

LIFT THE HEADS OF THE PEOPLE... NOT THE HEADS OF THE LEVITES

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Bamidbar

Lift The Heads Of The People... Not The Heads of The Levites

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 the counting of Klal Yisrael. There were two different censuses taken in the book of Bamidbar -- one at the beginning of the forty-year sojourn in the desert and one at the end of the forty years. It is for this reason that Sefer Bamidbar is referred to by the Talmud and other Rabbinic literature as Chumash haPekduim (the Book of the Countings). For a similar reason, it is referred to in non-Jewish sources as the Book of Numbers.

Moshe was commanded: "Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families according to their fathers' household, by number of names, every male according to their head count." [Bamidbar 1:2]. In Hebrew, there are different ways to express the activity of counting. One is "lifkod" another is "limnos". Here the pasuk [verse] uses the peculiar expression "s'eu es rosh kol adas bnei Yisrael" - - literally "lift up the heads of all the children of Israel".

The Shem M'S hmu'el comments that the census here was an ego builder. The fact that everyone was counted individually was a way of emphasizing the self-worth of each individual. In effect, every person was told: "You count!" This experience "lifted their heads".

[It is interesting to note that in the last US Census (2000), there was a great commotion because people did NOT want to participate. They did not want to fill out the form and they did not want to answer the questions. This is a totally different mindset than that envisioned by the Torah's census of "lift the heads of the Children of Israel". For us, it is an honor to be counted!!]

The Torah restricts the census by stating that the children of Levi should NOT be counted amongst the rest of the Jewish people. They needed to be counted separately. The Torah phrases this in the negative: "However the Tribe of Levi you shall not count and you shall not raise their head in the midst of the Children of Israel." [Bamidbar 1 :49]. Rashi explains why they are counted separately -- because they are the private legion of the Almighty. However, that does not explain the redundant warning -- first not to count the Levites and then not to raise their heads amongst the rest of the Children of Israel.

Why do the Levites not need the ego boosting experience of "having their heads lifted?" The Chasam Sofer suggests that the Levites did not need this boost in self-esteem and indeed may be harmed by it. When someone is in a leadership role in Klal Yisrael and they realize they are in that role, we do not want this fact to go to their heads, lest they become aloof to the needs and pains of the rest of the nation.

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetsky relates this idea to the following story involving Rav Chaim Meisels, the Rabbi of Lodz.

Rav Meisels once went calling on a wealthy individual in the middle of winter to collect funds to purchase wood for the fuel needs of the poor people in their town. He knocked on the door of a distinguished communal leader on a bitter cold night. The butler answered the door and invited the Rabbi in. The Rabbi refused to come in. He excused himself that his boots were muddy and he did not want to dirty the clean floors. The butler insisted he come in but the Rabbi persistently refused.

Finally, the owner of the house came to the door himself and begged the Rabbi to come in. "It is freezing out there, you must come in!" Still the Rabbi resisted the invitation to come inside and insisted that he preferred to remain outdoors. The homeowner stood by the door, shivering, and told Rabbi Meisels, "I do not know about you but I am afraid that I am going to catch pneumonia out here. Won't you please come inside?" The Rabbi finally agreed to come in doors on condition that the homeowner would grant his request. The homeowner was ready to agree to anything just to get the rabbi to come in so he could close the door.

Rabbi Meisels came inside and told the wealthy individual "We have 50 families in town who need wood to heat their homes. Will you provide them with the wood?" The wealthy communal leader agreed.

But the wealthy individual was curious. He asked Rabbi Meisels a question: "I have given you money before. Why did you suddenly ask me to stand outside tonight?" The Rabbi responded "It was because I wanted you to know what it means to be cold before I asked you for this donation."

This message -- "I want you to be cognizant of the needs of the Jewish people." -- is akin to the Talmudic dialog [Brochos 28] between Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua.

Rabban Gamliel, who was the Nasi (similar in those days to being King of Israel) came to visit Rabbi

Yehoshua in the latter's home. Rabban Gamliel remarked that from the sooty walls of his house, it was evident that Rabbi Yehoshua was in the charcoal business. (Rabban Gamliel was unaware that Rabbi Yehoshua was so poor that he lived in a house that had blackened walls that he could not afford to clean or paint, not because he was in the "charcoal business"). Rabbi Yehoshua sharply commented back: "Woe to the generation whose leaders are unaware of the poverty of the disciples of the sages."

This, the Chasam Sofer writes, was the significance of the commandment not to count the Levites and not to "raise their heads". The Levites are the spiritual mentors and leaders of Klal Yisrael. It does not behoove them to have their heads raised above the people. Nothing should be done to make them more "uppity" than their natural status would cause them to be anyhow.

Leaders who do not have the sensitivity to feel and empathize with the needs of the people cannot function effectively. In the words of Rabbi Yehoshua in Tractate Berachos: Woe to generation who has leaders who do not know of the poverty of the disciples of the Sages in their midst.

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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