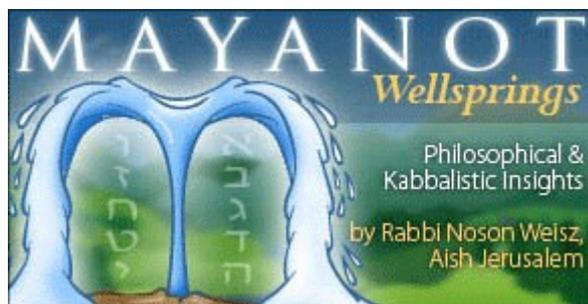


In This Issue

- **Mayanot** by Rabbi Noson Weisz
- **M'oray Ha'Aish** by Rabbi Ari Kahn
- **Covenant and Conversation** by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
- **The Guiding Light** by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen



Jewish Meritocracy

The bulk of the Book of Numbers is devoted to telling the story of the Jewish people's 40-year sojourn in the desert. It contains very few commandments and reads much like a history book.

While this can also be said about the Book of Genesis, the stories of Genesis record the events that are fundamental to all religious beliefs, the creation of the world, the development of the relationship between human beings and God, the lives of the Patriarchs that provide the template on which the history of the nation of Israel is later inscribed. In contrast, the Book of Numbers records events that were no doubt important at the time but seem to have little historic consequence.

But this is obviously a mistaken view. The very fact that the Torah devotes an entire book to recording these events

demonstrates their cataclysmic importance. It is therefore legitimate to approach Bamidbar by attempting to understand the historic significance of the events that are recorded in it.

In this connection it is noteworthy that we begin our annual reading of the Book of Bamidbar on the Sabbath before the Shavuot holiday. As there is no coincidence in spiritual matters this points to a connection between the information contained in Bamidbar and the ability to receive the Torah, the event that we celebrate on Shavuot.

The thesis we shall attempt to develop in the next few essays is that the Book of Bamidbar establishes the norms of a Jewish society. It explains the nature of the social contract that binds together the individuals that comprise the Jewish people, and provides an outline for the ethics of social behavior that are integral to the Jewish social contract. Inasmuch as the Covenant of Sinai set the seal on this contract, the internalization of this system of ethics is a necessary prelude to the receiving of the Torah.

THE CENSUS

The book begins by taking a census of the Jewish people; it lists their numbers, apportions these numbers into tribes according to families; it separates the Levites from the rest and finally draws a very detailed map of the Jewish encampment. Each tribe is assigned a leader, its own designated place, and its own particular order of march.

The camp of the Israelites is organized around the Tabernacle located at its center and places around the Tabernacle are assigned with reference to the four directions of the compass in clockwise order starting from the east, and ending in the north. Sandwiched between the inner edges of the Israelite camp and the Tabernacle is the encampment of the Levites, which is laid out according to the same basic pattern.

The Midrash informs us that the map of the Jewish camp described here is not a novel phenomenon. This manner of organizing the Jewish people can be traced back to the way Jacob distributed his children around his deathbed to receive his blessing. [For a detailed explanation of this subject see [MAYANOT, Parshat Vayechi](#), in the Archives section.]

Moreover, Rashi [Genesis 50,13] tells us in the name of the Midrash that Jacob instructed his children to deploy themselves in the same order when they marched with his bier from Egypt to his crypt in Cave of the Machpela, and subsequently throughout history whenever the entire Jewish nation went on a march or formed a common encampment. Thus the layout of the Jewish encampment we encounter in our Parsha was drawn up by Jacob and is virtually eternal.

Interestingly, the Midrash also makes the point that although this order of march made its first public appearance at Jacob's funeral there is a reverse tradition at work here. The inspiration for the arrangement was provided by the desert encampment

set up in our Parsha. As Levi had his own separate encampment around the Tabernacle he was instructed not to carry his father's bier with his brothers. Joseph who was broken into two tribes by the time of the desert encampment also didn't carry Jacob's bier. Ephraim and Menasha replaced Levi and Joseph to complete the complement of twelve. Jacob's eternal instruction originated in his prophetic vision of the Jewish encampment around the Tabernacle.

The encampment is the focus of an eternal spiritual circle, and we shall attempt to plumb its depths. Let us begin by looking at the character of the arrangement.

WHY THE RIGIDITY

There is a great rigidity about this entire system that is repugnant to the modern mind. Personal merits and abilities are not given the slightest consideration. Your family and tribal connection is the sole determinant of your place within the commonwealth. Not even the Torah scholar is awarded any special status. Your distance and direction from the Tabernacle, obviously the most desirable location, is purely a function of your lineage.

Although the age of encampments is long behind us, Orthodox Jewish society still retains the flavor of this approach. The family is still a very important determinant of a person's status within Orthodox society; sex is even more important. We have not turned into a meritocracy through the course of the millennia. Is there any way to bring this kind of social orientation down to earth so that a modern person can relate to

it?

SOCIAL HARMONY

The first observation we made is that we always begin to read the Book of Bamidbar on the Sabbath that immediately precedes Shavuot. This turns out to be quite deliberate. We are meant to enter the holiday with the echo of the detailed description of the Jewish camp still reverberating in our ears. The connection is explained in Jewish tradition in the following manner:

They journeyed from Rephidim and arrived at the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness; and Israel encamped there opposite the mountain.
(Exodus 19:2)

Rashi comments that on that occasion there was unity; they camped "as one, with a single heart," but on all other occasions there was dissension and turmoil in the encampment (Mechilta).

The Ohr Hachaim, one of the best-known commentators on the Torah adds:

This unity was a necessary condition of being able to receive the Torah; it would have been impossible for Israel to receive the Torah if there was the slightest degree of dissension among the Jewish people.

But why should such perfect harmony be a condition of Torah acceptance? Perfect harmony implies unanimity. Unanimity is difficult enough to achieve among couples. To aim for it on a national scale seems

unrealistic and even immature. The members of a mature society willingly abide by the decisions of the majority providing that the basic rights of all individuals are protected. That's what democracy is all about. Why can't a democratic majority of the Jewish people suffice as a condition of Torah acceptance?

LIMITS OF DEMOCRACY

Those of us who retain a memory of the turmoil surrounding the Vietnam War should be able to answer this question. Democracy has limits; people can live democratically, but they cannot be asked to sacrifice their lives democratically. The people who protested the Vietnam War were neither unpatriotic nor undemocratic. They simply did not believe in the justice of the American cause.

To be willing to sacrifice his life a person has to believe in the value of the sacrifice. Although the majority of Americans were consistently behind the war till the very end, America was forced to pull out of Vietnam. Those who were opposed to the war, even though they were in the minority, were simply unwilling to sacrifice their lives or the lives of their dear ones for a cause they could not sincerely support on the bases of upholding the decisions of the democratic majority.

Democracy is a good way to organize the economic and social inputs of everyday life. When it comes to questions of life and death every individual must clearly perceive in his or her own heart the things that are more precious than life itself.

The acceptance of the Torah entails at least the same degree of self-sacrifice as going off to fight a war. Jewish history is drenched with the blood of Jews who had to surrender their lives for the sake of their allegiance to the Torah, very often without any choice or prior consultation. In modern day Israel, Jews still lose their lives almost daily for the 'crime' of being Jewish. The Covenant of Sinai is still exacting a great human sacrifice. The Jewish people could only accept the Torah in a state of total unanimity.

But how can you achieve such a state? If we look around the world it is practically impossible to achieve total unanimity on even the simplest of issues, and certainly not about religious questions.

REALITY ISSUES

The Mishna in Avot teaches:

Jealousy, lust and the desire for glory remove a man from the world. (Avot 4:28)

"Remove a man from the world" is a most curious way to express the idea that something is harmful. The statement prompts one to ask: What 'world' do these negative drives remove a man from?

It is our suggestion that the Mishna intends to tackle the issue of unanimity. Although unanimity is elusive, there generally **is** unanimity among people about the things that constitute the necessities of life or about what we call the basic human rights. Our common perception of reality forces us all to acknowledge that we have the same basic human needs.

Deciding what things should be judged as important when they are not absolute basic necessities is the consideration that introduces social disagreement. But why can't we agree about what is important just as we agree about what is necessary? After all, don't we all inhabit a common reality? If I recognize something as important why isn't its importance automatically clear to you as well? Why do we so vehemently disagree about the important aspects of life?

It is this question that the Mishna addresses. We see reality differently because of the feelings of jealousy, lust, and the desire for glory that are programmed into all of us. It is these primal urges that distort the clarity of our vision so that we do not see reality as it is; these urges literally remove us from reality, or 'the world'.

It follows that perfect consensus about the nature of reality between multitudes of people can be attained in the absence of jealousy and lust for glory; in the absence of these primal urges everyone perceives the identical reality and is readily able to agree on the fundamental importance of whatever is really important. The next question. How can an entire people rise to such a lofty state?

Our Torah portion provides the only existential answer. If every person within the camp clearly knows his own place, knows that his place is uniquely his and that no matter what he does he can have no other, everyone in the camp can be totally free of feelings of jealousy and lust for

glory. Each Jew will observe the same reality as all other Jews in the encampment and Israel will reach perfect consensus. We will all agree that the Torah is important and that we must have it.

WHAT ABOUT MERIT

But surely such a suggestion is outrageous. Can anyone really maintain that the only way to attain perfect social harmony is through getting people to accept some sort of absolutely rigid medieval caste system? Can it be spiritually desirable to impose a social order that allows no room for the recognition of individual merit?

Well, why don't we look at the opposite system? Why don't we look at ourselves? Our society seriously attempts to equate status with merit. Ideally in our world, the social status we attain will not depend on our surnames, whether we are male or female, dark or white. When we successfully complete the process of social engineering and emerge from the present stage of human history and turn the world into our ideal, everyone will be able to reap the rewards merited by his talents and abilities in equal measure regardless of race, color, sex or religion.

But wait! let's not get carried away by our vision. Let's study this ideal world we are busily constructing for a minute. Doesn't this still leave other forms of arbitrary inequality that it is beyond our ability to iron out?

In our ideal society, any person with the requisite talent can become a brilliant doctor regardless of his ethnic origins etc.

and reap the rewards of his accomplishment with a prestigious job that carries with it the high salary commensurate with its status. Moreover such a person will earn his benefits fairly. He will have to survive medical school and internship to reap the rewards of his potentials with merit; he will have to work hard and compete fairly to get to where he is.

It sounds wonderful, but of course there is a fly in the ointment-such a person does not earn the high I.Q. that made it all possible in the first place -- he or she must be born with it.

Our ideal of a society based on merit is an illusion. People are **born** beautiful or talented or clever, the qualities that can be developed into skills and traits that we value and are willing to reward on the grounds that their possessors have more merit than the rest of us. No matter how egalitarian the society, the accidents of birth limit the ultimate status attainable by individuals, and the accidents of birth are totally divorced from merit.

Is there any real difference between what we aim to do -- which is to distribute status and rewards on the basis of genetic accidents -- and a system where these social rewards are distributed on the basis of family and lineage, also genetic accidents? What is the moral difference between the two systems? Doesn't the difference boil down to simple efficiency?

We have substituted an oligarchy of the intellectually gifted and replaced the oligarchy of lineage. In our ideal

meritocracy the accidents of birth would be allowed their fullest expression and will not be diminished or contradicted by the accidents of family and lineage. This is certainly a change but it can hardly be lauded as a major merit revolution.

Does this mean that the pursuit of an egalitarian society based on merit is an impossible dream? Not at all. As usual you merely have to look in the right place. Instead of looking at physicality, we have to look at spirituality!

SPIRITUAL MERIT

If we start with the assumption that God created us all, equipped us with our potentials and placed us in our circumstances, we eliminate at one fell stroke all the usual reasons for human pride. No one can be proud of the fact that he is smart or handsome, that he is male or female, that he can run quickly or for any of the usual reasons that people have for feeling superior or proud.

Moreover, any achievement that is based on such basically given genetic skills is also eliminated as a reason for feeling meritorious or superior. How can anyone know what someone else would have achieved given the same talents, motivations and circumstances? How can he be sure that the other person who was given all this would not have achieved more?

All merit must be based on what cannot be given but must be chosen. That is why true merit can only be based on the results of the exercise of free will. This brings up right

back to our Parsha and the reality point it presents.

THE ROOT FREE WILL CHOICE

All of us were given the ability to decide who we are -- a soul or a body. Is reality fundamentally material, a conclusion that implies that our basic identity is defined by our body? Or, are we essentially souls encased in bodies, which do not reflect our identity but are merely the space suits that we wear to survive the trip to the physical world?

If we are primarily bodies, then we **are** essentially males or females, smart or dumb, white or black, etc. Whether our attributes came to us accidentally or not does not matter; they are who we are and the fact is that it is worth more to have a high I.Q. than a low one. The possessor of the higher I.Q. is a greater asset to humanity. He is perfectly justified in claiming the rewards of his superiority, for in fact he **is** superior. It may not be just, but it is nonetheless true.

If we accept the notion that we are primarily physical beings, than it is possible to accept our society as a meritocracy on the grounds that it is the best we can do. Railing against the unjust distribution of gifted genes is akin to worrying about the injustice of our intellectual superiority to ants.

If we relate to human beings as bodies we must concede that we are doomed to forever inhabit an unjust world. Those who are more qualified have inherently more utility, and therefore, it will always be logical and utilitarian to give them more power and

status and offer them greater rewards, even though there is no moral justice behind this system whatever.

The Mishna is wrong, then. Jealousy, lust and the desire for glory are inevitable in a morally unjust world. We can never fully reconcile ourselves to unjust distributions. We can never reach unanimity by definition. We will never see reality in the same way. We would never be able to accept the Torah as a people.

If on the other hand, we choose to see ourselves as souls, everything takes on an entirely different appearance. Let us see how the world looks from this perspective.

SOUL IDENTITY

If we are primarily souls, we are not males or females, smart or dumb, white or black. These are qualities that inhere to our bodies, which are the outer covering that our souls wear. Our merit flows from the choices we make as souls, not from our achievements as bodies. Anything that is related to utilitarian considerations -- the attainment of food clothing and shelter -- is not a proper basis for evaluating anyone's basic worth. Such matters, because the potentials for their attainment are so genetically weighted, are beyond choice and primarily in God's province; the distribution of human talents required for producing the necessities of life is God's method of providing us with these necessities. Utility is divorced from merit.

The Talmud says:

All is in the hands of heaven
except for the fear of heaven.

(Talmud, Brochot, 33b)

But there are some technical questions. The first; if I am a soul how do I locate myself? It's easy to identify a body and single it out from other bodies but how do you identify a soul?

Let us borrow some concepts and language from the world of computers: A soul is a particular file of holiness, and a file can only be located by properly describing its path. To locate oneself as a soul it is essential to describe one's tribe and one's family, as well as the drive on which this family and tribe are located.

If we would set out to describe and locate a particular soul we would probably use a system much like the one introduced in our Torah portion which seems almost like a WINDOWS forerunner. We would have to locate where the original spark of divinity at the root of our souls separated from the Creator, which would be described by the direction orientation from the Tabernacle. This would give us the overall directory and then we would have to go through the tribe and family to locate the specific individual, a process that is uncannily similar to describing the location of a particular piece of software within a directory.

The placement of the Jewish people outlined by the Torah hammered home the message to the Jewish people that they were souls and not bodies. When they were in the desert eating the Manna living under the protection of God's cloud they all perceived this as their common reality; accordingly, all traces of jealousy and desire for individual glory as bodies left

them entirely. The difference in the given abilities of people which is basically a function of the potentials wired into their bodies were classified as the Divinely determined assignment of tasks. All Jews perceived the same reality; they were able to achieve the essential unity and consensus required to accept the Torah.

In any case, the acceptance of Torah makes sense only to the person who perceives himself or herself as a soul and not a body. There is nothing utilitarian about the Torah's commandments. They were not designed to manufacture superior widgets or better mousetraps.

The acceptance of Torah amounts to the acceptance of oneself as a soul. As a soul there is no reason to display any reluctance in accepting one's assigned position in the encampment of Israel. This brings one into perfect harmony with all the other souls in a way that still allows for self-definition.

Parshat Bamidbar is truly a proper prelude to the Shavuot holiday.



An (Un)Necessary Book

As we begin reading the fourth book of the Torah, we cannot help feeling somewhat unsettled. Each of the chapters of B'midbar

(Numbers) follows in logical sequence; no particular word or sentence causes us unease. Rather, the entire book, as a whole, gives us pause: At face value, this book should never have been written. The events it records should never have happened. The book of B'midbar begins as the Israelites leave Mount Sinai, in possession of the precious Torah. Their next stop should have been the Promised Land, their stated destination. Their original itinerary did not include forty years in the desert.

There are two ways of looking at this delay, which is distilled in the name of the book – B'midbar, “in the desert” - reflecting the setting in which the events unfold: Perhaps the people were simply not ready to enter, fight for, capture and rule their own country. They needed to “kill time” and to come of age, to mature as a nation and to muster the skills and strength they would need before facing the tasks ahead. The desert would be a holding pattern, an incubator. Alternatively, we may find that the desert experience had intrinsic value as an educational experience. To rephrase the question, were the years in the desert a coincidence of geography, or was there a deeper significance to the place in which the Jewish nation came of age? Surely, the Israelites needed a place to collect themselves and to prepare for the conquest of the Land of Israel, and there were few other locales available in which to do so. Nonetheless, there seems to be a greater design behind God's decision to delay their entry into the Land and to extend their sojourn in the desert. Is there something

special about the desert that is particularly germane to the process they would undergo?

In the desert, man is exposed, without shelter. Hot days, cold nights, open spaces and no reliable sources of food or water create a situation of unparalleled vulnerability. In this atmosphere, the Israelites' reliance on God was complete, and the certainty that all sustenance comes from God was ingrained upon their collective psyche for all time. This is the quintessential lesson to be learned from the desert, a lesson that could not have been learned as effectively anywhere else.

In this sense, the desert experience is reminiscent of the Eden experience, in which man did no work, yet all his needs were provided for. While we might not think of the desert as a utopian existence, on a functional level there was something very Eden-like in the Israelites' forty-year sojourn in the desert.

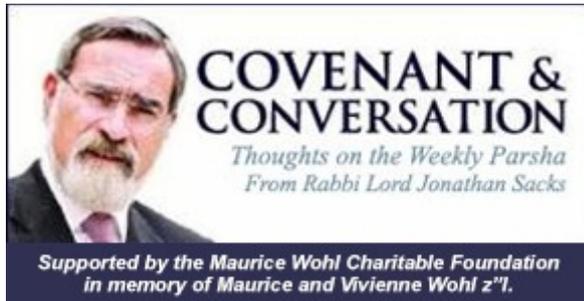
There is another aspect of the desert experience: isolation. Normally, societies are influenced by the ideas, mores and behaviors of other societies - either consciously or subconsciously. Even societies that erect walls – figurative or literal – to resist this inevitable crosspollination are usually only partially successful. The newly-freed slaves, at the dawn of their national history and in the early stages of cementing their national identity, may not have been mature enough to withstand negative influences from the pagan societies they would encounter in the Land of Canaan. In this light, it becomes

clear why God chose the isolation of the desert for the period of incubation.

This isolation may also be seen as proactive, more positive than a mere avoidance tactic. When Avraham set off to fulfill God's command and offer up his son Yitzchak, two young men, members of Avraham's household, accompanied them. They reached the appointed place together, but then Avraham divided the group in two: He and Yitzchak would ascend the mountain and serve God, and then rejoin the others. Rabbi Soloveitchik explained this verse as a paradigm of spiritual growth: There comes a time in the life of every seeker of spirituality when he must be alone. However, the verse does not end there: Avraham sees the separation as one stage, and the rejoining of society that follows as no less important a stage in the process.

The Jewish people have a great destiny to fulfill. In order to become a "light unto the nations," we must first be "ignited." This was the essence of the Revelation at Sinai. To cultivate that light and allow it to grow, we needed time; this was the time spent in the desert. Perhaps in a perfect world the former slaves could have entered the Holy Land immediately and had a positive impact on the nations around them; God knew that in reality, they simply were not ready. Just as Avraham needed time alone with Yitzchak, so, too, the Jewish People needed time alone to achieve a full understanding of their relationship with God and His commandments. And just as Avraham descended from that isolated experience of enlightenment and revelation

and influenced the entire world, so, too, will his descendants.



The Ever-Repeated Story

Bamidbar takes up the story as we left it toward the end of Shemot. The people had journeyed from Egypt to Mount Sinai. There they received the Torah. There they made the Golden Calf. There they were forgiven after Moses' passionate plea, and there they made the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, inaugurated on the first of Nisan, almost a year after the exodus. Now, one month later, on the first day of the second month, they are ready to move on to the second part of the journey, from Sinai to the Promised Land.

Yet there is a curious delay in the narrative. Ten chapters pass until the Israelites actually begin to travel (Num. 10:33). First there is a census. Then there is an account of the arrangement of the tribes around the Ohel Moed, the Tent of Meeting. There is a long account of the Levites, their families and respective roles. Then there are laws about the purity of the camp, restitution, the sotah, the woman suspected of adultery, and the nazirite. A lengthy series of passages describe the final preparations for the journey. Only then do they set out. Why

this long series of seeming digressions?

It is easy to think of the Torah as simply telling events as they occurred, interspersed with various commandments. On this view the Torah is history plus law. This is what happened, these are the rules we must obey, and there is a connection between them, sometimes clear (as in the case of laws accompanied by reminder that "you were slaves in Egypt"), sometimes less so.

But the Torah is not mere history as a sequence of events. The Torah is about *the truths that emerge through time*. That is one of the great differences between ancient Israel and ancient Greece. Ancient Greece sought truth by contemplating nature and reason. The first gave rise to science, the second to philosophy. Ancient Israel found truth in history, in events and what God told us to learn from them. Science is about nature, Judaism is about human nature, and there is a great difference between them. Nature knows nothing about freewill. Scientists often deny that it exists at all. But humanity is constituted by its freedom. We are what we choose to be. No planet chooses to be hospitable to life. No fish chooses to be a hero. No peacock chooses to be vain. Humans do choose. And in that fact is born the drama to which the whole Torah is a commentary: how can freedom coexist with order? The drama is set on the stage of history, and it plays itself out through five acts, each with multiple scenes.

The basic shape of the narrative is roughly the same in all five cases. First God creates

order. Then humanity creates chaos. Terrible consequences follow. Then God begins again, deeply grieved but never losing His faith in the one life-form on which He set His image and to which He gave the singular gift that made humanity godlike, namely freedom itself.

Act 1 is told in Genesis 1-11. God creates an ordered universe and fashions humanity from the dust of the earth into which He breathes His own breath. But humans sin: first Adam and Eve, then Cain, then the generation of the Flood. The earth is filled with violence. God brings a flood and begins again, making a covenant with Noah. Humanity sin again by making the Tower of Babel (the first act of imperialism, as I argued in an earlier study). So God begins again, seeking a role model who will show the world what it is to live in faithful response to the word of God. He finds it in Abraham and Sarah.

Act 2 is told in Genesis 12-50. The new order is based on family and fidelity, love and trust. But this too begins to unravel. There is tension between Esau and Jacob, between Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel, and between their children. Ten of Jacob's children sell the eleventh, Joseph, into slavery. This is an offence against freedom, and catastrophe follows - not a Flood but a famine, as a result of which Jacob's family goes into exile in Egypt where the whole people become enslaved. God is about to begin again, not with a family this time but with a nation, which is what Abraham's children have now become.

Act 3 is the subject of the book of Shemot.

God rescues the Israelites from Egypt as He once rescued Noah from the Flood. As with Noah (and Abraham), God makes a covenant, this time at Sinai, and it is far more extensive than its precursors. It is a blueprint for social order, for an entire society based on law and justice. Yet again, however, humans create chaos, by making a Golden Calf a mere forty days after the great revelation. God threatens catastrophe, destroying the whole nation and beginning again with Moses, as He had done with Noah and Abraham (Ex. 32:10). Only Moses' passionate plea prevents this from happening. God then institutes a new order.

Act 4 begins with an account of this order, which is unprecedentedly long, extending from Exodus 35, through the whole of the book of Vayikra and the first ten chapters of Bamidbar. The nature of this new order is that God becomes not merely the director of history and the giver of laws. He becomes a permanent Presence in the midst of the camp. Hence the building of the Mishkan, which takes up the last third of Shemot, and the laws of purity and holiness, as well as those of love and justice, that constitute virtually the whole of Vayikra. Purity and holiness are demanded by the fact that God has become suddenly close. In the Tabernacle, the Divine Presence has a home on earth, and whoever comes close to God must be holy and pure. Now the Israelites are ready to begin the next stage of the journey, but only after a long introduction.

That long introduction, at the beginning of Bamidbar, is all about creating a sense of

order within the camp. Hence the census, and the detailed disposition of the tribes, and the lengthy account of the Levites, the tribe that mediated between the people and the Divine Presence. Hence also, in next week's parsha, the three laws - restitution, the sotah and the nazir - directed at the three forces that always endanger social order: theft, adultery and alcohol. It is as if God were saying to the Israelites, this is what order looks like. Each person has his or her place within the family, the tribe and the nation. Everyone has been counted and each person counts. Preserve and protect this order, for without it you cannot enter the land, fight its battles and create a just society.

Tragically, as Bamidbar unfolds, we see that the Israelites turn out to be their own worst enemy. They complain about the food. Miriam and Aaron complain about Moses. Then comes the catastrophe, the episode of the spies, in which the people, demoralized, show that they are not yet ready for freedom. Again, as in the case of the Golden Calf, there is chaos in the camp. Again God threatens to destroy the nation and begin again with Moses (Num. 14:12). Again only Moses' powerful plea saves the day. God decides once more to begin again, this time with the next generation and a new leader. The book of Devarim is Moses' prelude to Act 5, which takes place in the days of his successor Joshua.

The Jewish story is a strange one. Time and again the Jewish people has split apart, in the days of the First Temple when the kingdom divided into two, in the late Second Temple period when it was riven

into rival groups and sects, and in the modern age, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when it fragmented into religious and secular in Eastern Europe, orthodox and others in the West. Those divisions have still not healed.

And so the Jewish people keeps repeating the story told five times in the Torah. God creates order. Humans create chaos. Bad things happen, then God and Israel begin again. Will the story never end? One way or another it is no coincidence that Bamidbar usually precedes Shavuot, anniversary of the giving of the Torah at Sinai. God never tires of reminding us that the central human challenge in every age is whether freedom can coexist with order. It can, when humans freely choose to follow God's laws, given in one way to humanity after the Flood and in another to Israel after the exodus.

The alternative, ancient and modern, is the rule of power, in which, as Thucydides said, the strong do as they will and the weak suffer as they must. That is not freedom as the Torah understands it, nor is it a recipe for love and justice. Each year as we prepare for Shavuot by reading parshat Bamidbar, we hear God's call: here in the Torah and its mitzvot is the way to create a freedom that honours order, and a social order that honours human freedom. There is no other way.



The Enigmatic Character in the Book of Ruth

In the Book of Ruth, which is read on Shavuot, there is one enigmatic character; it's not even clear what is his real name. He is known as Ploni Almoni which is the Jewish version of John Doe - the epitome of the anonymous person. He features in the story as the closest relative to Elimelech¹ who has died and left land. In addition, Elimelech's son, Machlon who has also died, has left a widow, Ruth. As the closest relative, Ploni has the right to redeem the land and marry Ruth and thereby ensure the spiritual continuity of Elimelech's seed. However, he turns down this opportunity, and the next closest relative, Boaz, redeems the land and marries Ruth.

The reason he refuses to marry Ruth, is because she is a Moabite convert. The Torah forbids a Jew to marry a Moabite convert. However, there was a tradition, that this Mitzva only applied to male converts, whereas it is permitted to marry a female Moabite convert. Yet, there remained people who still claimed that the prohibition also applies to female Moabite converts. Indeed, even at the time of King David, a descendant of Ruth, the powerful Doeg attempted to prove from logic that the

prohibition does apply to female Moabites as well. The controversy was only finally abated when Amasa ben Yeter said that he had a tradition from the Prophet, Shmuel that it is a *Halacha LeMoshe MiSinai* (a law passed down to Moshe that is not mentioned in the Torah) that the prohibition only applies to Moabite men. However, at the time of Ruth's conversion there was still some controversy, and Ploni did not want to marry her, stating that he feared that his future seed would be ruined if it came from her. Boaz, the next in line to redeem Ruth, had no such fears, and married Ruth, thereby begetting the Davidic dynasty that will ultimately produce the Messiah.

There are a number of questions on Ploni's actions in this episode. We will first approach the issue on a legal (halachic) level, and then on from a philosophical perspective. The first question is what was the motivation of Ploni? If it was simply that he wanted to be strict, then how could Boaz, who was the leading Sage of the generation, be more lenient? Secondly, the Brisker Rav asks, that the reason that Ploni gives for not marrying Ruth is difficult. He says that the reason is that he fears that that his seed would be damaged because the children borne of a marriage with a person forbidden to marry into the Jewish people would likewise be forbidden to marry Jews. Why did he not simply say that he was fearful that it was forbidden to marry Ruth, because of the potential prohibition to marry a Moabite convert?!

The Brisker Rav answers that it was indeed the accepted halacha that it was permitted to marry a female Moabite convert.²

However, Ploni believed that the halacha was based on the Torah Court's understanding of the Torah verses. There is a legal principle that if a greater Torah Court arises, it can nullify rulings of previous Court. Thus, he was fearful that a greater Court would maybe reverse the ruling of the present Court and forbid marrying a Moabite convert, and consequently, any children from such a union would be forbidden to marry into the Jewish people. Accordingly, we understand that he was not afraid of sinning as it was permitted at that time to marry a female Moabite at that time. However, if a future Court would reverse this ruling, then any children that Ploni would have had through Ruth, would retroactively be forbidden to marry into the Jewish people, hence is fear of the possible adverse effect for his future offspring.

On a philosophical level, the question arises, of whether Ploni actually did anything wrong – it would seem that he was simply being fearful of damaging his future descendants. However, the Sages do not seem to be so complimentary about him. They say that the word *almoni* alludes to the fact that he was '*ilem*' (blind) to the words of Torah in that his fear of marrying Ruth was totally unfounded.³ Accordingly, the question now arises, as to why he is viewed so harshly.

The key to answering this can be found in the words of the Targum Yonatan to explain the meaning of the word, 'Ploni'. The Targum translates the word 'Ploni' to mean that he was a man who was private in his ways.⁴ The Mishbetsot Zahav explains that

he was a selfish person who had no interest in being a leader⁵. Consequently, he did not sufficiently care about the great kindness he would be doing by redeeming Elimelech's field and marrying Ruth. This would involve not only kindness to Ruth, but kindness to Elimelech in that it would mean spiritual continuation for his family. The Kabbalists also say that the child that resulted from a union with Ruth was a reincarnation of her first husband, Machlon. Therefore, marrying Ruth would return spiritual life to Machlon. But it appears that Ploni's inherent concern only for his self, caused him to err in his unjustified fear of what may happen in the future. Such a concern was not a result of fear of sin, because if it was, then surely Boaz would have had the same concern, rather it was an outcome of his concern for himself.

All this does not mean that Ploni was a bad person, and we do not see that he was punished for refusing to marry Ruth. Indeed, one opinion in Chazal hold that his name was *Tov*, meaning good, and since a person's name indicates his essence, it seems that he was certainly not an evil person, and may well have been a 'good' person. However, the consequence of his failure to redeem Ruth, was that he is doomed to anonymity when he could, like Boaz, have been associated with greatness, in being the ancestor of David HaMelech and the line to Moshiach. In this vein, when Rebbetzin Dina Weinberg⁶ was once asked, "Why do we have to keep the Torah? Isn't it enough just to be a good person?" She replied that in Judaism, it is not enough to be good; we must strive to be

great. Ploni may have been a good person, but he missed his big opportunity at greatness. This should serve as a stark reminder to all of us not to spurn our personal opportunities at greatness.

1. Ruth Rabbah, 6:2 states that he was Elimelech's brother.
2. Quoted in Mishbetsot Zahav, Ruth, p.116.
3. Ruth Rabbah, 7:7.
4. Targum Yonatan, Ruth, 4:1.
5. Mishbetsos Zahav, Ruth, p.110.
6. The wife of Rav Noach Weinberg, zt"l.

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