execute her, and Tomor sends Yehudoh a veiled message informing him that he is really the father of her unborn twins. Tomor does not want to publicly shame Yehudoh – she leaves it up to him to either act on the truth and admit he is the one at fault, or go on with the execution and save himself the embarrassment. Yehudoh took responsibility for his actions and humiliates himself by admitting publicly that he was the one. The midrash says that at that moment, a bas kol went out and announced that Yehudoh received the role of malchus. A leader of Klal Yisroel has to be an honest representative of Klal Yisroel. He has to be totally honest and not let his ego interfere.

The fatal flaw of Shaul was that he failed to realize he was representing Hashem and His nation. It was not his personal issue to be humble

and timid. Yehudoh was able to be a genuine representative of Klal Yisroel and put his own ego and his own interests aside. This made Yehudoh and his descendants qualified as capable Jewish leaders. Eventually Moshiach will come from Yehudoh to lead Klal Yisroel to the final geuloh.

This is Yehudoh's derech avodoh.

What is Zevulun's derech avodoh?

Zevulun had a unique talent for business but he also developed an incredible sense that Torah is the most valuable thing to spend money on, and anyway, the money is not really my money. This is how supporting Torah can become a derech avodoh.

Each shevet was given a special talent that sets it apart from the others. But it can remain just that – a special talent that is useful in life. Yehudoh had leadership qualities, Zevulun is good at business, Yissochor is dedicated to learning, etc. But in order to make it a derech avodoh, it has to be channeled and amplified till it goes beyond just natural talents and tendencies. People get confused between shevet Yissochor's dedication to learning and shevet Levi's dedication to learning. We have to appreciate that it's more than just learning. It becomes a particular kind of derech avodoh that sets this shevet's learning apart from the others. The flag showed the shevet how they could use their personalities to excel at a particular derech avodoh.

Yaakov Ovinu is the chosen of all the Ovos – he fathered 12 sons who would become Klal Yisroel. Yaakov had to incorporate all the middos within himself in order to give over the middos to his children, which was necessary to create Klal Yisroel. He gave a different middoh to each one of his children.

Shimon and Levi had a tendency to release explosive emotions. Levi channeled it properly while Shimon never did and had to be scatted among Klal Yisroel.

Each shevet is unique, and within each shevet, each individual is unique. This is why we are not allowed to count Jews. The gemara says each and every person who exists has unique facial features – no two people look exactly alike. My Rebbe explained that this difference in physical appearance reflects the fact that each neshomo inside of us is unique. Even identical twins must have some kind of difference if Chazal said every face is different. Each person's neshomo is different and unique.

The Netziv explains why the dor haflogoh's attempt to unite the entire world under one tower was so dangerous that Hashem Himself had to interfere and foil their plan. The problem was that they tried to eliminate everyone's differences and make all human beings identical. Hashem doesn't want this for humanity. Hashem wants everyone to be unique. Every shevet is unique and every individual is unique, and each one of us has to try to find the derech avodoh that best matches his unique personality.

In the future, we will go more in depth to describe the various unique derech avodoh of each of the shevotim.