

THE DESERT AND BEYOND

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d told Moshe in the Sinai Desert by the Tent of Meeting ... "Count the heads of the entire assembly of the children of Israel ..." (BaMidbar 1:1)

So starts the Book of BaMidbar. Rashi quickly comments:

Because of His [G-d's] love He counted them ... (Rashi)

Does G-d need a reason to count the Jewish people, or for anything He does? The answer is, yes and no. It true that G-d can do anything He wants to whenever He wants to do it. However, when He wishes to teach us how to behave, then He does things for reasons that we can relate to, as in the case of counting the Jewish people.

In fact, the Ramban on this week's parsha states that Dovid HaMelech's mistake in counting the Jewish people in his time, which brought on a plague (Shmuel 2:24:9), was that he did so for no reason. After counting them, Dovid did not go to war, nor did he use the men he counted for any specific purposes that would have required counting them beforehand. He had only wished to know there number to appreciate how large a nation he ruled.

In fact, says the Ramban, BaMidbar Rabbah states that:

Rabbi Eliezer in the name Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra said: Whenever Israel was counted for a purpose, their numbers were not diminished; but when they were counted for no purpose, their numbers diminished. When were they counted for a purpose? In the days of Moshe at the setting up of the flags and the division of the Land. When for no purpose? In the days of Dovid. (BaMidbar Rabbah 2:17)

Furthermore, says the Ramban, Dovid may have counted all the males from the age of 13 years and up, though the Torah itself counts men from the age of 20 and older, since it is at this age that one becomes fitting to become part of the Jewish army, not to mention the fact that he did not count them using the half-shekel piece, as the Torah prescribed (Parashas Ki Sisa).

But how could Dovid make such a simple, yet costly mistake?

The Talmud answers:

"If the L-rd has instigated you against me ..." (Shmuel 1:26:19)

The Holy One, Blessed is He, said, "You call me an instigator? I will cause you to stumble even in that which even school children know ..." Immediately after this it happened, "And Satan moved against Israel and enticed Dovid ..." (Divrei HaYomim 1:21:1). It is also written, "He instigated Dovid against them to say, 'Go number Israel and Yehudah ...'" (Shmuel 2:24:1).

It is a powerful lesson of "aveirah gorres aveirah" (a sin causes another sin). It might be difficult to see the measure-for-measure in Dovid's punishment that was caused by a statement made to his nemesis, Shaul HaMelech, nevertheless, the Talmud is indeed making the connection. From here we can see how small mistakes we make can end up affecting an entire nation. After all, inherent in the concept of the census and the half-shekel is the idea of the Jewish people being a single unit (see Parashas Ki Sisa).

Shabbos Day:

G-d spoke to Moshe, saying, "Behold, I have taken the Leviim from among the children of Israel instead of all the firstborn, the first offspring of the womb among the children of Israel; therefore the Leviim shall be Mine, because all the firstborn are Mine, for on the day that I killed the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel ..." (BaMidbar 3:13)

Originally the service was performed by the firstborn, but when they sinned with the golden calf, they became disqualified, and the Leviim who were not involved, were chosen in their stead. (Rashi)

It is important to try to imagine what the remaining firstborn must have felt like every time they saw a kohen perform the Temple service that had originally been their responsibility. It is important to imagine this because it is a good parable for life itself, during which so many people are prepared to reap short-term benefits in place of long-term gain.

In the book, "The Path of the Just," Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto warns (paraphrasing): Don't say that you do not mind sacrificing a portion of your share in the World-to-Come for some temporal pleasure now, and that you won't mind later when you see your neighbor on a higher level; it's not true ...

And why is it not true?

This lesson we can learn from children. Children have very little sense of having to look out for later. They'll eat candy now and ruin their appetites for supper; they'll eat too much candy now and suffer a stomach ache shortly thereafter. They'll spend money wantonly today at the cost of a more financially-secure future.

One person confided how, if he had only listened to his father when he was growing up and had saved his money as he had been advised, then, he calculated (conservatively), he would now have an extra \$30,000, enough for a significant deposit on a home. And that's not including the interest he would have made had he invested the money wisely.

Where had the money gone? On movies, on coffee and cake, on sports equipment, on frivolities that, although they provided some temporary fun, did very little to develop him as a person, so he said. But that's what the kids his age were doing at the time, so that's what he did too.

In the meantime, his cousin who had also been gainfully employed had saved his money, having "fun" but less of it. Today that same cousin has far less financial difficulty, and was able to buy a house right after marrying, and is having a good, "middle-class" life. He also has money put away for retirement, earning interest for the future.

Others argue, "Yea, but you have to have a childhood, you know. If you don't have fun when you're young, when will you? If you want to be a happy adult, you have to first be a happy child!"

True. There are stories of great rabbis who had been geniuses early in life who made sure to allow some time in the course of their intensive studies to play. However, life is a tightrope act that every serious and meaning-oriented individual must walk ... without falling off. This means making sure to not over-indulge in the niceties of life at the cost of the "niceties" of the Future World.

There is a story to this effect in the Talmud about Rebi Chanina ben Dosa, who had been exceedingly poor, yet also, for whom miracles were commonplace. The Talmud recounts:

One day, Chanina's wife said to him, "How long shall we have to be pained with the need for daily bread?" He answered her, "What can I do?" "Pray to G-d that He should give you something," she said. He prayed and a hand came out and gave him a leg of a golden table. Later, she saw in a dream how the righteous in the World-to-Come would eat from golden tables with three legs, whereas her husband's table would only have two legs. She then said to Chanina, "Do you prefer that the rest should eat from tables with three legs while your table only has two? Pray that G-d should take it back." He prayed, and the leg was taken back ... (Ta'anis 25a)

As young parents, we stand back and watch our children who lack wisdom make choices we know they will regret in the future; we try to direct them, but often to no avail, and always without their appreciation for what we have done for them, and why.

Our parents may stand back and watch us, who lack the wisdom of years, make decisions that they know we will regret when we reach their age. How do they know? Because they made the same mistakes when they were young, and now regret them when they are older.

In the meantime, G-d stands back, so-to-speak, and watches all of us get heavily involved in the trivial aspects of daily life while living as if there is no World-to-Come, knowing full well that there will come a time of regret ... knowing full well, that when that time of regret comes around, it will be

too late to undo what was done. Second chances in life rarely come, if at all, as the above story finishes off:

... We are taught that the latter miracle was even greater than the first, for it is customary for Heaven to bestow but not reclaim. (Ta'anis 25a)

At least not while there is time to fix up the mistake, to give back what we shouldn't have taken in the first place; to make the sacrifice we should have been wise enough to make from the beginning.

The firstborn had been the priests. They had been sanctified in Egypt, when G-d killed off the Egyptian firstborn in the last plague while sparing the Jewish firstborn. They had been there; their crucial role within Jewish history had been handed over to them.

However, later, at the base of Mt. Sinai, the same firstborn had been overcome by the obsessions of the physical world, embodied in the golden calf. The golden calf had presented them, and still presents us, with a choice that we continue to confront: Which will it be? The ecstasy of temporal pleasures, or the bliss of eternal closeness to G-d?

However, the Day of Reckoning always comes, and when it had come for the firstborn, the golden calf with all its memories had been completely destroyed, ground to dust before their very eyes. And after the dust had settled, they had found themselves displaced by those who had had the wisdom to sacrifice instant and short-lived unnecessary physical gratification, for long-term indispensable eternal pleasure.

It will be no different in the future, when desire and pride can no longer affect our decision-making process. Then we will be able to see life as the soul sees it, not just as the body saw it, like a child who finally grows and develops a mature attitude toward life.

It is a lesson for all generations, especially since we too are called G-d's "firstborn." We not be replaceable, but, as last week's parsha pointed out, we sure are punishable. There can be no greater punishment than self-inflicted loss.

Seudos Shlishi:

G-d spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert by the Appointed Tent on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had left Egypt ... (BaMidbar 1:1)

The book of BaMidbar begins on Rosh Chodesh Iyar, over one year after the Jewish people had left Egyptian slavery. In just under two months, the Jewish people will turn their backs on Mt. Sinai, and forge onward toward Eretz Yisroel, an eleven day journey. At the start of this book, the Jewish nation is about to leave the security and "plushness" of Har Sinai (G-d had made the desert bloom in honor

of the giving of Torah, which is why we decorate the study halls and shuls on Shavuot, for the barrenness of the Sinai Desert:

So says G-d, "I remember the kindness of your youth, and the love ... when you followed Me in a land that was not planted ..." (Yirmiyahu 2:2)

However, as this book will recount, an eleven-day journey eventually resulted in 39 years of wandering, because the spies spoke badly about Eretz Yisroel. This had not been the only unmitigated disaster to plague the Jewish nation as they inched their way to the Promised Land; there were rebellions along the way too, against Moshe, or G-d, and against both.

Overall, not much went wrong; the main problem was in the magnitude of what didn't go right. The mishnah in Pirke Avos (5:6) speaks only of "ten tests" throughout the forty years! However, when the Jewish people had tested G-d, it had not been in small ways, but in fundamentals of Torah and for that reason, most of the Jews that had left Egypt had never lived to see the land of their forefathers.

Why couldn't the generation of the desert get their act together? Why couldn't they just have bided their time, and trusted in G-d? After all, look at the miracles G-d had done for them, and had still been doing for them? Did they have reason to doubt G-d? If we had lived then and had experienced what they had experienced, would we have tested G-d so?

The answer to this question lies partially in who this generation was, but even more so in where they were.

Kabbalistically, everything in the physical world has a spiritual root. Not only this, but the spiritual root of a person has a lot to do with what a person relates to, and what he can't relate to; to whom he can connect with, and to with whom he has difficulty forming a relationship. This is also the idea behind the concept of finding a "zivug," or a "soul-mate."

As it turns out, the souls of the generation of those who left Egypt were souls that were not of the same spiritual root of Eretz Yisroel, at least in the immediate sense. If so, then this would make it appear as if this generation had been doomed to fail and to become stranded in the desert from the beginning! Was that fair?

The answer to this question lies in an understanding of what the Jewish people were doing in the desert in the first place. Traditionally, aside from being physically barren and lifeless, the desert symbolizes one of the harshest spiritual environments as well. If the nation had been able to withstand the negative influence of the desert, then they would have accomplished a major rectification in the spiritual world.

It is not unlike two people who find it difficult to get along with one another. People who have little difficulty in getting along with each will enjoy the benefits of friendship, but not necessarily the benefits of self-growth. However, two "enemies" who can find a path of peace will certainly have been forced to refine their character traits in pursuit of a working compromise.

The desert may have been an exceedingly difficult spiritual environment, but by contending with it while trying to maintain the spiritual bliss of Mt. Sinai the Jewish people would have undergone an important process of spiritual growth. In the end, though the first generation was subdued by the desert, in the very end, what they persevered also produced a generation that had become spiritually prepared within 40 short years to move into the eternal land of Israel.

Melave Malkah:

Special for Shavuos 5758

Part Two: Criteria for Bringing Moshiach

We began a three-part series on Moshiach last week, since we read the book of Rus (the ancestor of Moshiach) on Shavuos. This is the second installment.

"Then I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; and he lifted up his right hand and his left hand to Heaven, and swore by the Everlasting One that after a time, times, and half, and when there shall be an end to the crushing of the power of the holy nation, all this will be over." (Daniel 12:7)

Rav Abba said: There is no better revelation of the appointed time for Moshiach in another passage. (Sanhedrin 98a)

That may be true, but how does that help those of us who have and still anxiously await Moshiach? There is nothing in Daniel's statement that we can use to approximate the final date of arrival of the ultimate redeemer of the Jewish people, which we yearn to know. And the Talmud itself doesn't make the situation any easier, being just as ambiguous as Tanach:

Ben Dovid won't come until all the neshamos (souls) are finished from the body. (Yevamos 62a)

What does that mean? The Talmud does not explain itself, nor does Rashi. However, when it comes to actually trying to make the calculation,, the Talmud is very clear:

May despair come upon those who calculate the time of arrival for Moshiach ...

And this the Talmud does explain ...

For, when the calculated time comes and Moshiach does not appear, they say he will never come. (Sanhedrin 97b)

Indeed, the Talmud's concern is not baseless, for, as Rav said:

All the dates of redemption [calculated from the Torah] have already passed ... (Sanhedrin 97b)

And, as a result, there has been great despair. In many cases, many Jews have tragically turned their backs on waiting for Moshiach, as the Talmud warned. This is why many of those who could accurately make such predictions, like the Vilna Gaon for example, have been just as secretive and protective of such information:

"... And from here [what I have just written about] you can know the time of the Final Redemption if, G-d forbid, we do not merit [to bring it earlier]; however, I have caused an oath, in the name of the G-d of Israel, to the reader of this that he should not reveal it." (Safra D'Tzniusa, Chapter Five)

And so, onward, the clock ticks as the moment of moment remains a mystery. Years become decades; decades become centuries, and eventually, centuries even yield to millennia and still, Moshiach has not come; still we wait, like people hanging from a rope by our fingertips for dear life!

What are we waiting for? What has to happen before Moshiach must come? In Egypt, only after the Jewish people had become overwhelmed by their slavery, becoming "kotzer ruach" (short of breath) from the unbearable demands made upon them, that Moshe finally arrived to reverse the trend that led to that redemption. Is that what has to happen to the generation of Moshiach as well?

(After all, according to tradition, Moshiach will have the soul of Moshe Rabbeinu. Fascinatingly enough, the numerical difference between Moshe (345) and Moshiach (358) is 13, the number that alludes to G-d's mercy and which is associated with miracles on the level of those performed to leave Egypt!)

Perhaps. But then again, most recently, the Holocaust seemed to back the Jewish people into such a corner. For millions of Jews who suffered directly or even indirectly from the prolonged bizarre and brutally cruel behavior of the Third Reich, "kotzer ruach" is probably an understatement; "no ruach" might be a more accurate description of the state of these Jews during Churban Europe.

And before the Holocaust, there were the countless barbaric pogroms and crusades, smaller in magnitude only because the perpetrators lacked the technical know-how of the Germans to effectively murder en masse. However, we are told that the Roman war machine caused the streets of Israel to "flow with Jewish blood."

Despair? The Talmud records that the situation had become so grave that the rabbis had even considered national suicide, albeit passively:

... From the day that the Roman government put evil decrees upon us, banning Torah study and the observance of mitzvos, [such as] not permitting us to circumcize our sons (others say, to redeem our sons), it was decided that it would be better to decree upon ourselves to not marry and to avoid having children, so that the seed of Avraham should die on its own ... (Babba Basra 60b)

(Amazingly enough, the Talmud says that the reason why the rabbis did not pursue this course of action was because it would have been too difficult for most Jews to comply with such an enactment.)

From those depths of despair, Moshiach did not come. From the "abyss of despair" during the period of the worse pogroms (1648-1730); Moshiach still did not come. And though the Holocaust seemed to be the final "labor pain" before giving birth to Moshiach, over 50 years later, Moshiach has still not come. Still.

What is history waiting for?

There are various ways to measure the passage time: our way, and G-d's way.

We are familiar with the conventional way of measuring time: rotations of the earth; revolutions around the sun, and more practically, the spinning of the hands on clocks and the flipping of the pages of calendars.

Such conventions help us to be at places "on time," but they do little to tell us what is happening within the undercurrent of history. In other words, we tell time with watches, but G-d does not. For G-d, the passage of time is measured by the using up of Holy Sparks.

What is a Holy Spark?

In short, they are the spiritual potential within creation for all that exists and can be accomplished. Whether something is inanimate or animate, if it exists, it does so because it possesses a spark of holiness. Even the most evil person, to live, must possess such sparks (albeit very few of them), for without sparks of holiness life cannot go on.

There is not an infinite amount of such Holy Sparks. According to Kabbalah, there are just enough of these sparks to create creation, maintain it, and provide mankind with everything he needs to use creation to fulfill G-d's ultimate purpose for history as we know it. There is not one spark too many, or one spark too little to accomplish this. Not one.

To live, a person "consumes" Holy Sparks creation as we recognize it. To act, a person uses even more sparks, and depending upon what was accomplished, a set amount of sparks will be used up, never to be available again to physical man. Whether a person acts morally or immorally, Holy Sparks are used up, never to be made available again in this portion of history.

It is not unlike the grains of sand in an hourglass. The passage of time is measured by the amount of grains of sand that pass through the pre-determined narrow passage way that separates the upper chamber from where the sand has come, from the lower chamber to where the sand is flowing.

As each grain of sand passes through the channel, it is spent, its role in keeping time having been

completed. Until the hourglass is flipped once again, the grains of sand that have reached the bottom chamber are no longer available to tell time.

So too, the Holy Sparks of creation must pass from this world to the world Above, and as each spark makes its way back to its Holy Source, creation becomes that much more fulfilled; the "right" moment of Moshiach's arrival comes that much closer. When these sparks are completely used up, simultaneously, Moshiach becomes the ruler of all mankind, and evil becomes completely non-existent.

Hence, the period of time that separates the first moment of creation that G-d first commanded from the very and precise moment in history that Moshiach is supposed to arrive is not made up of consistently ticking seconds, minutes, hours, or even years; it is composed of a set amount of Holy Sparks that must be used to fulfill the Divine purpose for creation.

According to Kabbalah, there are only two ways to do this. The first way is the most efficient and therefore the most practical way, and that is the learning of Torah and the fulfillment of mitzvos. Whether a person is learning Torah in one spot, or expending a lot of energy by running around doing mitzvos, Holy Sparks are being spent to achieve either, and at a very quick rate for that matter.

The other, far less effective (and dangerous way) to use up Holy Sparks is to sin. It is like putting good "gasoline" in a bad car; the fuel cannot cause the car to drive any better than it potentially can drive. In G-d's world, transgressing and immoral behavior is an exceptionally poor "vehicle" to use up Divine "fuel."

Furthermore, even should a transgression use up a Holy Spark, it cannot yet return back to its Holy Source. How can it? The transgressor has "shlepped" it through spiritual filth, and it must therefore undergo some form of purification, before being permitted to rise and enter the Holy Chambers Above.

The very process of learning Torah and doing mitzvos acts as a purification for the Holy Sparks, and therefore they require little else to gain entry to the Holy Realm from whence the originally emanated. However, after being a victim of a sinner's design, the Holy Sparks must be spiritually cleansed, and, as is fitting, the transgressor himself plays a role in that process as well.

According to tradition, this is where Divine punishment and human suffering come into the picture. The moment the actual sin is over, in order to purify the Spark, it actually becomes the instrument and source for the Divine response to the sin. Unless the transgressor does full tshuva (which itself acts to purify the spiritually-sullied Sparks), suffering and punishment will cause the person to become "refined" and "purified," as well as the Holy Sparks in the process. Depending upon the size and effect of the suffering, that is how profound the cleansing process actually will be.

This is a very superficial overview of a very deep and sophisticated concept. However, it serves well enough to add some understanding to the Talmud's hitherto unexplained statement:

Ben Dovid won't come until all the neshamos (souls) are finished from the body. (Yevamos 62a)

Whether we're talking about actual human souls, or Holy Sparks, it's all the same Source. And though despair may be a measure of just how many Holy Sparks have been purified, it does not necessarily measure just how many Holy Sparks are left to be used up.

However, for us, history is fast approaching the year 6,000, and we live at the "top of the heap," so-to-speak. As a result of our ancestors, and because of what they accomplished (and suffered), there cannot be many more Holy Sparks left to use. The only question for us remains: How do we wish to use them? The effective, pleasant way of Torah and mitzvos, or, the less effective, painfully destructive way of a spiritually empty life ...

"Its [Torah's] ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace. It is a Tree of Life for those who grasp it, and its supporters are praiseworthy. (Mishlei 3:17)

In the end, we may be no closer to predicting the "estimated time of arrival" of the greatest and final savior of the Jewish people; but, at least we're a little closer to understanding how to make our generation, his generation. May it be so!

Have a great Shabbos, filled only with blessing.

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