

## **A Weekly Byte... from Isralight**

### **(Portion of Bamidbar)**

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*  
From Rav Binny

*Three thousand years ago, King Solomon wrote in the book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) that there is a time and a season for everything under the sun.*

*“A time to sing, and a time to dance, a time to rejoice and a time to mourn, a time to reap and a time to sow.” And, like all things, there is a time to ask questions and a time to remain silent.*

*In the Israeli army, there is a type of question known as a ‘she’elat kitbag’, or a ‘kitbag’ question. This concept is born on the first day men are inducted into the army, and I remember it like it was yesterday.*

*When newly drafted soldiers arrive at Bakum (Basis Klitah U’Miyun, The base for receiving and sorting), they enter at one end of a long series of huts as civilians, and emerge a few hours later, Israeli soldiers in full uniform with all their gear thrown into a kitbag.*

*Vaccinated and examined, with your hair cut and a long series of items thrown at you and instructed to be stuffed pell-mell into your kitbag, wearing boots and uniform that don’t exactly fit because you didn’t know enough to ask for the right size, (and in the three minutes you were given to dress you didn’t have time to notice they didn’t fit before you were on to the next series of invasions of your privacy and your identity) this day lives on in my memory as one of the more harrowing experiences of my life.*

*It has not yet hit you that you have entered a different world where you will spend the next few years of your life, but you have already learned the hard way that you need to figure out what you are supposed to be doing fast, because there is always a price for getting it wrong. I still remember the guy who thought he’d be smart and threw his boots on without the laces. The sergeant who caught him wanted to know if he thought he was a man or a bird, and promptly made him put the boots on his hands, and, with arms extended like wings, he was made to run around the entire series of huts flapping his arms in unison.*

*After a few hours that seem like a lifetime, you finally emerge at the end of this experience in a state of near total confusion. And it is at this point that the legend of the kitbag question is born.*

*You are made to run out of the hut and line up in rows of threes (“shelashot”), something you will become all too familiar with in the coming months. At this point, the sergeant overseeing your ‘education’ looks at his watch and points out another building in the distance.*

*“It is now 12:15,” he says.*

*“That building is the Dining hall.”*

*“In the army, seven minutes is a lifetime, and that is all you get to eat. It will take you three minutes to get there, and three minutes to get back, so be back here in ‘threes’ at 12:28.”*

*Everybody gets it; you do not want to get back at 12:29. But before anyone can move, there is always one guy who raises his hand to ask that incredible kitbag' question. He means well, and is just trying to do the right thing, but there are some questions you just don't ask:*

*"Sir, do we have to take our kitbags?"*

*The sadistic smile of the sergeant says it all, and off we ran with our overloaded, ill-packed, bulging-at-the-seams kitbags on our shoulders. (To this day, whenever I meet someone going into the army, I tell him to bring some granola bars and sandwiches, and offer to watch the kitbags)!*

There is a time to ask questions, and a time to remain silent. You don't ask the officer who just stopped you for speeding why he has such shiny sunglasses, and you don't ask the dentist why he said 'oops' as the anesthetic takes effect. There is a time and a place for everything. And often, knowing when and where those times and places are, is what life is all about.

This week, we begin a new book in the Torah, the book of *Bamidbar*, and the first portion (*Bamidbar*) is case in point.

The Torah seems to deem it important that not only do we know *what* G-d is telling Moshe to do, but exactly where he is when receiving the command as well:

*"And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, (the Ohel Mo'ed)..."*  
(Bamidbar 1:1)

We already know the Jewish people are in the Sinai desert from the context of the portion we just concluded, so one wonders why it is important to repeat this here? Additionally, why do we need to know that whatever G-d is about to share with Moshe is being communicated in the Tent of meeting? In fact, one wonders why they need to have these conversations in a Tent of meeting at all? Does G-d need an Internet portal? Can't G-d be in touch with Moshe wherever Moshe is?

Obviously, these places are not about what G-d needs, but contain some message that we need to understand. What then is the significance of the Sinai desert, and the Tent of meeting, the *Ohel Mo'ed*?

The **Noam Elimelech** (Rav Elimelech of Lizensk), points out that each of these places represent two very distinct ideas in Judaism.

Sinai, in Jewish tradition, has come to represent the concept of humility. The first Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers), shares the history of the oral tradition from generation to generation and begins by stating that:

*"Moshe Kibel Torah Mi'Sinai"*, which literally translated means Moshe received the Torah *from* Sinai. All of the commentaries ask why it does not say, more appropriately, that Moshe received the Torah *at* Sinai? To which they respond that the Torah was given on Mount Sinai, as opposed to a more magnificent and majestic mountain such as Everest or Kilimanjaro, because a little hill like Sinai teaches us the value of humility. And true acquisition of Torah and all it represents can only come from a sense of humility.

Indeed, the Torah tells us that it was no accident that Moshe was the person chosen to receive and pass on the Torah to the Jewish people; he was the humblest of all men.

And if Sinai represents humility, then the desert, where Sinai is located, represents the best place to acquire that humility.

We get so caught up in all of our achievements and accomplishments; sometimes we need to take a step back and retreat into the desert, in order to acquire a little humility in our lives. Indeed, the desert is a place, which is really no place. There is no address, fewer landmarks, less habitation, and fewer environments to support life. It is naturally a place one passes through, and not a destination in itself. The desert represents the process by which we achieve certain goals, but it, like Mount Sinai, is not the goal. However holy an experience we had at Sinai, we were clearly never meant to stay there; it was a point of passage, though of course an important one, on our way to the land of Israel.

The *Ohel Moed* (Tent of meeting), however, was very much a place, but it was not only a place one went to; it was also a place you could take with you. What really, was the Tent of *Moed*? We loosely translate this as the Tent of meeting, but the word *Moed* also means time, as in the *Mo'adim*, which are the festivals, or times of rejoicing in our calendar. Even more interesting, the festival, or *Moed*, is also associated with joy, as these are the days on which we are meant to experience joy.

What is the connection between time and joy? Quite simply, happiness is all about purpose. The Prophets speak of the day when the Jewish people will rejoice, because that will be the time when we begin to sense that the long journey of exile had some purpose, even if we will never fully comprehend it. And that sense of purpose is what gives us the experience of joy. This is why the Torah tells us that the harvest, during the festival of Sukkot, is the “time of rejoicing”, because when the fields are harvested the entire arduous process of ploughing and planting, and reaping and threshing makes sense; the purpose to it all becomes clear. This too, is the secret behind the joy we experience under the wedding canopy, when the long and often difficult journey to find the right person finally bears fruit, indicating that the entire process, with all its ups and downs, has been for a reason, and we once again experience purpose. This is the essence of any joy we experience in our lives; we rejoice when we feel we are imbued with a sense of purpose.

Joy is not about what we have; it is about who we are, and the sense that there is a purpose to our being here. It is that purpose which not only gives us joy, but is the root of the mitzvah to seek out that joy. We are all put on this earth for a reason, and our challenge to try and discern what that mission is; and that is the joy that we seek.

And of course, this is intricately bound up with the concept of time. Time is a gift we are given, but what we do with it is up to us, and again, the challenge is to fill our time with purpose and meaning. And that is the *Ohel Moed*, the place that represents our mission to fill the short time we have on this earth with meaning.

It is also interesting to note that whereas Sinai is associated with Moshe, the *Ohel Moed* is the province of Aaron, of whom G-d says: “When he sees you, he will rejoice in his heart.” (*Ve'Samach Be'libo*) (Shemot 4:14)

When Moshe is unsure how his older brother will feel about his suddenly arriving on the scene as the savior of the Jewish people, when it is Aaron who has remained in Egypt amidst the pain of the Jewish people, G-d tells Moshe that he need not worry; Aaron will rejoice upon seeing Moshe. Aaron will discern the purpose to it all, when he sees Moshe and understands that the Jewish people are finally ready to go home.

In the first verse of the book of *Bamidbar* (and subsequently for those willing to look, as in verse 1:3) the Torah alludes to the fact that everyone has a different role, and represents a different energy, and we need to learn how to work together to capitalize on different people's strengths as a vehicle to a more complete whole.

And all of this is essentially the theme of the book of *Bamidbar*, and very clearly the background to all of the topics in this week's portion.

As an example, the Torah tells Moshe along with Aaron to count the Jewish people, but in a very specific manner: They are to count all of the men who are of the age to go to the army. (1:3) Whatever the purpose of this counting, whether to show G-d's love for the Jewish people, or to teach us the value of every individual, what remains unclear is why this counting is specifically of the soldiers.

In fact, the Torah seems to suggest that an army is a good thing, and even a part of an ideal society, and while there is certainly a crucial role for the army when necessary, one would hardly consider it an ideal to have an army. So why are we counting the soldiers?

Some commentaries, like the **Malbim**, suggest that this is a practical count, prior to entering the land of Israel, to prepare the army for war.

**Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch**, however, suggests that the *Tzavah* (army) here does not refer merely to an army that makes war, but to a higher body dedicated to public service.

The dream, as the verse in *Tehillim* suggests is: "May there be peace in your armies" (Psalms 122), which is a strange dream; if we had peace why would we need any armies? In truth, what makes a person a soldier is his willingness to lay down his life for something larger than life itself, and a person can only do that if his life is more about giving than taking. Such a person recognizes the true value of *Moed*, or time, as our most precious commodity which must be invested with our purpose, which is to give back to the world, in order to leave it a better place than it was when we got here.

And this is the entire purpose of the counting in the first place: as a message that every person is valued, because every single one of us has something unique to give to the world.

Which leads to the next topic of this week's portion, the separate counting of the tribe of *Levi*, which is all about the idea that we are all different, because we each have something different to give, and if we are counted differently, that can only be about the fact that we all have very distinct purposes. And so it makes sense that the tribe of *Levi*, with its very unique and exalted purpose, would be counted in a unique way.

This then is also the meaning of the marking of each tribe, and indeed each family "*Al Diglo*", by their individual banners, (2:2) each given a specific place in the encampment. This reminds us the lesson that where you are also has a powerful impact on who you are, and a person's place has a powerful impact on a person's purpose.

And a careful look at all the issues in this week's portion will very clearly demonstrate that this is the theme of this week's portion, *Bamidbar*.

Ultimately, the book of *Shemot*, ending with the debacle of the Golden calf, and the building of the Tabernacle, demonstrates that The Jewish people are still a nation of slaves not yet ready for the freedom and responsibility of entering the land of Israel.

The book of *VaYikra*, which follows *Shemot*, was all about giving the Jewish people a set of role models (the *Kohanim*), which is part of a recipe for growth.

And now, the book of *Bamidbar* provides the opportunity for the Jewish people to take a step back, into the desert, to become the nation that will be ready to enter the Land.

To do that they have to discover that we are not what we do and the work we do is not what makes us who we are or gives us our value. A slave ultimately, is only valuable as long as he can produce and work. But a free man is valuable not by virtue of what he can do, but of what type of a person he has become.

Ultimately, the difference between a slave and a free man is the sense of purpose and joy that comes with recognizing that our purpose here is much more the work we do, and much more about the people we hope to be. Our goal is to discover and connect to the right time, and the right place, for everything.

May Hashem bless us soon to connect all of us, each in our own way, to what we are really meant to be doing here, so that we may rediscover that sense of joy that comes from living a meaningful life.

Shabbat Shalom,

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