

WHEN IT REALLY COUNTS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert by the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month in the second year ... (Bamidbar 1:1)

"... On the first of Nissan the Mishkan was erected, and on the first of Iyar they were counted." (Rashi)

The Rashbam points out an interesting point on this verse:

"All the times something was said during the first year [at Mt. Sinai], before the Mishkan was set up, it mentions 'Mt. Sinai.' But, from the time the Mishkan was erected--on the first of the month in the second year--it does not mention Mt. Sinai, but rather, says 'in the Sinai Desert at the Tent of Meeting.' " (Rashbam)

The only thing is, that, the Rashbam does not explain the significance of pointing this out. There is no question that the building of the Mishkan, and the service therein was a turning point in Jewish history, but what difference does it make in terms of the way the Torah delivers its narration?

To begin with, it is noteworthy that a mountain and a desert are opposites--very opposite. A mountain is high, and grand, and therefore represents pride. On the other hand, a desert is low, and without ostentation. It represents humility, and as the Talmud warns:

A person should make himself into a desert ... (Eiruvim 54a)

Why?

Torah is not in heaven ... (Devarim 30:12) This means that Torah will not be found in someone who elevates himself. (Eiruvim 55a)

--that is, he makes himself like a mountain, as opposed to like a desert.

Having pointed this out, perhaps this is the basis of the Rashbam's remark, as if to say: Before the Mishkan was built and the Jewish people had a House of G-d in their midst, it was difficult to conquer pride, and therefore, it was difficult to integrate Torah. The episode of the golden calf was a direct result of this problem.

However, after the golden calf forced the construction of the a physical dwelling place for G-d, there was something in the midst of the Jewish people to constantly inspire awe. It was this sense of awe that humbled the Jewish people, and transformed them from "mountains" to "midbars" (deserts).

Perhaps this is also why the counting of the Jewish people follows this verse. As has been pointed out many times before, the language the Torah uses is "lift up the heads" of the people, because, the counting often came after a spiritual crisis that lowered the morale of the Jewish people. Counting them made them feel important once again, and was a Divine method to raise their spirits.

Now we can add another component as well. The Torah (via the Rashbam), is telling us that the service of G-d has to be filled with awe, and one must be humble (especially to learn Torah objectively). Nevertheless, one must keep a balanced perspective, and not become overly intimidated from awe of G-d and living by Torah. Fear of G-d and the fear of sin should be exhilarating, not debilitating.

Shabbos Day:

Count the heads of the entire congregation of the Children of Israel ... From twenty years and over--all who can go out as part of the host from Israel should be counted according to their hosts by you and Aharon. (Bamidbar 1:2-3)

On such a technical verse, the Kli Yakar asks a very non-technical question:

"If this age was chosen for the sake of the dwelling of the Divine Presence, then why was 'all who can go out as part of the host ' mentioned? What does the host have to do with the dwelling of the Divine Presence? ..."

His answer is even less technical:

"It is as we explained earlier, that this counting was in order to know if there were 22,000 people in each of the twenty-eight camps of the Divine Presence, in order that it should resemble the Heavenly Hosts. This is why it mentions going out as part of the host, as if to say, part of the Heavenly Host ..." (Kli Yakar)

This opens up a discussion about an idea that we may already know about, but don't always think about, but ought to think about. We live in a very physical world, and we know that, somewhere, "Up There," there is a very spiritual world. We know the two are connected, because if they weren't, then this world could not continue to exist. However, the nature of that connection is not clear to many, and because it is not clear, they forget about the connection almost completely.

The Talmud speaks of a Yerushalayim Shel L'Matah, and a Yerushalayim Shel L'Ma'alah--an Earthly Jerusalem, and a Heavenly Jerusalem. Elsewhere, it is mentioned that there is a Bais HaMikdosh

Shel L'Matah, and a Bais HaMikdosh Shel L'Ma'alah--an Early Temple, and Heavenly Temple. In other words, for every spiritual component found in the everyday Physical World below, there can be found a counterpart in the everyday Spiritual World above.

It was to this reality that Ya'akov referred when he awoke from his prophetic dream and exclaimed: "Indeed, G-d is in this place, and yet I didn't know it." He was frightened and said, "How awesome is this place! It is none other than the House of G-d, and this is the Gate of Heaven." (Bereishis 28:16-17)

The commentators explain that Ya'akov already knew that Mt. Moriah--the past place of Akeidas Yitzchak and the future place of the Temples--was a very holy place. However, what he learned that night in his dream was that it corresponded to the Temple Mount Above, which made it the holiest place on earth.

Elsewhere, the Midrash (and Talmud) states that when Nebuchadnetzar proudly conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and exiled the remaining tribes into Babylonia, a Heavenly Voice called out:

Your grind already ground flour; you have killed an already killed people. (Eichah Rabbosai 1:43).

The Nefesh HaChaim explains that this means that long before Jewish enemies are able to destroy Jewish sites, or the people themselves, the Jewish people have already done so Above, perhaps decades, or even centuries ago. In other words, today's destruction may be the result of a sins and a decree from decades ago!

(Indeed, the Chofetz Chaim is said to have warned many times in the late twenties that "millions of Jews are going to die, yet no one is doing anything about it!" Apparently, the Chofetz Chaim saw, in his day, the seeds of a future disaster and tried, in vain, to warn others about it.)

How? Because, every time a Jew sins, G-d forbid, its effect, though not immediately noticeable down here on earth, is immediately noticeable Above. Hence, before Nebuchadnetzar could destroy the First Temple on earth, and Titus, the Second Temple, the Jewish people had to first "destroy," or at least spiritually damage the Heavenly Temple Above through anti-Torah behavior. This spiritual "damage" left the physical temple devoid of its connection to its spiritual counterpart--like a body missing its soul--and like "already ground flour" ... and the Jewish people, "like an already killed people ..."

If teshuvah is not forthcoming at some time in the near future, and sinning persists, then the spiritual erosion increases Above. It is only a matter of time before the results shows up here Below on earth, and in everyday life. Likewise, if teshuvah is performed, though the results are not immediately noticeable Below they are Above, and eventually the blessing of such teshuvah makes it into physical, everyday life as well.

In conclusion, we have to constantly be aware of the fact that every spiritual component in the

Physical World we live in has its spiritual counterpart Above, which is affected by everything--literally, everything--we do. Though we cannot always see the effects of our actions, the good and the bad ones, in everyday life, we have to know that all we do Down Here affects all that happens Up There. It is like a shadow that mimics a person's every movement.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

G-d spoke to Moshe and Aharon and told them, "Count the Children of Kehas among the Children of Levi according to their families and their fathers' houses; from thirty years until fifty years ..." (Bamidbar 4:1-3)

"Count those who are fitting to carry loads, which are those between the ages of thirty and fifty years ..." (Rashi)

Rashi points out the significance of this age as being the time in a man's life that he is best fit for heavy labor. However, this particular counting had an added effect, as the Talmud indicates:

The decree [against the spies and their followers] did not include the Tribe of Levi, as it says, "In this desert will fall all the bodies of all who were counted from the age of twenty and above ..." (Bamidbar 14:29), and Levi was counted from thirty years and up. (Bava Basra 121b)

Wait a second. It seems to be such a trivial way to be saved from such an ignoble end, as the fate that met the spies for speaking loshon hara about Eretz Yisroel. Furthermore, as Rashi points out in the Talmud, the Levites were counted from one month old and up--the thirty years to fifty years was just in terms of service of G-d!

The answer to this question lies in knowing why the age of twenty years is so significant. At the age of twenty, a child is said to have intellectually matured enough to be completely responsible for his or her actions, and therefore, he or she is now punishable for any sins committed. At Bar Mitzvah or Bas Mitzvah, a child is obligated in mitzvos, and earns reward for doing them; they are, however, only punishable for sins from the age of twenty and older.

It seems like a good deal, doesn't it. In fact, one might be tempted to say, "Let me sin now until the age of twenty, and then I'll straighten out when it really counts!" However, as everyone knows, sinning is not merely a button one can flip on or off at any time. If a child has lived a morally reckless life until the age of twenty, chances are, he will follow that pattern well into his twenties, and perhaps, the rest of his life as well.

But for a Levi, whose name alludes to his role as a conduit to connect man to G-d, from birth, he was devoted to the service of G-d (which is best performed between the ages of thirty and fifty years). This was both the spiritual advantage and merit of being from the Tribe of Levi, because he was conditioned from an early age to be self-sacrificing for Torah.

Thus, one's spiritual lifestyle, and willingness to being self-sacrificing for G-d and Torah, is very much a part of early conditioning. We don't believe in doing mitzvos by wrote, but on the other hand, we do believe that living a Torah lifestyle requires social conditioning, and for a child, that must start long before he reaches or even comes close to the age at which he will become completely responsible for his actions.

Melave Malkah:

Shavuos

Next week, b"H, is Shavuos: The Time of the Giving of Our Torah. It is the day ("days" outside of Israel) that the Jewish people celebrate the time when G-d's Presence came down over Mt. Sinai and gave the Ten Commandments, just before Moshe ascended the mountain for the next forty days to receive the rest of the Torah and the first set of Tablets.

Which he promptly broke.

As the Torah recounts, on the seventeenth day of Tammuz, precisely forty days after that wondrous sixth day of Sivan, the golden calf was built, worshipped, and destroyed. Its builders and worshippers met a similar fate, and the non-participating survivors did not get off free either. In fact, we're still feeling the effects of the golden calf to this very day.

If so, then one could ask, what joy is there in Shavuos? What good is the beginning of the celebration if the end of that celebration was destruction and doom?

The answer is partly in this midrash:

... And it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day (ha-shishi). (Bereishis 1:31)

The sixth day ... The letter "heh" [preceding the word "ha-shishi"] is extra ... to say that [G-d] made a condition with them [creation]: "If the Jewish people accept the Five Books of the Torah, [then it is good; if not, then you will resort back to null and void]." (Shabbos 88a)

In the verse, "the sixth day" refers to the sixth day of creation. However, because of the use of the letter "heh" with respect to the sixth day, and not for the preceding days of creation, the Talmud reveals that the letter heh, which represents the number five, is an allusion to the Five Books of Moses to be given in the future on a different sixth day--the sixth day of Sivan, in the year 2448/1313 BCE.

Furthermore, says the Talmud, it will be the acceptance of Torah on that day that will justify the continued existence of creation. Rejection of Torah, G-d forbid, would spell the end of creation once-and-for-all. All of this is indicated by the extra "heh" on the word "shishi"--sixth day.

But didn't we accept Torah, and in effect, reject it shortly thereafter by allowing the golden calf to be built and worshipped?

Apparently not. The proof of this? We are still here, albeit living with some chaos, but we're still here.

It seems that, by NATIONALLY accepting Torah on the sixth day of Sivan, the Jewish people saved creation from reverting back to null and void! Subsequent rejections of Torah have been both half-hearted, and only partially, and though they have warranted national suffering, the world has still been allowed to precede towards its Messianic finale. The sixth day of Sivan, 2448, was a singular opportunity to accept or reject Torah--to save or destroy the world.

That is certainly something to celebrate, and for which to be grateful. Besides, according to tradition, though the Final Redemption will begin in the month of Nissan, around Pesach-time, it will end on Shavuot. And that is certainly something to anticipate with joy.

Gut Yom Tov, Happy Kabbalos HaTorah, and a Great Shabbos,

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