

Portion of Matot-Masei

(reprinted from 2004)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

In 1986, an Israeli fighter-plane was shot down over Lebanon, and the pilot and navigator, safely ejected from the burning plane, found themselves trapped behind enemy lines. In one of the most daring missions of the war, an Israeli search and rescue team flew in under heavy fire, and in a classic retrieval operation, with an Israeli commando suspended from a helicopter by a cable, literally plucked the pilot from the jaws of the approaching enemy only eight hundred yards away. His co-pilot already surrounded by an enemy that was only fifty yards away, could not be rescued.

Ask any Israeli air force pilot what his ultimate nightmare is, and he will tell you of Ron Arad, the navigator of that flight who had to watch his co-pilot whisked away to safety, while he was left behind. Years later, Ron Arad is still missing.

This mission raises one of the classic questions in military operations: at what point is the individual expendable, for the sake of the many? Does saving the life of one Israeli airman justify risking the lives of many others? The lives of a dozen men, not to mention tens of millions of dollars of vital and sophisticated Israeli equipment in the form of helicopters and support, were all put at tremendous risk in the mission to bring one man home. No strategy or mission plan could ever justify such a decision. And yet, if you ask any Israeli soldier, from the army's commander in chief, all the way down to the infantry man alone in his fox hole, they would all agree, that the IDF's policy of never leaving a man behind makes that not only a justifiable, but even an essential part of the Israeli military. Where does this insistence of the value of the individual, even at the expense of the many, hail from?

*There was a time when being Jewish represented how unified and at-one we could really be. In first of this week's double portion, **the portion of Matot**, the Torah describes how the Jewish people came together as one unit to wage war against her enemy Midyan. Each tribe sent her men forward to become one solid Israel defense force, over three thousand years ago.*

I remember one Shabbat during the Lebanon war; my older brother and I were finally both out on a weekend pass at the same time. He was serving in the Paratroopers 202nd battalion, which was then stationed in Tsidon, south of Beirut in what became known as the infamous 'death way' (Tsir Ha'Mavet), and I was down from forward positions in the Bekaa valley opposite the Syrians.

It was Shabbat afternoon, and we were sitting on the balcony of our parents' apartment in Jerusalem, when we started hearing a strange wailing sound in the distance. Curious as to the source of this odd sound, we decided to go for a walk and investigate.

Walking through Jerusalem's Independence Park, we turned a corner at the bottom of Hillel Street and came upon a most comic sight. On the street outside the Beit Agron theatre (which had begun showing movies on Friday nights) were three very distinct groups:

On one sidewalk opposite the theatre, there was a sea of black coats and hats, probably in the vicinity of five hundred or so Ultra orthodox (whatever that means!) men who were all yelling "SHABBOS!" repeatedly, in unison, at the tops of their lungs. They were apparently demonstrating their opposition to movies being shown in the holy city of Jerusalem on Shabbat, and were obviously the source of the strange wailing sounds we had been hearing all the way across the park.

Across the street, on the opposite sidewalk in front of the theatre, was a much smaller group of about fifty or so people mostly clad in t-shirts and jeans, many holding signs supporting freedom of expression and the like. This group, while not as loud as the sea of black across the way, were yelling with just as much determination things like: 'go to the army!' or 'No to religious coercion'.

And in the middle of the road, some mounted on horses, were a large number of Israeli police, trying to keep things calm.

To the two of us, both dressed in white Shabbat shirts, slacks and Kippot on our heads, the whole thing looked pretty comical, until one of the guys in t-shirt and jeans, seeing our Kippot (religious head coverings or Yarmulkes) yelled out: 'Why don't you go join the army or go stand with your buddies over there!'

And then it wasn't so funny...

So how did we get so fractured? The dream has always seemed so wonderful, and so obviously right:

"Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh La'Zeh" "All Israel are responsible one for another"

We are meant to feel that when one of us is in pain, all of us are in pain. In fact, that is what the word "Arev" or 'mixed in' signifies: we are all part of one great mixture. So where did it all go so wrong?

There is a message, hidden in the first part of this week's double portion, *Matot*, which may provide not only a clue as to the problem, but perhaps as well, a remedy for the possible solution.

Until now, it appears that the Torah, and in fact the entire book of *Bamidbar* (Numbers), is dedicated to building a unified nation, whose focus seems to be the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) representing G-d. There is one army, and whenever the Jews are counted, they are for the most part counted as one Nation.

But when Moshe prepares to wage war on the nation of *Midyan*, in response to that nation's attempt to destroy the Jewish people, he does not command the people to 'rise as one' in order to defeat the common enemy.

Instead, he tells the Jewish people:

"... put forth men from amongst you for the army... a thousand from each tribe, a thousand from each tribe, for all the tribes of Israel, shall you send to the army." (Bamidbar 31:3-4)

Why are we suddenly dividing Israel into separate tribes? Why isn't there simply a command to the entire Jewish people to gather the 'Israeli' army together?

In fact, it is interesting to note that when Moshe addresses the people regarding this commandment to wage war against the Midianites, he does not address the heads of the tribes as one might expect if this were an attempt to garner support on a tribal level. Instead, the Torah tells us that Moshe speaks "el **ha'am**", "to **the nation**". So if Moshe is speaking to the entire Jewish people, why are they commanded to send one thousand men from each tribe? Why not the entire army?

After all, when waging war, more is always better, right? So, if the Jewish people at this point have a standing army of *six hundred thousand* men (11:21), why would they only draft twelve thousand?

Even more interesting, this is also the first time that even the tribe of *Levi*, normally excluded from military operations, bears an equal responsibility to fight (as **Rashi**, quoting the *Sifri*, points out here)! Why are the men of the tribe of Levi sent out to fight? Since when are the Levites a fighting force? Especially since this can't be a desperate call to arms which includes everyone as part of an emergency situation; after all, in the end only twelve thousand men will go to battle.

Indeed, until now, the tribe of Levi was not even counted for military service:

*"But the tribe of Levi do not count, and do not take a census of them, from amongst the children of Israel. And you shall appoint the Levites over the Tabernacle of testimony (the **Mishkan Ha'Edut**)..."* (Bamidbar 1: 49-50)

So why are Levite men suddenly needed to do battle here?

And it is interesting to note that this new focus on tribal identity (read state rights?) continues into the second of this week's portion *Massei*, (36: 2-9) when we are told that the inheritance of land is by tribe, and that:

"Inheritance (of land) shall not turn from one tribe to another tribe, for the tribes of the children of Israel shall cleave, every man to his own inheritance." (36: 9)

Incredibly, after spending the entire book of *Bamidbar* forging a rag tag band of former slaves into one unified people, the concluding verses of the book seem to be throwing us back into the violent world of tribalism and territorialism!

This is especially challenging when considering the fact that the dangers of tribalism were abundantly clear to Moshe as witness his strong response to the desire of two of the tribes (Gad and Re'uvan) to settle lands east of the Jordan River:

"And Moshe said to the children of Gad, and the children of Re'uvan: 'will your brothers come to do battle while you sit here?'" (32: 6)

And, even stronger, a few verses later, Moshe evokes the sin of the spies, suggesting (32:14) that this desire to separate from the rest of the people will tear the Nation apart:

"Behold! You have risen up in place of your fathers, a society of sinful people..."

How could the Torah conclude the book of *Bamidbar*, dedicated to building a Nation that will be a light for the entire world, by fostering such a divisive, destructive force as tribalism?

Indeed, one wonders: why the need for tribes in the first place? Why, in the formation of the *family* of Israel, long before the *Nation* of the children of Israel was born, was there a need to divide the brothers into separate tribes? Why couldn't we just be one big happy family? After all, isn't this divisive tribal identity part of the same mistake that caused the brothers to be jealous of Joseph to the point that they were willing to sell their own brother as a slave, which was what caused us to end up as slaves in Egypt in the first place?

In truth, there is something happening here that represents a fundamental change not just in the introduction of the individual identity of the tribes, but in the very way we perceive tribes at all.

It is here in the book of *Bamidbar* we are introduced to an entirely new concept: the concept of '*Mateh*'. Until now, the word used in the Torah for tribes is '*Shevet*'. Only in the book of Numbers do we first see the tribe as a '*Mateh*'. In fact the concept of a tribe as a *Mateh* is not used once in the Torah outside the book of *Bamidbar*! (And in *Bamidbar*, the word *Mateh* appears nearly one hundred times...) Perhaps part of the purpose of the book of *Bamidbar* is the construction of a new model: the *Mateh*.

All of which begs the question: what is the fundamental difference between the notion of a *Shevet*, and the idea of a *Mateh* (both words meaning 'tribe')?

Rav Weinberg (in his *Frameworks*) based, I believe, on **Rav Dessler** in the *Michtav Me'Eliahu*, points out that both these words are a form of stick. A *Shevet* is a **club**, which was actually used to great effect by the *Shotrim* (possibly the equivalent of Jewish policemen) and their Egyptian taskmasters, in effectively controlling their slaves.

The *Mateh*, on the other hand is something we are quite familiar with as the **staff** used by Aaron and Moshe.

And perhaps that is precisely the point: maybe the Jewish people (and through them the world) needed to change their perception from whatever *Shevet* represents, and discover the beauty and the power of the *Mateh*.

A *Shevet* is in the end, a weapon of war. It is a **club**, used for violence, to control and dominate, as well as to fend off would-be attackers. Indeed, the English word for *Shevet*, club, is itself a group which is designed to exclude others, such as a frequent flyers club which creates a culture of those that are 'in', and those that are not. If you are not 'part of the club', then you just don't get it.

A *Mateh* on the other hand, is a **staff**, which is a stick used for support, representing leadership and direction. Here too, the English word for *Mateh* is also a group of people, such as the staff of a camp or the general staff of the army. In this case, however, it is not an exclusive group, but rather one that comes to support the larger whole. The camp staff is not exclusive, even though it may be defined; its entire purpose is to act as a support and leadership for the entire population of the camp. And of course, this is exactly the function of the stick we call a staff or a *Mateh*: this is not a stick one uses as a weapon; it is rather a stick one leans on for support.

And maybe this distinction is the entire point. There is a movement in the world which seeks to do away with the value of the individual identity. Communism suggested that there are no individuals, there is only the state. John Lennon in his *Imagine*, suggests how wonderful it might be if there were no peoples, no religions, no borders, and no differences, "above us, only sky". But Judaism begs to differ, because within the context of the nation, it is critical that there always be a place for the individual.

Building a nation does not exclude the possibility of the tribe, rather, the book of *Bamidbar* is dedicated to creating a place for each tribe (and alongside that, each individual) *within* the nation.

Hence *Bamidbar* begins (1:2) with the command to name each individual within the context of their families. And this may well be the goal set already in the book of *Shemot*, which does not really translate as the accepted English 'Exodus', but actually means 'Names'. Because in Judaism, every individual has a name, and every person has his or her place within the context of the whole.

And the book of *Bamidbar* does not actually mean 'Numbers' which has become the accepted translation. In fact, '*Numbers*' is precisely what the book of *Bamidbar* is not!

Many historians believe that the actual creation of numbers as a system (at least in Near Eastern and Western civilization) may well have its roots in ancient Egypt, and one of the prevalent theories is that the Egyptians came up with numbers because they needed a system to keep track of their slaves. Thousands of years ago, one of the greatest civilizations in history, taught the world that a human being could become a number. And it isn't so long ago we discovered that the world has still not freed itself of this terrible message. Judaism on the other hand, suggests that a human being should never be a number. Indeed, it is a Biblical prohibition to count another human being for precisely that reason; because every human being is a world, and should never be a number.

But this idea is challenging when trying to build a nation. Because sometimes there is a need for each individual to put aside their own personal dreams and desires in service of the greater good. And yet, within that need lies great danger, because it is too easy for a nation to be built by crushing the rights and even the identity of any and every individual, in service of the state. This then, is the dichotomy which the *Mateh* seeks to resolve. The Jewish notion of a tribe as a *Mateh*, as opposed to a *Shevet*, teaches us to value the power and majesty of becoming one, with one dream and one purpose as a Nation, while never losing sight of the beauty value of each and every individual.

A chain, after all, is only as strong as each link, yet at the same time if you spend a year on each link, you'll be long gone before you have ever forged a chain...

Interestingly, it is in war, more than perhaps any other experience where the dangers and pitfalls of nationalism are greatest, and especially in a war such as the war against Midian here in this week's portion, which is presented as a need for the Jewish people to defend the name of G-d and respond to another nation that sought to destroy us. Americans are still struggling with the inevitable quashing of certain basic human rights that were the result of the war against terror that was the response to 9/11.

Specifically, here then, it is the *Matot*-tribes that must learn to do battle together. And it is for this reason that so much emphasis is placed on the realization that not a single man was lost in the battle (31:49).

To this day in Israel there is a powerful experience of national mourning over the loss of every individual, even while recognizing the needs of the entire Nation.

All of which brings us back to this summer of 2005.

Make no mistake about it; the Jewish people and the State of Israel are treading on dangerous ground. When Jews, in an attempt to fulfill what they believe is a National mission, can put aside the values and dreams and maybe even the individual rights of their fellow Jews, something is amiss. And if we are about to be witness to what may be the greatest destruction of Jewish communities by Jews in the land of Israel since the Romans put torch to the Temple two thousand years ago, then something is terribly wrong.

But we need to take a closer look at the problem. The term for 'The Disengagement' being used in Israel is the '*Hitnatkut*', which is a much more powerful word than disengaging. And if on a National level we are about to experience such a '*Hitnatkut*' there is a message we are getting that we need to think about and be cognizant of. To be '*menutak*' is much more tragic than just being disengaged. *Menutak* means to be cut off. When someone gets the phone for you and you get on the line wanting the other person to get off the phone so you can have a private conversation, you tell him: '*titnatek*'; 'cut the line on your end'. If we are experiencing a 'cutting off' or an isolation, it is because as a people we have become cut off from one another. We have allowed ourselves to become our own islands of theology and principle, as well as geography and beliefs. We live in our little island communities, be they our homes, our synagogues, or even our Jewish organizations.

In Israel, unfortunately, people live in communities defined as religious or secular, Orthodox, Ultra-Orthodox or Reform, Right wing or Left wing, Labor or Likud, and of course Jewish or Arab.

We have, perhaps for many valid reasons, become cut off from one another, islands of ideals and philosophies. How many left-wing Israelis have close right-wing friends? How many Jews who define themselves as secular have close 'religious' friends? When was the last time you heard of Jews in black hats and coats sitting around sharing thoughts with their fellow Jews just back from the pub in Tel Aviv?

Even the terrible labels necessary to make this point are themselves our own creation, perhaps bred of a millennium of exile. What indeed does it mean to be 'religious'? And how can a human being be defined as totally secular?

I recall, prior to a huge multi-divisional exercise in the army, being approached by our Brigade commander after the Officers' security and safety briefing was completed a couple of hours ahead of schedule. In the middle of the beautiful winter desert, he suddenly realized he had nearly a hundred high-ranking Israeli officers with nothing to do for the next two hours. So, being pretty much the only officer present with a Kippah on his head, he asked if perhaps I would lead everyone in a discussion.

We decided to have a discussion about the challenges of the religious-secular divide in Israeli society. So I asked everyone to define themselves as religious or secular, and was shocked that over ninety percent of the officers actually defined themselves as secular. After a further five minutes of discussion, we agreed that the Hebrew word for secular, 'chiloni' based on its root 'chol', is actually the opposite of 'kadosh' or 'holy'.

So I asked all of them whether they really thought that an Israeli Officer, wearing the rank and uniform of the Israeli Army in a modern day Jewish State of Israel, actively involved in defending the Jewish people against her enemies, could actually be devoid of all sanctity?

If we are experiencing a Hitnatkut, and by no coincidence this is happening during the most painful period in the Jewish calendar, the three weeks of mourning, we all need to do some serious thinking.

Two thousand years ago **Josephus** describes why it took three weeks from the time the Romans broke through the walls on the seventeenth day of Tammuz, until they burned the Temple on the ninth day of Av in August of the year seventy. It only takes ten minutes to walk from the Old City walls to the Temple Mount, but it took the Romans three weeks, because during this month they pillaged, raped, looted and butchered their way through the Jewish city of Jerusalem. In less than a month they murdered over one hundred thousand Jews, and this before there were machine guns and mortars, carbon monoxide vans and gas chambers; they did it with their hands.

And here we are, two thousand years later, about to drag Jews out of their homes, destroy every last Synagogue, Jewish school and grave site that eight thousand people built with love for thirty years. And the overwhelming majority of Jews in Israel will never even have visited this beautiful community before it is gone.

And it is so easy to blame everyone and anything; it's the politicians and the Leftists, or the right wing fanatics and the rabbis. It's the secular media or the corrupt government or the Europeans and the Americans, never mind the Arabs.

But Jewish tradition has always viewed politics and military strategy as symptoms, not the cause. Two thousand years ago, the Rabbis in the Talmud did not blame the destruction on poor rebel strategy or

corrupt *Kohanim* (priests). And they did not blame the Romans, nor even for that matter, G-d. The destruction of an independent Jewish nation in its homeland, they said, was the result of *Sinat Chinam*, or baseless hatred.

The **Netziv**, (Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin of Volozhin), in his introduction to the book of Bereishit (Genesis) suggests that *Sinat Chinam* is when we hate someone simply because their opinion is different from our own. This does not mean that we cannot agree to disagree, but it absolutely means that we can only disagree with someone after we first respect where their opinion is coming from. We can disagree with an opinion, but we must never stop respecting the person.

After all, if every human being is created in the image of G-d, then there is always a Divine spark in each and every human being.

Today, just like two thousand years ago, we have only ourselves to blame, because if this is happening, then all of us, and each one of us, have a lot of work to do.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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