

THE POWER OF GROUP IDENTIFICATION: BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshios Bamidbar & Shavuot

The Power Of Group Identification: Both Positive and Negative

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 550, - Opening Cans on Shabbos and Yom Tov. Good Shabbos!

Parshas Bamidbar begins with a census of the Tribes of Israel. At the end of the census, the Torah informs us that the total number of population who went out to the army was 603,550 [Bamidbar 1:46]. Then, the next pasuk [verse] says, "The Levites according to their fathers' tribe were not counted among them." [pasuk 47] It is most strange then, that immediately following this statement the Torah again states: "Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, 'But you shall not count the tribe of Levi, and you shall not take their census among the Children of Israel.'" [Bamidbar 1:48-49]

What is this second exhortation not to count the Levites teaching us? We already know that they were not counted from the immediately preceding narration! Why then does the pasuk reiterate that they were not to be counted?

Rashi informs us why the Levites are singled out for special treatment here. Rashi states that this census had an ominous future. Anyone included in the census at the start of Parshas Bamidbar (from 20 years and above) would be included in the forthcoming decree in Parshas Shlach that the entire generation would die in the wilderness. Foreseeing this, the Almighty did not want the Tribe of Levi to be included in this census: "They are Mine because they did not err in connection with the (Golden) Calf."

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz asks: What does being counted have to do with anything -- if they did not sin with the Golden Calf, they were not deserving of death regardless of whether they would be

counted or not?

We see from here, Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz says, that if there is a decree on a community, there may be individuals who should not otherwise be punished with the same punishment, who in fact will be held responsible and suffer that same fate by virtue of their being part of the community, despite the fact that they are not individually guilty.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz then address one of the most difficult questions that has perplexed our generation and the generation that preceded ours -- why did all the people, May the Almighty spare us, who died in the holocaust have to die and suffer, despite the fact that many among them were G-d fearing and righteous individuals? There is no real answer to this question. But Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz suggests a partial answer that they were in fact not guilty, but for some reason, there was a decree of death on the European Jewish community -- and when there is such a decree on a community, innocent people are sometimes caught up in the decree.

Therefore, had the Levites been included in the counting of Klal Yisrael, and there was subsequently a decree on those enumerated as part of Klal Yisrael to be eradicated, the Levites would have had to suffer that same fate. To protect them, so to speak, the Almighty said: "Don't count the Levites." For this reason it is repeated. The Torah is stressing to us that being part of a community is a double-edged sword.

On the other hand, Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz says: If this works against us, it certainly works in our favor as well. Miraculously, and for some inexplicable reason, there is only one Yeshiva of the Yeshivas that existed before World War II that made it out of Europe, almost totally intact -- the Mirer Yeshiva. In this life, we will never know why it was that the Almighty ordained that this should happen. But the point of Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz was that anyone who included themselves in that community was spared by virtue of their having been part of that community.

When one speaks to students of the Mirer Yeshiva who went through that ordeal, they emphasize that their teachers always told them they have to stay together. There was a question on one Simchas Torah whether they should be allowed to return home. They were directed by the Yeshiva administration "We have to stick together because the only way we are going to make it out of here is if we are going to remain together." They all went through Europe and through Siberia and Japan and Shanghai together.

There was a merit for that community to be saved and anyone who was a part of that community was spared, regardless of whether or not on an individual level they were any better than people who, G-d spare us, were killed in the holocaust. Their individual merit is academic, they benefited from the "psak din" [Divine decree] on the Mir Yeshiva that they should be spared.

Being part of a Tzibur [community] can save a person, even though he is unworthy. On the other hand, being part of a Tzibur can sometimes doom a person even though he may not be guilty. The lesson here is the power of being part of a Tzibur.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (# 330). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: Sefer Rus and Its Halachic Implications? The complete list of halachic portions for this parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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