

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

Short Divrei Torah on Parshas Bamidbar

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AT ALL COSTS

Reb Meir Shapiro of Lublin

"And G-d spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai..." (1:1)

The Torah was given with three things: with fire, with water and in the wilderness. (Midrash Rabbah)

The trait that has distinguished the Jews from the beginning is the spirit of self-sacrifice they have always shown in Torah observance and adherence to their faith. Throughout the ages, Jews have mounted scaffolds, stretched out their necks to slaughter, hurled themselves into the seas and sacrificed their lives rather than give up the Torah. We can find the most eloquent demonstrations of this astonishing strength throughout Jewish history.

Avraham, the first Patriarch, allowed himself to be thrown into the burning lime kiln for the sake of his pure faith. By this act, he imparted to his descendants the will and the strength to submit to martyrdom - if need be - for their Judaism.

Some may argue that this was only one isolated act of heroism by one unusual and distinguished individual. But let them, however, consider the second instance involving the entire Jewish people. When the Red Sea was divided, the Jews marched as one into the midst of the raging waters at G-d's command.

Now some may say that this test extended only over a relatively short period of time. Let them, however, consider the third instance, the fact that the Jews willingly entered a wilderness full of wild animals, without food or drink, not knowing how long they would have to stay there, for no other cause but love and loyalty to G-d and to His Prophet, as is written in Yirmiyahu (2:2): "I remember for you the affection of your youth, the love of your nuptials, how you followed Me in the wilderness in a land not sown."

It was by virtue of these three tests of fire, water, and wilderness, when the Jews were called upon to demonstrate the spirit of self-sacrifice in obeying G-d's word, that the Torah was given to them as their eternal possession. These three tests have been the surest guarantee for the eternal survival of the Jewish people.

PUTTING PRIDE ASIDE

Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin

"And G-d spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai..." (1:1)

When *Bnei Yisrael* camped in the desert, they did so in a tight and specific formation. No one complained about their place and no one attempted to change their position in the total configuration.

We, too, should emulate this quality of our ancestors and not quarrel about where we sit in *shul* or who has a more honorable and respectable place. "It is not the seat that brings a man honor, but the man who brings honor to his seat!"

JOYOUS RENEWAL

Reb Elimelech Lizensk

"And G-d spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month." (1:1)

The Torah was given in the desert of Sinai so that we should maintain a state of humility, for that is the way the Almighty has shown us.

Hashem chose the most lowly of mountains in the desert (Megillah 29a). Therefore, a person should not become depressed when he feels low. The Torah is cautioning us to always be in a joyous state, for the Holy Presence does not dwell in a place of depression (Shabbos 30b).

That is what the Torah means by "the tent of *Moed* (holiday)" - one should enter the tent of holiday in joy. "On the first of the second month" means that if a person says, "How can I be in a state of joy, if I am in a state of sinning?" the Torah says that one should always repent in a state of joy.

One should take courage by saying that it is as if he were born that day and he would not return to a state of folly. That is called renewal - to renew to a new being. The word *chodesh* ("month") alludes to *chadash* ("new") so that "On the first of the second *chodesh*" means that a person renews himself twice - once when he is born and the second time when he repents and is forgiven.

WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"And G-d spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai..." (1:1)

The word *"bamidbar"* literally translates as "in the desert." A desert is a place that is barren, *hefker*, ownerless, with miles and miles of empty sand. The Torah was given in the desert on *Har Sinai* to impart the lesson that the key to *Kabbalas HaTorah* is the *middah* of *anavah* - humility. Only when a person is humble and sees himself as *hefker*, ownerless, and not deserving of anything, can he possibly connect to Hashem and His Torah.

Many people, however, misconstrue the true meaning of humility. They believe that one must consider himself worthless in order to achieve pure *anavah*. This is so wrong! In fact, it is not humility; it is actually *gaavah* - conceit, the exact opposite of true humility. Humility is the knowledge that: I am special, even great but that it all comes from Hashem, and I must utilize my G-d-given talents for the service of Hashem. Conceit is the knowledge that: I am special, even great therefore I deserve honor, praise and how dare anyone treat me in a manner that does not befit my level of social standing or other perceived reason for honor! But the way I will get praise is by making myself appear worthless so that others will think I am great!

"If you learned much Torah (or any other worthy endeavor), don't take the credit for yourself because it was for this that you were created" (Avos 2:9). Rav Noach Weinberg zt'l once said: "When I come up with a great *chiddush* in Torah, I feel so good about myself. Although I can't take the credit, I can take the pleasure!"

A human being must not have low self-esteem. On the contrary, we should feel good about ourselves and our achievements. The key to humility, though, is to remember that the credit, praise and glory goes to Hashem, the Creator Who made our accomplishments possible.

DIVINE DESERT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"And G-d spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai..." (1:1)

The silent desolation of the desert is a metaphor for the lack of Divine revelation in creation.

The fact that the Jewish people were organized into an army while still in the desert alludes to the notion that despite the world's spiritual silence, it can indeed be taught to express the Divinity hidden within it. (This is alluded to by the fact that the word for "desert" in Hebrew [מדבר] is related to the word for "speaks" [מדבר].) In this context, the enemies opposing the Jewish people's trek through the desert are the forces of negativity that we must battle in order to enable the world to reveal its inherent Divinity. The "weapons" we use to fight this battle are the study of the Torah and the observance of G-d's commandments.

When we "cultivate" the barren "desert," we help the world recognize its Divine source and the purpose of its creation. This, in turn, prepares it for the Messianic Redemption, when the world's innate Divinity will be clearly and fully revealed. (Sefer HaSichot 5749, vol. 2, p. 477) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

REMOVING THE BARRIER

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"And G-d spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai..." (1:1)

The Medrash Rabbah comments in regard to this *pasuk* that anyone who does not make himself like the desert, which is ownerless (and by extension humble), is not able to acquire wisdom and Torah knowledge. It is for this reason that the Torah specifically mentions Sinai in connection with the desert, as Sinai represents where we received the Torah.

Rav Shimon Schwab (Maayan Beis Hashoeivah) explains that the Medrash is teaching us that a person who is focused on himself and displays arrogance and conceit creates a barrier between himself and Hashem. However, a person who makes himself ownerless, by being modest and unassuming, will remove any impediments that exist between him and Hashem. As a result of his humility, his bond with Hashem will be strong. This will ultimately allow him to be successful in his spiritual ambitions, resulting in meriting to acquire wisdom and Torah knowledge.

When we are successful in a particular endeavor, we often fall into the trap of thinking that it is we who achieved it without any assistance or support from Hashem. Rav Schwab is teaching us, based on the Medrash, that our success in all facets of our lives is dependent on our ability to view ourselves as ownerless. We must acknowledge that our talents and abilities stem solely from Hashem. If we are successful in recognizing the primary role that Hashem plays in our accomplishments, then we are guaranteed to be the beneficiaries of a strong and meaningful connection with Hashem and His Torah.

INHERITED FAITH

Skoyler Rebbe

"Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel, according to their families..." (1:2)

The essence of our belief and pure faith in Hashem is derived from our holy forefathers. The Torah and the *mitzvos* reveal the inner essence of faith.

That is the meaning of "Take a census of the entire assembly (*adas*)."

By shifting the letters of *adas* to the word *daas*, the word "assembly" is changed to "knowledge" - knowledge of Torah, signifying that the inner essence of knowledge and thoughts of true and pure faith are derived from our ancestors. Therefore, we say: "the Children of Israel according to their families."

BELIEVE IN YOURSELF

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

"Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel, according to their families..." (1:2)

Parshas Bamidbar begins with the census that was taken of *Bnei Yisrael* at Mount Sinai. The Ramban (1:45) addresses the question as to the need to know the number of people in the nation. Why was it important to count all the members of *Bnei Yisrael*?

The Ramban first suggests that the census might have been required to show G-d's kindness, turning the family of seventy people into a large nation. *Bnei Yisrael* were counted so that they would appreciate the fact that they grew into such a large multitude from humble beginnings.

But the Ramban then presents a second answer... The Ramban explains that there was immense benefit for every member of the nation to come before Moshe and Aharon, tell them his name, and receive their blessing. By coming before Moshe and Aharon to be counted, the person sensed that he is an important member of the nation. Moshe and Aharon looked upon him and gave him a blessing, conveying the critical message that he counts, that he matters, that he's important, that he can make a difference and have an impact.

Hashem could have very easily just told Moshe the number of people in the nation. But the goal wasn't this information - the goal was the process, the exercise of each person coming before Moshe and Aharon and being told that he counts, that he is an indispensable part of *Am Yisrael*.

Rav Shlomo Wolbe suggests that this might be the reason why Parshas Bamidbar is always read on the Shabbos before Shavuot. Before we can receive the Torah, we must recognize our value and worth, that we matter, that we have something to accomplish. It is only when we understand that we count, that we are needed, that we have an important contribution to make as part of *Am Yisrael*, that we can accept the Torah and take on our mission.

The Gemara in Maseches Shabbos tells that when Moshe Rabbeinu ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, the angels in the heavens tried to interfere, arguing that the Torah should not be given to mortals. Hashem instructed Moshe to respond to the angels and explain to them why *Bnei Yisrael* deserved the Torah. Rav Yechezkel Weinfeld shlit'a notes that although it was Hashem's decision to give us the Torah, He wanted Moshe to refute the angels' arguments. We would have expected that Hashem, Who was giving the Torah to *Am Yisrael*, would be the one to explain why He felt they were deserving of the Torah. But instead, He specifically told Moshe to respond to the angels. The reason, Rav Weinfeld explains, is because we need to confidently believe that we deserve the Torah in order to receive it. We must believe that we count, that we have potential, that we have the ability to study and practice the Torah and live according to its precepts.

This is a critical prerequisite for accepting the Torah. Therefore, it was Moshe, and not G-d, who had to respond to the angels and clearly explain why we are worthy of receiving the Torah.

PRESERVING OUR IDENTITY

Reb Aryeh Leib of Plotzk

"...according to their families, according to their fathers' houses, by the number of names..." (1:2)

The Jews succeeded in preserving the purity of their families and their pedigrees through such a long and oppressive exile as their sojourn in Egypt, where they were enslaved and outlawed, because they zealously clung to the characteristics that set them apart from the other nations and refrained from conduct that would have led to assimilation.

They made no concession whatsoever to the alien environment in which they lived, refusing even to change their names. This way of living kept them from losing their identity and merging with the people in whose midst they dwelt.

The fact that they kept their own names ("according to the number of names") enabled them to be counted "by their families, by their fathers' houses."

SPREAD THE LOVE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel, according to their families..." (1:2)

The Torah records only the total number of men, and not the number of families, in each tribe. Nevertheless, G-d had the families counted, in order to stress the centrality of the family in Judaism.

Our individual and national goals are certainly important, but the Torah also demands of us the selflessness necessary to forge the family unit. A husband and wife are two separate people, with their own natures, desires, and even missions in life; yet each must work for and work with the other, completing and complementing each other and merging into one harmonious, loving unit.

The strife and breakdown of communication from which the world suffers stem from selfishness. In contrast, the Torah commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves. The primary setting in which this commandment is fulfilled is that of our families.

Inasmuch as loving our fellow Jew is an expression of our love of G-d, loving our fellow Jew enhances our love of G-d. Love of G-d, in turn, brings us to love His Torah and study it - not merely out of our obligation to do so, but out of love. This threefold love of our fellow Jew, of G-d, and of the Torah ripples outward from the family setting and affects the entire world for the better. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 8, pp. 209-215) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

KNOWING THEY COUNT

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

"Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel, according to their families..." (1:2)

The Gemara in Maseches Sota (13b) comments that when Moshe Rabbeinu passed away, a *bat kol* (heavenly voice) announced throughout the entire camp, "Moshe, the *sifra* *de* Yisrael, great scribe of Israel, died!"

The Maharsha brings two explanations for why Moshe Rabbeinu is referred to here as *sifra*.

One is that Moshe was the first *sifur*, the first scribe, as he wrote the first Sefer Torah. Hashem dictated the text, and Moshe wrote the words on parchment, producing the first Sefer Torah, and thus becoming the first *sifur*.

The second explanation brought by the Maharsha is that the word *sifra* here means not "scribe," but rather "counter." Moshe was called the *sifra* *de* Yisrael because he conducted two censuses, counting *Bnei Yisrael* both at Mount Sinai, as we read here in Parshas Bamidbar, and a second time toward the end of his life, in *Arvos Moav*, as we read in Parshas Pinchas.

Why would this role - counting the people - be considered such a significant achievement that this is how Moshe is called when his death is announced?

Perhaps the Gemara here is teaching us that a leader's most important responsibility is to "count" every one of his constituents, to make each and every one of them recognize that he matters, that he is needed.

Moshe, of course, was singularly great in many different respects. He was the prophet who perceived G-d more clearly than any other prophet. He received the Torah from G-d and masterfully taught it to us. He was unparalleled in his devotion to the people, intervening on their behalf with endless self-sacrifice. He was the humblest of all men. But his most important quality was that he was *sifra*, he ensured that each and every person appreciated his own value and worth. He made it clear that everyone counted.

The renowned educator Rabbi Daniel Kalish recently remarked that he once had a conversation with a certain prominent *rav*, who proudly spoke about the numerous talks he had given to teens. In just the past year, this *rav* said, he spoke to some 3,000 teenagers. Recalling this conversation, Rabbi Kalish remarked, "I would have been much more impressed if he would have said that he had *listened* to 3,000 teenagers. Young people need to be listened to, to feel that they are heard, much more than they need to be spoken to."

The most important job of an educator is to be a *sifra* *de* *Yisrael*, to make it clear to his charges that each and every one of them counts, and this requires patiently and respectfully listening to them, allowing them to be heard, and letting them know that they are important.

NATION OF PRESIDENTS

Rabbi Aryeh Dachs

"Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel, according to their families..." (1:2)

The story goes that the Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir, once quipped to Richard Nixon that although the US population, at the time, was 150 million, which dwarfed the population of Israel, it was more difficult to be the Prime Minister of Israel. "Why is that?" asked Nixon. Golda explained, "You are the president of 150 million Americans; I am the prime minister of six million prime ministers."

Parashas Bamidbar begins Sefer Bamidbar, which the Septuagint calls the Book of Numbers. Numbers refers to the counting that takes place at the outset of the *sefer*, where, in preparation for Hashem to rest His Presence in the *Mishkan*, Hashem commands Moshe to take another count of the Jewish People. Rashi explains that the accounting was an expression of how treasured the Jewish People are to Hashem. "*Mitoch chibasan... moneh osam kol shaah* - Due to His fondness for them... He counts them all the time." How is counting an expression of fondness, *chibah*?

There is more than one expression in *lashon hakodesh* used for counting. On this occasion, the Torah uses the phrase "*Se'u es rosh... Bnei Yisrael*," which literally translates as "Lift up the heads of the people of Israel." Why is this counting called *se'u*, lifting? Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner explains that there are two sorts of counting. The first counting is done to figure a whole. After the count is finished, only the sum is relevant. For instance, when one counts eggs to reach a dozen, when he reaches twelve eggs, the eggs are no longer considered distinct items. They are now identified by their grouping, as a dozen. On the other hand, if one has a large amount of a specific item in a pile and wants to know how many items he has in the pile, his counting has the opposite objective: To figure how many items make up the whole. In this case, the objective is to break apart the whole to get a figure for each individual item.

The Jewish body, *k'nesses Yisrael*, is made up of millions of individual Jewish People. Although there is significance to the body of the Jewish People, the counting is nonetheless designed to "lift" each member of Israel by dividing the greater body of Israel into individual units. This expression is the ultimate sign of "*chibah*," endearment and fondness, for each Jew individually, distinct from the rest of the people of Israel. We are not a giant mass. Each of us is unique, and our uniqueness distinguishes us from the masses. We are a nation of presidents! The lesson of the counting is that every Jew is significant. And although the greater body of Israel is an important entity, we cannot lose sight that the *k'nesses Yisrael*, the gathering of Israel, is a granular compilation of millions of extraordinary individuals.

PRECIOUS COUNTING

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel, according to their families..." (1:2)

Because of G-d's love for the Jewish people, He commanded Moshe to count them. When they fell due to the golden calf, they were counted. When the Tabernacle was established, they were counted. (Rashi)

The idea of counting the Jews represents counting the King's legions. In counting the Jews, G-d demonstrated how precious they were to Him. Each Jew has his own special place, and each one makes a difference. In our present exile, the number of Jews is limited and can therefore be counted. But in the Future, when impurities will be removed from the world, the number of Jews will increase beyond number (cf. Hoshea 2:1). For in truth, the Jewish soul transcends time and space - it transcends number.

We see the same idea of a "count" in the way G-d counted the Days of Creation. As soon as the world was created, G-d gave each day a number: the First Day, the Second Day, the Third Day, and so forth. Sanctity and holiness transcend time and space and cannot be numbered or counted. But in this world of impurities, G-d established a numerical system so that a count can be taken. Thus, one must stand to be counted and represent his good and his position. But in the Future, the Jews will be beyond number. (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 96)

RECOGNIZING INDIVIDUALITY

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"...according to their families, according to their fathers' houses, by the number of names..." (1:2)

Parashas Bamidbar relays five censuses of the Jewish people: per tribe, per flag, members of Levi who were at least one month old, the firstborn of every family, and the count of the *Leviim* ages thirty to fifty. However, the very first census contains unique instructions, directing a count "according to the number of names." Why would we be counting names when we're counting people?

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig explains that counting can be used to combine individuals as a group, and it can be used to give each member of a group their own identity, such that each person counts and matters. One way to acknowledge a person's uniqueness is to use their individual name, transforming even a mechanical count into recognition of distinct character. This census is intended to capture both the group totals, as well as everyone's distinct contribution to the whole. With the Torah as our exemplar, we should focus on the individuality of those around us and celebrate being counted with them.

A GOOD EYE

Rabbi Aryeh Dachs

"You and Aharon should take a census of every man in Israel over twenty years old, all who are able to go to war, according to their divisions." (1:3)

Bamidbar is referred to in the Talmud as *Chumash HaPekudim*, the section of counting. It begins with an accounting of the Jewish People in the desert, which was done by Moshe and Aharon.

The Ramban struggles with the need for the counting. Specifically, why is it important for Moshe and Aharon to tabulate the total count of the Jewish People?

The Ramban understands that the final tabulation highlights the individuals who constituted the Jewish nation.

He marshals a Midrash that states that the Almighty told Moshe and Aharon to count the Jewish People with *kavod* and *gedulah*, with honor and loftiness, meaning, they were to count each one individually.

They were not to ask the heads of the families, "How many sons do you have?" Rather, each person passed before Moshe and Aharon and was counted separately.

The Ramban explains that when each member was counted, they also received a "[double] merit." These holy men "placed" on each of them an *ayin tovah*, literally, a "good eye," as well as a prayer on their behalf.

I saw an interesting insight in the *sefer* MiShulchan Rabbi Eliyahu Baruch. He notes that the Ramban values *ayin tovah* right alongside the blessings of Moshe and Aharon.

An *ayin tovah* is simply a way of looking at another with a positive feeling, with a sincere wish for their good and success.

We are keenly aware of the power of a blessing. We are taught that we should not take the blessing of a simpleton for granted (Megillah 15a).

Conversely, we are also aware of *ayin hara*, the evil eye. One can find many benedictions and amulets available to ward off the *ayin hara*.

The Ramban introduces us to a new power: *ayin tovah*. This power is somewhat self-evident, for there is a rule, *middah tovah merubah*, the good forces exceed the negative.

When we look at someone in a positive light and wish them well, we are not merely doing a good practice for our own self-improvement.

There is a great power of *ayin tovah*, a power akin to the power of a blessing. When one looks at another in a positive light, they actually have the ability to bestow good upon them.

INFINITE WORTH

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You and Aharon should take a census of every man in Israel over twenty years old, all who are able to go to war, according to their divisions." (1:3)

Counting something is a way of showing that we value it. By counting how much of something we possess, we express how much value each unit of the whole adds to the total value of the whole and how indispensable each unit is to the whole.

In a census, each individual counts for one - neither more nor less. Thus, by commanding Moshe and Aharon to take a census, G-d informed the people that each one of them is equally dear to Him, as an individual. We each possess invaluable worth by virtue of our unique soul-essence. By virtue of this essence, which the lowliest among us possesses no less than did Moshe, we are all, equally, G-d's people.

When we recognize this, we, too, will cherish ourselves as individuals and cherish every other individual - as an individual of infinite worth - as well. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 8, pp. 231-232) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

READY FOR BATTLE

Reb Noson of Breslov

"You and Aharon should take a census of every man in Israel over twenty years old, all who are able to go to war, according to their divisions." (1:3)

All Jews must be ready to wage war for G-d. They can do so only when they are united in their goal. Thus, Moshe counted the Jews in the desert who were ready to fight for G-d. (Likutey Halakhot VI, p. 150)

PAVING A UNIQUE PATH

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"And with you there shall be a man from each tribe, a man who is a prince of his father's household." (1:4)

The story is told of a wealthy irreligious man who approached his local Rabbi and insisted that he be permitted to *duchen* (blessings recited by *Kohanim*) this coming Pesach. "But that honor is exclusively reserved for the *Kohanim*" exclaimed the Rabbi.

The wealthy man would not take no for an answer and after much insisting, he finally pledged a donation of \$10,000 to the *shul* if the Rabbi would only allow him to *duchen*. Obviously the Rabbi had no choice but to refuse the offer, but as the wealthy man was about to leave, the Rabbi turned to him and asked, "Tell me, you don't come to *shul* very often and when you do it seems you aren't really interested in *davening*. Why is it so important to you to be able to *duchen*?"

"Well," answered the wealthy man, "my father used to *duchen*, my grandfather used to *duchen*, and his father used to *duchen*..."

There are certain entitlements that come with one's *yichus*, lineage, but this verse is hinting to us that every person can become the "head of his father's household" no matter who preceded him. As Rav Shammai Ginsberg, author of *Imrei Shammai* learns from this verse which calls the ones being counted the "head of his father's household" even though they technically may not have been the oldest of the household; they were called the "head of the household" because the "head" represents the source of all beginnings, to show that their *yichus* was beginning with them!

In light of this, Rav Ginsberg quotes a story of a jealous man who boasted to a Torah scholar "My *yichus* is far greater than yours!" "Whilst that may be true," answered the Torah scholar, "your *yichus* finishes with you, but mine begins with me!"

Everyone is born into circumstances and environments destined to provide them with the means to develop their own unique relationship with Hashem. Hashem only wants the best from His children and in His infinite wisdom He has granted us precisely the right tools that we need to become great.

One who was not born into an illustrious lineage is required to start that lineage himself, and even someone fortunate enough to already have an illustrious lineage must still forge his own path and become great in his own right.

This is the great praise that the Torah bestows upon Yitzchak when we are told that Hashem heard his prayer to have children. Rashi tells us that the prayers of Yitzchak who was a *Tzaddik* and the son of a *Tzaddik* were accepted prior to those of his wife Rivka, who was a *Tzaddekes* and the daughter of a *Rasha*. At first glance, Hashem's choice of who to favor seems confusing; surely the fact that Rivka so bravely abandoned her family's evil ways should give her more merit than Yitzchak, as the Gemara says "a place where a *Baal Teshuva* stands, [even] complete *Tzaddikim* are unable to stand" (Brachos 34b)? Why were the prayers of Yitzchak, son of a *Tzaddik*, who surely had a much easier time choosing to follow Hashem's ways, preferred by Hashem?

The answer is just as we have said above; the reason Hashem favored Yitzchak's prayers is because he was able to forge his own unique path despite the fact that it would have been very easy for him to simply copy his father Avraham in every way. After all, there was no better role model in the world. Despite this, Yitzchak created his own relationship with Hashem, and Yaakov did the same.

This is why Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov are each called *Avos*, fathers, for they individually created their own approach to connect with Hashem and in some way, they each started their own *yichus*.

THE MIDDLE ROAD

Reb Yaakov Yosef of Ostrow

"And with you there shall be a man from each tribe, a man who is a prince of his father's household." (1:4)

A person should strengthen himself to be an "average" individual. He should not become arrogant, and he should not become overly humble. Neither should he be overcome with bitterness. One must realize that we are human; nevertheless, when we do good deeds we reach a higher level.

Though it is imperative that one should be humble, nevertheless one should consider himself "a man who is prince of his father's house," a "man" who is a "prince" in Israel, who merits being on a high plane because he goes in the way of his forefathers.

FOLLOWING SOUND ADVICE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"These are the ones called from the congregation, the leaders of their fathers' tribes..." (1:16)

Mashal: One of the conditions that the Vilna Gaon zt'l imposed on the leaders of the Vilna community was that he should not be called to any communal meetings unless it was to institute a new law or custom in the city of Vilna.

At one point, an influx of money collectors swamped the city of Vilna and an emergency meeting was called. People were frustrated with the incessant demands for money and decided to enact a new law in the city based on the words of the Gemara (Bava Metzia 71) that states: Charity for the poor people of your [own] city takes precedence.

As this was a new enactment, they informed the Gaon that the community leaders were calling a meeting to formalize this new law. The Gaon sent them back a message: "Why are you telling me? I am only to be called to meetings when a new law or custom is being enacted."

Quickly, the leaders ran to the Gaon to explain why they had called him. Was this not a new law?

"Absolutely not," answered the Gaon. "This law is quite old, in fact. Being unkind to strangers and not giving them charity was a law back in Sedom and Amorah..."

Nimshal: Sefer Bamidbar begins by listing the princes of each tribe. They are referred to as "the summoned ones of the assembly," and Rashi explains that these people were the ones who were summoned for every matter of importance. In our day, the real trick is to know what is really important and what is not, and which community measures are appropriate and which are not.

Those who step forward on behalf of the people are the ones we should turn to for advice, and we must follow their sage counsel in all areas so that we do not become like the people of Sedom and Amorah, who acted only with their own interests in mind and were thus callous and cruel.

A TZADDIK'S PRAYER

Ramban

"...and they declared their pedigrees according to their families, according to their fathers' houses..." (1:18)

The fact that every one of the Jews passed before Moshe, the father of all prophets, and his brother Aharon, the man who was sanctified to G-d, and that the Jews also had to make their names known to them in writing, enabled the Jews to be worthy of remaining alive. For as the Jews passed before Moshe and Aharon the two leaders would look upon them with kindness and ask G-d to be merciful to them, to cause them to multiply and to let their numbers increase.

(From the Ramban's explanation the custom was derived that when we go to a *tzaddik* with the request that he pray for someone, we give the *tzaddik* a piece of paper on which the name of that person is written.)

COMMON GOAL

Belzer Rebbe

"As G-d had commanded Moshe, he counted them in the wilderness of Sinai..." (1:19)

This *pasuk* shows that although there were many tribes, the individual tribes were counted as one. That was because all the tribes were connected and there was one concept. All were as one in the command of Hashem.

ENLISTING IN HASHEM'S ARMY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[The tally of] every male twenty years old and over, everyone who goes out to the army..." (1:20)

The Jewish army, like all armies, was the representative of its nation. As its soldiers went out into the world, they were expected to act as a living example of the high moral caliber of the Jewish people.

The same is true of all of us, since we are all G-d's "soldiers." G-d expects us to wear our "uniforms" proudly, acting in a manner that befits the soldiers of His army. Any observer should easily recognize that G-d has charged us with His mission to conquer the world with goodness and holiness.

This is why only mature Jews, age twenty and over, were conscripted into the army. We are counted only when we have sufficiently matured spiritually to identify with our Divine soul and this Divine consciousness has prompted us to "enlist" in G-d's "army."

As long as we exhibit this readiness, no distinction is made regarding our level of spirituality or achievements in the study of the Torah. No matter what, each of us counts as one, and has an equally important role to play in bringing the world to its spiritual fulfillment. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 8, pp. 219-220) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

BEYOND NATURE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[The tally] of the tribe of Reuven... all who were fit to serve in the army." (1:20)

All the sick and crippled Jews were healed when the Torah was given; thanks to the protective Clouds of Glory, the Jews remained healthy throughout their journey, despite the adverse conditions of the desert.

We see from this that the Jewish people - by virtue of their connection to G-d expressed through studying the Torah and fulfilling its commandments - were not bound by the laws of nature. Furthermore, their ability to override nature was self-evident, expressed not only in spiritual concerns, but in physical health and well-being as well.

This holds true today as it did when the Torah was given on Mount Sinai. To the extent that we live our lives according to the dictates of the Torah, we too will be blessed with spiritual and physical health, despite any obstacles posed by the laws of nature. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 8, pp. 220-222) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

PREPARED FOR WAR

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"All those who were counted were six hundred and three thousand and five hundred and fifty." (1:46)

The idiom the Torah uses for "take a census" is "raise the heads" of those being counted. Since the purpose of the census was to conscript the people for battle, this indicates that in order to overcome the enemy, the army must always feel above it.

Similarly, G-d conscripts us daily to battle the spiritual desolation of our material world. In order to overcome this enemy, we must always feel above it.

Therefore, the very first directive recorded in the Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law, is that when it comes to fulfilling G-d's will, we must not be embarrassed by scoffers (Tur and Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Orach Chaim 1:1). This includes external scoffers - those who try to mock us for our dedication to our ideals - and our inner scoffer, the evil inclination. Only in this way can we proceed to fulfill G-d's will for us throughout the rest of the day, thereby actualizing each day's spiritual potential to the fullest. (Hitva'aduyot 5743, vol. 3, p. 1612) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

PURPOSEFUL COUNTING

Kesav Sofer

"These are those who were counted, whom Moshe and Aharon counted... And all those who were counted of the Children of Israel... all that were able to go forth to war in Israel, all those who were counted were six hundred and three thousand and five hundred and fifty." (1:44-46)

The word "counted" is mentioned in each of these three *pesukim* to stress that the census was commanded for three distinct purposes:

1) So that the people would receive added merit by passing before Moshe and Aharon and being mentioned by name (Ramban). Hence, the statement in the first *pasuk*: "These are those who were counted, whom Moshe and Aharon counted."

2) To determine who was fit to go into battle and how many were fit to do such service. Hence, the statement in the second *pasuk*: "And all those who are counted of the Children of Israel... from twenty years old and upward, all that were able to go forth to war in Israel."

3) To make the greatness of G-d's mercies known, since the seventy souls who had originally come to Egypt grew into a host of over six hundred thousand, counting only the men above age twenty. Hence, the third *pasuk*: "All those who were counted were six hundred and three thousand and five hundred and fifty."

CARRYING ON THE LEGACY

Chasam Sofer

"The Israelites should encamp with each man beside the flag that bears the insignia of his father's house..." (2:2)

Why is it written "with his own banner, according to the insignias"? Because when Yaakov was about to depart from this world, he said to those around him: "Take up my body with reverence and respect. You [alone shall] bear my body and let no other man lay his hand on my bier." (Midrash)

Yaakov showed his children the way to take up his body reverently. Symbolically interpreted, this request means that Yaakov's descendants should hold aloft the name of their departed ancestor by displaying the awe and reverence properly due to G-d.

Now, there are people reverent to G-d but evil to other people. Such individuals will cause their ancestor's name to be mentioned not with respect but with disdain. People will criticize their evil conduct and put them to shame. This is why Yaakov commanded his children to take him up not only with "reverence" but also with "respect," or, symbolically interpreted, to maintain such good relations with other people that this would increase the respect the world holds for G-d and the people of Israel. Only if Yaakov's descendants conduct themselves in this manner will "no other man lay his hand on my bier"; only then will no human being dare speak evil of them or put them to shame.

That we lift up Yaakov's bier with reverence and respect, with reverence for G-d and love for other human beings, was Yaakov's last will and testament, and this is the device, the standard, by which his descendants should abide - "every man with his own standard..."

UNITED INDIVIDUALITY

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"The Israelites should encamp with each man beside the flag that bears the insignia of his father's house..." (2:2)

At the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar, the Torah describes the flags and emblems that represent each of the *shevatim* (tribes) (2:1-34).

Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky (Emes L'Yaakov) asks why Hashem delayed assigning each *shevet* its flag until the second year after they had left *Mitzrayim*.

Rav Yaakov explains that were the *shevatim* to have been identified by their sign in year one, there would have been a concern that it would cause divisiveness. Only once *Klal Yisrael* was united, as a result of the *Mishkan* being located at the center of the camp, at the beginning of the second year, could each tribe then develop their own unique identity without risk of national divide.

It is for this reason that the *shevatim*'s flags and individual symbols were delayed in being assigned until the second year after having left *Mitzrayim*.

As we prepare to receive the Torah on Shavuot, we need to ensure that while we all have our individual talents and capacities, we don't allow them to stand in the way of our ability to unite.

Let's work together to make our own unique contributions and at the same time play our role in the greater symphony of *Klal Yisrael*. With this approach, we will surely be ready to accept the Torah *k'ish echad b'lev echad* - "as one person with one heart"!

PROTECTED FROM ALL SIDES

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"The Israelites should encamp with each man beside the flag that bears the insignia of his father's house. They should encamp surrounding the Tent of Meeting, at a distance from it." (2:2)

The people's encampment on all four sides of the Tabernacle symbolized how they protected the holy edifice and the Torah that resided in its innermost chamber. Certainly, the Torah does not need our protection - on the contrary, the Torah and its commandments protect us. However, G-d chose to entrust us with the noble mission of protecting the Torah.

Similarly, we must guard our personal, inner sanctuary - within our hearts and within our homes - from all four sides: from cool spiritual indifference on the cold north; from hot, lustful passions on the warm south; from self-gratification over brilliant accomplishments on the morning east; and from dark despair on the evening west. (Hitva'aduyot 5745, vol. 4, p. 2103; Reshimot 62, p. 15; Ohr HaTorah, Bamidbar, vol. 4, pp. 1360-1361, 1396-1397; Zohar 2:156a; Igrot Kodesh, vol. 6, p. 185) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

UNITED HOLINESS

Reb Noson of Breslov

"The Israelites should encamp with each man beside the flag that bears the insignia of his father's house. They should encamp surrounding the Tent of Meeting, at a distance from it." (2:2)

The Jews encamped in the desert around the Ark, which was in the center (see Rashi).

Each Jew corresponds to a letter in the Torah. Only when they band together can the Torah be "complete." Thus, we read about the unity of the Jewish people right before Shavuot, the holiday of receiving the Torah. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 105a)

The Jews say to the nations, "What greatness can you say about yourselves that can compare to the greatness of the encampment of the Jews in the desert?" (Tanchuma, Bamidbar 11)

In the desert, the Jews camped according to tribe. Each tribe was completely different in size, stature and nature from the other, and each was distinguished by its own flag with its own tribal colors. Yet despite their many differences, all the tribes clung to their faith in the One G-d, united in their beliefs, revealing the Unity of G-d. (Likutey Halakhot V, p. 198a)

Whenever the Jews traveled, they dismantled the Tabernacle for the trip and reassembled it at their new encampment. No matter where the Tabernacle was reassembled, it retained all the sanctity of the Tabernacle that Moshe initially assembled. From this we learn that when we travel, we can take our holiness with us and reestablish it wherever we go. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 236a)

Each Jew possesses an individual good point with which G-d exults in him. Similarly, on a national scale, each of the Twelve Tribes was represented by a different flag and a different-colored stone on the Breastplate of the *Kohen Gadol*. From this, we learn the importance of developing our individuality. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 25a)

Moreover, we cannot truly accept the Torah until everyone's individuality is brought to the fore. Therefore Parashat Bamidbar (which opens with the tribe-by-tribe census of the Jewish people) is read on the Shabbat before Shavuot, teaching us the importance of establishing our individuality before unifying for a common cause. (ibid., II, p. 50)

The differences between the tribes and their representative flags and colors also allude to the various hints that arouse a person to G-d. Each person sees G-d's works from a different viewpoint, and the "call to gather to war" (against the forces of evil) manifests differently to each person. (ibid.)

YISSACHAR-ZEVULUN

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"The tribe of Zevulun - and the prince of the tribe of Zevulun is Eliav, son of Chelon." (2:7)

The verse naming the tribe of Zevulun is unique. For, unlike all of the other verses which list the names of the tribe's princes, the word "and" is not used to introduce the tribe of Zevulun.

The Baal HaTurim explains that the word "and" implies that there are two separate entities which are joined together. So, by mentioning each tribe with an "and" between them, we understand that the tribes were separate but are being placed together in a common description. However, since there is no "and" to join the tribe of Yissachar - the previously mentioned tribe - and Zevulun, the Torah is teaching us an important message: that the two tribes were like a single tribe, with nothing to separate them.

Explaining further, the Baal HaTurim writes that the tribe of Zevulun financially supported the tribe of Yissachar in every way; allowing the entire tribe to focus solely on their Torah studies. For this, explains the Baal HaTurim, the Torah considers them a single tribe and that Zevulun's reward is no less than that of Yissachar. (This agreement, aptly termed the "Yissachar-Zevulun" agreement, considers the supporter as if he learned the material himself (Rema, Yoreh Deah 246:1).)

Although it appears that Torah scholars are the recipients of the ones who are financially supporting their Torah learning, in truth, it is the other way around. For the Gemara explains that regarding those not proficient in Torah, the only way that they will be resurrected in the World to Come is if they somehow enabled and encouraged Torah study. Therefore, in reality, the true benefactors are the Torah scholars, whereas the true beneficiaries are those who facilitate the Torah study with their resources.

PROTECTING OUR SANCTUARY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Exactly as they camp, so must they travel..." (2:17)

Both when they camped and when they journeyed, the tribes kept their positions around the Tabernacle, protecting it on all sides.

This teaches us to protect our inner sanctuary and the Torah within it at all times and under all circumstances. Whether we are relaxed or restless, tranquil or unsettled, even when we are engaged in our struggle against the wilderness of the spiritual desert in which we find ourselves, we can remain centered and focused by preserving our inner connection to G-d and our consciousness of our purpose and goal in life. (Hitva'aduyot 5745, vol. 4, pp. 2103-2104) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

The Tabernacle was the resting place for the Divine Presence, which manifests via the prayers of the Jews. The entire Jewish nation camped around the Tabernacle, since each Jew acquired a portion in it through his prayers.

For example, just as the contributions of many Jews combined to furnish the hundred silver sockets at the bases of the beams, the prayers of many Jews combined to create all the beams, bars, pillars, tapestries, and vessels of the Tabernacle. Today, the more Jews who become involved in prayer, the more parts will be built for the Tabernacle, until the Divine Presence will be revealed once again. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 102a)

ACTIVATION REQUIRED

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"They should encamp surrounding the Tent of Meeting, at a distance from it." (2:2)

Both the Jewish people and the Torah play an integral role in channeling G-d's beneficence into the world. The Torah is the instrument through which G-d's blessings flow, but the Jewish people are the ones who activate and use this vessel to accomplish the goal.

G-d therefore had the people - His newly formed army, organized to combat the materiality of the world - take their formation around the Tent of Meeting, i.e., the Tabernacle, the innermost chamber of which housed the two Tablets of the Covenant, i.e., the Torah. By studying the Torah and obeying the Divine commandments it contains, we "activate" the Torah, using it as G-d's instrument to remake the world into His home and bestow infinite goodness upon it. (Sefer HaMa'amarim 5717, pp. 176-177) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

EQUAL VALUE

Baal HaTurim

"The tribe of Zevulun..." (2:7)

All the other tribes counted with their standards are accompanied by the conjunction "and" (e.g., "and the tribe of Gad and the tribe of Binyamin... and the tribe of Naphtali"). Why is the conjunction omitted in the case of the tribe of Zevulun?

The tribe of Zevulun engaged in commerce, supporting the tribe of Yissachar to enable the latter to engage in study (see Rashi's commentary to Bereishis 49:13-14). The Torah writes "the tribe of Zevulun" - without the conjunction - in order not to create the impression that the tribe of Zevulun was inferior or in any way secondary to the tribe of Yissachar; the tribe of Zevulun is regarded as an independent unit and as equal in merit to the tribe of Yissachar. This is to teach us that one who supports those who study the Torah is just as great as one who studies oneself.

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“And these are the descendants of Aharon and Moshe on the day that Hashem spoke to Moshe on Har Sinai. And these are the names of the sons of Aharon; the firstborn, Nadav and Avihu...” (3:1-2)

One would think that, following the words: “And these are the descendants of Aharon and Moshe,” the descendants of both Aharon and Moshe would be listed. However, in the next *pasuk*, only the names of Aharon’s sons are mentioned. Rashi comments that we learn an important lesson from here: Aharon’s sons are called the descendants of Moshe because he taught them Torah. From here we derive: Whoever teaches the son of his friend Torah, it is considered as if he gave birth to that child (Sanhedrin 19b).

A very famous question is asked: Based on this logic, the entire population of *Klal Yisrael* should be considered the “sons” of Moshe, for it was Moshe Rabbeinu - the rebbi, leader and teacher of the nation who taught the whole Torah to the entire nation. Why, then, are only the sons of Aharon called Moshe’s “children,” when in fact every Jew in the desert could be worthy of such an appellation?

The Maharal of Prague, Rav Yehudah Lowy zt”l, gives a wonderful response. Rashi is making a specific point here. Although Moshe did, in fact, teach Torah to all of *Bnei Yisrael*, he no doubt took extra time out of his busy schedule to study with his nephews, the sons of Aharon. For them, he literally “went the extra mile” by devoting more time and effort, explaining and reviewing the Torah lessons with them.

The Maharal expounds that a parent is defined by one’s willingness to go the extra mile. Set hours do not exist; there are no boundaries. A parent is always prepared to do whatever it takes for his child. The principle that whoever teaches his friend’s son Torah is considered as though he fathered him only applies when the rebbi truly acts like a father in the sense that he is willing to go above and beyond the call of duty and truly become like a parent to that child.

MAINTAINING THE RESPECT

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“And these are the descendants of Aharon and Moshe on the day that Hashem spoke to Moshe...” (3:1)

Rashi explains that Moshe Rabbeinu’s name is mentioned when recounting the children of Aharon his brother, because Moshe taught them Torah, and as Rashi says, “Whoever teaches his friend’s son Torah, the *pasuk* considers him as if he gave birth to them.” The next *pasuk*, however, reverts back to form as it lists “the names of the children of Aharon,” and no mention of Moshe is included. After giving us a beautiful illustration of the significance of a Rebbe and teacher, why does the *pasuk* immediately revert to the usual terminology?

Rabbi Eliezer Friedman shlit’a (Hadras Yirmiyah) describes the following scenario in response: We often find that a young boy will go off to yeshiva to learn and study from great *Roshei Yeshiva* and masters in Torah. The *bachur* imbibes the lessons of his *rebbeim* and the pure atmosphere of the yeshiva world, and *shteigs* - progresses in learning. When the boy comes home, however, he may have the tendency to perceive his family - grandparents, parents, siblings - in an altogether different light. Even in cases where the family is strict in religious observance and Torah values, in the *bachur*’s mind, they don’t compare to the level of his *Roshei Yeshiva* and *rebbeim*. This may cause him to lose a measure of respect and appreciation for his family. He may even suffer from a lack of *derech erez* - respect towards his parents.

This is a terrible byproduct of the yeshiva system, and the *pasuk* makes it clear that this must never occur. Thus, immediately after discussing the significance of Moshe Rabbeinu as his nephew’s teacher, the *pasuk* reminds us in no uncertain terms that “these are the names of the children of Aharon” - the relationship with their father never changed.

THEY’RE HUMAN TOO

Eglei Tal

“And these are the names of the sons of Aharon: the firstborn, Nadav... These are the names of the sons of Aharon, the anointed kohanim...” (3:2-3)

Why does the statement “these are the names of the sons of Aharon” occur twice in two consecutive *pesukim*? In some other religions, priests are regarded as superhuman beings immune to error. For this reason, when a man in these religions is ordained to the priesthood he is given a new name to signify that he is no longer the same as he was prior to his ordination but has become a new person. Not so with the Jews. Even the most respected Jew is regarded as a human being who is by no means immune to error. “There is no righteous person on earth who always does good and never sins,” and it is written: “One shall not believe in one’s own holiness.”

We are indeed duty-bound to give due honor to scholars. However, we do so not because of who they are but in order to honor the Torah that they study and observe, just as we pay honor to a Torah Scroll not because of its physical character - after all, it is only parchment - but because the sheets of parchment from which it is created bear the Torah’s sacred words.

Similarly, we don’t believe that the matter from which a Torah scholar is created is any different from the substance from which ordinary people are formed.

The statement “these are the names of the sons of Aharon” occurs twice, first in the naming of the sons and then in the characterization of the sons as *kohanim*. This shows that even after their anointment to the priesthood, Aharon’s sons did not receive new names but were still considered the same people as before.

IT'S WITHIN REACH

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Bring near the tribe of Levi and present them before Aharon the kohen, that they may serve him." (3:6)

The Levites were singled out from among the rest of the Jewish people to act as G-d's personal servants. Nevertheless, the medieval Jewish sage Rabbi Moshe Maimonides points out that anyone who wishes to dedicate himself to the service of G-d can do so. He or she thereby becomes a "spiritual Levite" - and even a "spiritual priest," or even a "spiritual high priest!" - regardless of his actual tribal lineage. (Hitva'aduyot 745, vol. 4, pp. 2115-2116) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

FLOURISHING LIKE A PALM TREE

Baal Shem Tov

"Bring near the tribe of Levi and present them before Aharon the kohen, that they may serve him." (3:6)

Of them it is written: "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree; he will grow like a cedar in Lebanon." (Midrash Rabbah)

There are two kinds of righteous people. One is continually busy with the performance of the Divine service, but does all this selfishly and not for others. A person like this makes no effort to influence others to be righteous. Such a person, who studies and worships but doesn't do anything to help increase the number of righteous people in the world, is like a cedar, which is a magnificent and strong tree but bears no fruit.

The other righteous person is not only pious but causes others to flourish in spirit, to repent of their sins and to grow closer to G-d. Someone like this is compared to a palm tree, which not only grows but flourishes and yields fine fruit. The "cedar of Lebanon" only "grows" for itself but the "palm tree flourishes" and yields fruit, increasing the good in the world.

The tribe of Levi was continually engaged in Torah study and in the performance of the Divine service. Nevertheless, the Levites were like the palm tree because they also took the time to study Torah with others (as in "They taught Your judgments to Yaakov and Your Law to Israel"), and brought others closer to the ways of Judaism (as in "Loving all of G-d's creatures and bringing them closer to the Torah").

GUARDING OUR HOLINESS

Koznitzer Rebbe

"And they [the Levites] shall safeguard all the utensils of the Tent of Meeting..." (3:8)

A human being is like Hashem's Tabernacle. Just as the Tabernacle and its utensils had to be guarded so that they would constantly be in a state of holiness and purity, so must the human being be careful of blemish or defect. He must constantly aim to be in a state of holiness and purity.

SHARE THE WEALTH

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"And they [the Levites] shall safeguard all the utensils of the Tent of Meeting..." (3:8)

There are two types of righteous people (exemplified by the palm tree and cedar tree; see Tehillim 92:13):

One type is those who study the Torah and fulfill G-d's commandments perfectly, but do not share their spiritual wealth with others. A second type is those who devote some of the time and energy that they could have spent on striving for self-perfection to helping others.

Both paths are legitimate ways of serving G-d. However, as the Ba'al Shem Tov taught, G-d prefers that we follow the second example, sparing neither time nor energy to ensure that we bring benefit to others.

This was the path of the tribe of Levi (Tanchuma, Bamidbar 15). They did not serve G-d on their own behalf, but as representatives of the entire Jewish people. In this way, they showed us how we can illuminate the entire world. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 2, pp. 557-558) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

PERSONALIZED PATHS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You shall appoint Aharon and his sons, and they shall safeguard their priesthood. Any non-priest who approaches shall die." (3:10)

The Torah makes it clear that different people - and different groups of people - have different tasks. Divine providence has arranged for each of us to be born with a particular spiritual identity suitable for our destined spiritual task; it is therefore crucial for each of us to acknowledge that spiritual identity and live our lives accordingly. One person's path to holiness can be another person's death - spiritual and physical.

Just as the Israelites were divided into the laity and the priesthood, each with its different roles, so it is for humanity at large: the nations of the world and the Jewish people each have their unique function and responsibility.

By dedicating ourselves to discovering and honoring the particular spiritual path that G-d has created for each of us, we become worthy of receiving G-d's blessings of happiness and spiritual fulfillment. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 18, p. 1) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

EQUALITY FOR ALL

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Behold! I have taken the Levites from among Bnei Yisrael instead of all the firstborn." (3:12)

The tribe of Levi was designated by Hashem from among the entire Jewish Nation for greater spiritual development. Their role was to vigilantly guard and

maintain an ever-present level of holiness, as befitting one who is called upon to serve in the *Mishkan* and *Beis HaMikdash* at all times. The *pasuk* employs a rather unusual word to confer this responsibility on *Shevet Levi*: “*mitoch Bnei Yisrael*.” The word “*mitoch* - among” seems an interesting word choice, since the *pasuk* could simply have stated, “I have taken the Levites in place of the firstborn.” Similarly, on at least two other occasions, the word “*mitoch*” is used in conjunction with *Shevet Levi*. Why?

A tremendous insight is noted by Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld zt”l. The Torah wants us to know - and to never forget - that although *Shevet Levi* was not granted their own autonomous portion of Eretz Yisrael, they are no less worthy than any other member of *Klal Yisrael*. At the same time, although *Shevet Levi* is on a higher spiritual level than the rest of the nation, they are nevertheless an equal member of the Jewish people as a whole, not an exalted community above and beyond the rest of *Klal Yisrael*.

This is hinted to in the word “Yisrael” itself. If one takes the middle of each spelled-out letter of “Yisrael,” one will find a *vav* from the letter *yud*, a *yud* from the letter *shin*, a *yud* from the letter *reish*, a *lamed* from the *alef*, and a *mem* from the *lamed*.

These middle-of-the-middle letters spell out “*Leviim*”! Thus, the *pasuk* uses the word “*mitoch* - among” to signify that *Shevet Levi* is always in the “middle” of the nation, and *Klal Yisrael* must always regard them as such.

TRY YOUR BEST

Rabbi Avi Wiesenfeld

“And Moshe counted the Leviim according to the word of Hashem, as he had been commanded.” (3:16)

Over 50,000 people participate annually in the New York Marathon. If we look at the list of winners, it is interesting to notice that throughout the years, there are runners who win the race multiple times, and none of them even happen to be American. If we were to ask the average participants, “Why are you running if you’re not going to win,” they would reply something like, “Last year it took me eight hours to complete the race. If I manage to reach the finish line in seven hours and forty minutes, I’m a winner because I did a little bit better.”

In this week’s *Parshah* Moshe Rabbeinu is commanded to count *Bnei Yisrael*. Upon asking Hashem how he is expected to do such an impossible task, Hashem instructs him to go and stand outside each tent of the Jews and that is how he will be able to count them. Moshe Rabbeinu does as he is commanded, and as he is standing outside each tent a *bas kol* emanates from the heavens and tells Moshe how many Jews are inside the tent.

Rav Zeidel Epstein zt”l asks the obvious question. Why did Moshe need to exert himself to go to and stand outside each tent?

Couldn’t a *bas kol* just have easily come down and told Moshe the total number of Jews without him having to leave his own tent?

The answer to this question provides us with an important principle in the way Hashem runs the world. Hashem tells us, “If you do your part, I’ll take care of the rest.” Moshe had to put forth some effort, and then He merited that the *bas kol* came down to help him do as Hashem had instructed him.

We are now about to experience the festival of Shavuos, the *Yom Tov* on which we received the Torah. The Torah contains the 613 (*Taryag*) *mitzvos* which we re-accept upon ourselves every year at this time. Often, a person thinks to himself, “I can’t keep all these *mitzvos* and adhere to all the complex *halachic* details on a daily basis. I’m never going to win!” The response is that the *Ribono Shel Olam* expects only one thing of us - to try. It’s not about getting it all right or winning. It’s about trying. When Hashem sees that we’re doing our part, He says, “I’ll do the rest.” With this in mind, we can be *mekabel* the Torah with a sense of responsibility, with the knowledge that Hashem is at our side helping us each step of the way.

TAKING THE FIRST STEP

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“And Moshe counted the Leviim according to the word of Hashem, as he had been commanded.” (3:16)

Rashi quotes a conversation which took place between Hashem and Moshe. Moshe expressed concern in regard to determining how many babies there would be in each family since it would be immodest for him to visit and enter each tent to collect the data. Hashem responded that Moshe would stand outside the tent, and He would go inside and share the number of family members in each tent. Hashem continued and said, “Moshe, you do your part, and I will do My part.”

Rav Yisrael Meir Druck (Esh Tomid) asks two questions. Firstly, if Hashem was going to gather the information, then why did Moshe have to bother standing outside each tent? Secondly, what did Hashem mean when He said, “You do your part, and I will do Mine”? It does not seem that Moshe really did anything.

Rav Druck explains that Hashem was teaching Moshe, and all of us, a very powerful lesson. In life, Hashem is always going to be the One responsible for our successes. However, we need to do our part as a prerequisite to benefit from Hashem’s kindness. Moshe needed to put in effort by visiting each tent in order to merit help from Hashem. It is for this reason that he had to visit each tent even if Hashem was collecting the information.

Like Moshe, we need to constantly remind ourselves throughout our lives that we can’t sit back and hope for the best. Instead, we need to realize that Hashem helps those who help themselves!

OUR INNER TABERNACLE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"These were the sons of Levi, by their names: Gershon, Kehas, and Merari." (3:17)

The three Levite clans were charged with transporting the three components of the Tabernacle. These three components of the physical Tabernacle reflect the three spiritual components of the personal, inner "Tabernacle" each of us constructs for G-d in our own lives:

- The clan of Merari was in charge of the walls of the Tabernacle and pillars of the Courtyard. The basic, rigid structural foundation of our inner Tabernacle is our uncompromising devotion to G-d's will.
- The clan of Gershon was in charge of the nettings of the Tabernacle and veils of the Courtyard. The fluid component of our inner Tabernacle is our emotional involvement with G-d and our loving expression of this emotional relationship in performing His commandments.
- The clan of Kehas was in charge of the furnishings inside the Tabernacle. The furnishings of our inner Tabernacle are the particular ways in which our relationship with G-d changes our lives and enables us to infuse the world with Divine consciousness. The central feature of this component of the Tabernacle was the Ark, which housed the Torah, which is our guide for transforming both ourselves and the world. (Likutei Torah 3:20b-21a) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

GOOD NEIGHBORS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"The families of the children of Kehas camped to the south of the Tabernacle." (3:29)

Korach, whom we will meet later (Bamidbar 16) as the instigator of the mutiny against the authority of Moshe, was a Levite of the clan of Kehas. Most of his fellow mutineers came from the tribe of Reuven, who also camped south of the Tabernacle, near the clan of Kehas (ibid., 2:10). They were thus exposed to Korach's negative influence and subsequently got caught up in his mutiny.

Moshe and Aharon camped on the east side of the Tabernacle. The tribes of the camp of Yehudah, who also camped on the east side of the Tabernacle, constantly witnessed Moshe's and Aharon's devotion to the Torah, and this inspired them to become great Torah scholars themselves.

We learn from this the importance of good neighbors. We can also see that a bad neighbor is one who, like Korach, promotes dissension and discord, while the best possible neighbors are those who, like Moshe and Aharon, inspire others to study the Torah, for "its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace" (Mishlei 3:17). (Likutei Sichot, vol. 33, p. 10) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

TO EACH THEIR OWN

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"And those who camped in front of the Mishkan, in front of the Tent of Meeting to the east were Moshe, Aharon, and his sons..." (3:38)

In this *Parashah*, the Torah outlines where the tribes were situated in the desert. Rashi tells us that the tribe of Yehudah became great in Torah because they were positioned next to Moshe whereas the tribe of Reuven, who lived in close proximity to Korach's family, were subsequently dragged into his devastating dispute with Moshe.

The simple understanding of Rashi's comments is that since the tribe of Yehudah lived next to Moshe, they were influenced by his greatness in Torah and were subsequently rewarded with greatness themselves; and because Reuven lived next to Korach's family, they were punished as a result of being negatively influenced by him.

If this is the case, we can ask a penetrating question: Is it fair to reward the tribe of Yehudah and punish the tribe of Reuven for whom they lived next to - after all, Hashem Himself instructed the tribes to be positioned there?

From the strength of this question, we can understand a fundamental principle of man's role in this world. Everyone is placed in a position where they are required to work hard to achieve greatness, for distinction and reward do not come without tireless effort. Whether the test is for a young boy, born into a Bnei Brak family who is required to understand why he is putting on *tefillin* every day when he has been doing it his whole life, or whether the test is for the not-yet-religious boy, born just around the corner in Tel Aviv who finally comes to put on *tefillin* for the first time; both tests are immensely difficult, and the reward for these boys is not necessarily based on what they actually do, but rather, the effort they put into trying to do it. (Michtav M'Eliyahu, vol. 1, p. 113)

Therefore, we may suggest that the tribe of Yehudah had the difficult role of emulating the greatest leader of the Jewish People; they had to take note of Moshe's actions and work hard to incorporate them into their lives. At the same time, the tribe of Reuven had an equally difficult task of avoiding the negative influence of Korach. The tribe of Yehudah and the tribe of Reuven had tests in different directions - but in terms of difficulty, perhaps their tests were equally difficult. And because the tribe of Yehudah passed their test, they were duly rewarded, but because the tribe of Reuven failed their test, they were accordingly punished.

We are faced with daily challenges: some to increase our *mitzvah* performance in quality or quantity and others to withstand the tests placed before us. Neither is necessarily more challenging than the other, but the key to success in all challenges we face is a desire to grow, sincere prayer, and most of all, hard work.

AVOIDING DISPUTES

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“And those who camped in front of the Mishkan, in front of the Tent of Meeting to the east were Moshe, Aharon, and his sons...” (3:38)

The tribes of Yehudah, Yissachar, and Zevulun became great Torah scholars by virtue of having camped near Moshe and Aharon. In contrast, the tribe of Reuven camped on the same side of the Tabernacle as the Levite clan to which Moshe’s cousin Korach belonged. They were therefore caught up in Korach’s mutiny against Moshe, as the Torah will recount later.

This teaches us that the way to avoid being dragged into a dispute is by studying the Torah and living according to its teachings, and the way to connect to G-d through studying the Torah is by distancing oneself from any form of contention. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 33, p. 16-17) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

REWARDED WITH GROWTH

Ramban

“All that were recorded of the Levites, who Moshe and Aharon recorded at Hashem’s command, according to their family, all male from the age of one month and up were twenty-two thousand.” (3:39)

Why was the tribe of Levi smaller than the other tribes of the Jews?

The Sages explain that when the Jews were in Egypt the tribe of Levi was not compelled to perform hard labor like the rest of the Jews.

We read in Shemos (1:12): “The more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad.” The Sages take this to mean that G-d caused all the other tribes, which were under the whip of the Egyptian taskmasters, to increase and multiply in a supernatural manner. Since the Levites, unlike the other tribes, were not so afflicted, this statement was not applicable to them, and they increased and multiplied only by natural means.

(Rabbi Elimelech Biderman elaborates: This teaches us a general rule about the various struggles we face. The very challenges are what cause us to grow.)

AVAILABLE TO ALL

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Count every firstborn male of the Children of Israel from one month of age and up...” (3:40)

G-d originally intended that the firstborn of each family perform the priestly service. He selected the tribe of Levi for this service only because the tribe of Levi - unlike the firstborn - refused to participate in the sin of the Golden Calf.

From this we see that a person who was not born into the spiritual elite - and was therefore not originally destined for the highest levels of spiritual attainment - can ascend to these levels by virtue of his or her merits. Businesspeople, manual workers, parents, students - none of us need think that we cannot engage in the in-depth study of the Torah, pray with intense fervor, or spread Divine consciousness throughout the world.

As Maimonides says, anyone “whose spirit has motivated him and whose perception has enlightened him to set himself apart to stand before G-d, serving Him... has [by this fact] been hallowed as the holiest of the holy.” (Hitva’aduyot 574 5, vol. 4, pp. 2115-2116) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

NO AGE REQUIREMENT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Take the Levites in place of every firstborn of the Children of Israel...” (3:45)

The other tribes were counted only from age twenty - the age at which they were old enough to serve in the army. The Levites’ task, however, was to protect the Tabernacle, and any increase in their population - even of newborn infants - helped them in this task. Therefore, they were counted virtually from birth.

We can all join the legions of the Levites in a spiritual sense, by nurturing our intrinsic connection to G-d. This connection is not affected by any variations in time, age, or environment. It therefore enables us to “know Him in all your ways,” down to the simplest aspects of life that a mature adult shares with the smallest child. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 2, pp. 558-559) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

RISKS OF WEALTH

Reb Noson of Breslov

“You shall give the money to Aharon and his sons as a redemption for the firstborn who are in excess of the number of Levites.” (3:48)

Due to the bounty You gave them, they made a golden calf. (Berakhot 32a)

Wealth is a great blessing. When used properly, it can elevate a person to great spiritual heights. But too often, wealth becomes a vehicle that people use to turn away from G-d.

When the Jews in the desert demanded an idol and killed Chur, who stood in their way, Aharon hinted at their misuse of wealth by saying, “Remove your gold rings and bring them to me [to build an idol]” (Shemos 32:2). Because they blemished with wealth, the firstborn lost their right to perform G-d’s service. After the establishment of the Tabernacle, the firstborn redeemed themselves by giving of their wealth to Aharon the *Kohen Gadol*. (Likutei Halakhot V, p. 430)

SELFLESS FOUNDATION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Take a census of the sons of Kehas from among the sons of Levi according to their families, according to their fathers house." (4:2)

G-d uses the idiom of "take a census" (literally, "raise the head") only here, in the case of the clan of Kehas, and later, in the case of the clan of Gershon (Bamidbar 4:22). When G-d tells Moshe to count the clan of Merari, He simply says, "count them" (ibid. 4:29).

Allegorically, this is because the clan of Kehas personified the way our relationship with G-d enables us to transform reality, and the clan of Gershon personified our emotional involvement with G-d, while the clan of Merari personified the selflessness that serves as the foundation of our spiritual life. Thus, the idiom of "raising up" is not used for the clan of Merari not because of any shortcoming on their part, but because they expressed pure selflessness. In this aspect, they exceeded the other two clans, who personified more the active, self-assertive facets of spiritual life.

Both self-assertion and selflessness are necessary and complementary components of the process of spiritual growth. But selflessness is the foundation upon which all of our spiritual progress and the fulfillment of our Divine mission is built. (Sefer HaSichot 5748, vol. 2, pp. 466-468) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

TEMPERED WITH LOVE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"The charge of Elazar son of Aaron the kohen is the oil of illumination, the incense spices, the daily grain offering, and the anointing oil – the charge of the entire Tabernacle and everything in it – of the Sanctuary and its utensils." (4:16)

According to Kabbalah, the Levites personify the Divine attribute of *gevurah* (restraint and judgment), while the priests (and Aharon in particular) personify the Divine attribute of *chesed* (love and kindness).

In the Temple service, the music of the Levites inspired the worshipers to scale the heights of holiness and purity (which are achieved through eschewing that which is unholy and impure), while the sacrifices offered by the priests drew down Divine blessing and revelation (which are manifestations of G-d's love and kindness).

By placing the priests in charge of the Levites, the Torah indicates that while both *chesed* and *gevurah* are necessary and complimentary facets of spiritual life, we should nonetheless ensure that *chesed* "sweeten" *gevurah* - meaning that love temper fear, and kindness direct strictness. (Hitva'aduyot 5748, vol. 3, pp. 405-407) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

FROM ADVERSARY TO ALLY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Thus shall you do for them so that they shall live and not die: when they approach the Holy of Holies, Aharon and his sons shall come and assign them, every man over his work and to his burden." (4:19)

It often happens that when we strive to reach our potential in spiritual matters, we encounter forms of opposition. Sometimes other people ridicule us or are hostile to us; sometimes we are assaulted by inner voices of self-doubt.

The Torah teaches us here that the proper response to these challenges is not to battle them but to use the power of Aharon, who dedicated his life to being a peacemaker.

Our loving-kindness will then either neutralize the negativity or eliminate it altogether. And transforming an adversary into an ally is the most complete and effective victory possible. (Hitva'aduyot 5748, vol. 3, pp. 405-407) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

HAFTORAH

QUANTITATIVE VS QUALITATIVE

Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman

"The number of the Children of Israel will be like the sand of the sea, which can neither be measured nor counted..." (Hoshea 2:1)

It is written: "The number of the Children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea" and, immediately following, "which can neither be measured nor counted." Isn't this a contradiction? One (prophecy) will come true when Israel will do the Omnipresent's will and the other will come true when Israel will not do the Omnipresent's will. (Yoma 22)

How are we to understand the implication in Tractate Yoma that if the Jews repented and mended their ways they would suddenly multiply so much that it would no longer be possible to count them after their change of heart?

To understand this, we can think of individuals we know who, though they are singular in quantity, in quality are equal to thousands. Thus, the Sages say of Moshe that he "outweighed all of Israel" and of Yair ben Menashe that he "was equal to the greater part of the Sanhedrin" (Bava Basra 121). This is what the Sages mean by their statement: If the Jews will do the Omnipresent's will, every single Jew will become so great and important that his or her quality will be beyond measure.

Thus, the interpretation of the *pasuk* in Hoshea is as follows: “And the number of the Children of Israel will be” once the Jews do the Omnipresent’s will, the Jews, who are finite in number now (when they do not do the Omnipresent’s will), will grow beyond measurement in terms of quality (“which can neither be measured nor counted”). For “it will come to pass that, instead of that which was said to them, ‘You are not My people,’ it will be said to them: ‘You are the children of the Living G-d’” (Hoshea 2:1), and as a child of the Living G-d every single Jew will be endowed with the worth of hundreds of thousands so that it will be impossible to define the greatness of the people of Israel in terms of number.

OPPRESSION LEADING TO ELEVATION

Bikkurei Aviv

“...instead of being told, ‘You are not My people,’ it will be said to them: ‘You are the children of the Living G-d.’” (Hoshea 2:1)

The Hebrew word for “instead” (*ba’makom*) may be translated also as “in the place.” Hence, the above text may also be construed to read: “And it shall come to pass that in the place in which it was said to them ‘You are not My people,’ it shall be said to them: ‘You are the children of the Living G-d.’”

History has shown that it was precisely in those countries where the Jews suffered oppression and persecution that Judaism’s spirit has thrived, and Jewish identity was strengthened. In countries where the Jews fared well - where they were emancipated and accorded all the rights of citizenship - Judaism’s strength was sapped by assimilation and by conversion movements, which snatched away large segments.

We hear the prophet say: “And it shall come to pass that in the place in which it was said to them: ‘You are not My people,’” in that place where the others will humiliate you and say that you are a base people, “it shall be said to them: ‘You are the children of the Living G-d.’” The humiliations to which you will be subjected will compel you to guard your identity zealously and adhere more closely to the Torah, so that you’ll be regarded as true children of the Living G-d.

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