

HOW TO PREPARE OURSELVES TO RECEIVE THE TORAH

As we know, the book of Numbers is called Chumash HaPekudim, for it deals with the census of the Children of Israel. In fact from the beginning of our parsha, the book describes the numbering of the Children of Israel, the way they were counted by tribe and family, each tribe with its standard and the entire camp according to its families. Counted were men aged twenty years and older, all who could go into the army of Israel.

There is, however, something very interesting that we see in the very first verse of our parsha. There it is written, "The L-RD spoke to Moses in the desert of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their departure from the land of Egypt" (Numbers 1:1). This verse gives us all the details pertaining to where Hashem told Moses to perform the census. Furthermore, we are also given precise details as to when he was told to perform this census. This is difficult to understand, for of the 613 mitzvot that were given on Mount Sinai, almost none of them mention the fact that they were given to Moses there, nor the date on which they were given. Yet here, the text specifically mentions these things in detail. Why such an abundance of information?

As we know, the days in which we find ourselves are called the three days of hagbalah ("restriction"), commemorating the time when the Children of Israel were forbidden to approach Mount Sinai. Hashem commanded Moses to tell them to sanctify and purify themselves, and to change their clothing and guard themselves from all sin, for in three days Hashem would descend upon Mount Sinai to give them the holy Torah.

What meaning do these three days of "restriction" hold for us? What is the significance of these days, which took place long ago, for

us living today? Granted, the Sages have said, "In every generation a man is bound to regard himself as though he personally had gone forth from Egypt" (Pesachim 116b). This means that they instituted the concept of "in those days, at this time" (as at Chanukah, Purim, etc.), meaning that in every generation a person must sense what transpired at that time, what happened to the Jewish people, for such things recur in every generation. If a person does not think about what happened in the past, in the present he will be unable to receive the light that comes to us from those sacred days.

If we do not fully realize that today there is also a concept of three days of hagbalah – days when we must sanctify ourselves and be prepared to receive the Torah – it will be impossible to receive it! Today, too, we must all make spiritual preparations to merit the Torah, which is why today there also exists a concept of three days of hagbalah.

This concept is not only to be understood in a spiritual sense. We are aware of our Sages' teaching that all the souls of the Jewish people stood on Mount Sinai, and like a single person they all heard: "I am the L-RD your G-d." Consequently, the first verse in the book of Numbers brings us into a fitting frame of mind to receive the Torah. It makes us understand that things were said "in the second year." Why this specific detail? Everyone knows that the Torah had, at that point, already been given to the Children of Israel (having been given within the first year of their departure from Egypt). However to our great regret, as early as that first year the Children of Israel sinned and made a golden calf, spurning the holy Torah that had been given to them from Mount Sinai and looking for a substitute.

This is why the first verse of our parsha comes to tell us: If you are truly the Children of Israel and want to again receive the Torah

– not like in the "first" year, when the Children of Israel made a golden calf and exchanged the Torah for nothing – then you must prepare yourselves to receive it in several ways. Exactly which ways?

Before all else, you must receive it "in the desert of Sinai." That is, you must conduct yourselves with humility and be self-effacing, like the desert. As the Sages have said, "When one makes himself like the desert, which is free to all, the Torah is presented to him as a gift" (Nedarim 55a). This means that a person must annul himself – meaning his ego, his feelings of pride – and yield before others, conducting himself with humility before every Jew. Thus he will arrive at the gift of the Torah, as he should.

Next we must receive it "in the Tent of Meeting." We simply must enter the tent of Torah study and sit down to learn, working in the Torah without having any frivolous conversations or interruptions, for the very fact that we study the Torah constitutes the best way to prepare ourselves to receive it. However for this to happen, it must also be the first of the "second" month. We must have the mindset of the "second" – not the first – devoid of pride, for "words of Torah endure only with he who is humble" (Taanieth 7a), never with the proud.

Above all else, we must reflect upon the fact that the second month, which as we know is the month of Iyar, is also called "Ziv." Now the word ziv indicates vision, the act of seeing. This refers to seeing the reality of Hashem, how today He is also before us and giving us the holy Torah. If we act in this way, with humility and by putting an effort into studying Torah, we will also arrive at an unselfish vision of the giving of the Torah, and we will receive it all the days of our lives.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

The Importance of Each Jew

Why do we read Parsha Bamidbar near the holiday of Shavuot?

The gaon Rabbi Moshe Feinstein Zatzal explained, "There are some people who say, 'Who am I and what am I? Even if I study Torah, I'll never reach a great level.' Such an attitude leads them to negligence and laziness in study. We therefore read Parsha Bamidbar, which contains the census of the Children of Israel, in order to demonstrate that every Jewish person, great or not, is important and a part of the census. Each Jew is valuable and has a part in the holy Torah, and he can give new Torah interpretations that his soul received on Sinai. Therefore the reading of Parsha Bamidbar encourages everyone at the time of receiving the Torah" (Iggerot Moshe).

How to Acquire the Torah

It is written, "The L-RD spoke to Moses in the desert of Sinai" (Numbers 1:1).

Concerning the beginning of the book of Numbers, the Midrash states: "Anyone who does not throw himself open to all like a desert cannot acquire wisdom and Torah" (Bamidbar Rabba 1:7). Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk commented in this regard: "This teaches us that only a person who makes himself like a desert, who rejoices in his lot and does not ask anything for himself of others, is worthy of having the Shechinah rest upon him and merit rejoicing in the light of the Torah. This is like a man who is walking alone in the desert. He can only rely on his own strength; he cannot count on the help of others. So too must a person who studies Torah work and labor through his own efforts to uncover its secrets. Even if he has studied a great deal, he must constantly feel that he has not even begun. He must feel like a desert that man has not even touched."

Similarly, it is said in the name of the holy Baal Shem Tov, "This is the meaning of the expression, 'The Torah of the L-RD is pure' [Targum on Psalms 18:31]. This means that the Torah always remains pure and intact, and even if you have put an effort into studying it, you have not even taken more than a dog lapping water from the vast ocean."

– Parperaot LaTorah

The Value of the Jewish People in the Eyes of Hashem

It is written, "Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel" (Numbers 1:1).

Rashi states: "Because they are precious to Him, He counts them all the time. When they went out of Egypt He counted them, and He counted them when they fell because of the golden calf, so as to know the number of those who remained. When He caused His Shechinah to rest upon them, He counted them. On the first day of Nissan the Mishkan was set up, and on the first day of Iyar He counted them" (Rashi on Numbers 1:1). In the Gemara we find, "A person is in the habit of touching his purse all the time" (Bava Metzia 21b). Why so? It is because his money is valuable and important in his eyes, which is why his thoughts never stray from protecting it at all times. Similarly, the Children of Israel are valuable to G-d, which is why He constantly "checks" upon them, counting them time and time again.

Counted Things and the Forces of Impurity

It is written, "According to the number of names, every male according to their head count" (Numbers 1:2).

Some explain that the reason why Hashem commanded the Children of Israel to be counted was in order to prevent the forces of impurity from having any influence on them. Because the desert is a place where demons and

evil spirits reign, Hashem protected the Children of Israel by counting them there, since the forces of impurity cannot influence anything that is counted or measured.

This idea appears in the Gemara, where it discusses a case of some workers transporting wine: "Certain carriers were once carrying a barrel of wine. Wishing to take a rest they put it down under a drainpipe, whereupon the barrel burst. Therefore they came to Mar, the son of Rabbi Ashi. He brought forth trumpets and exorcised the demon who now stood before him. Said he to the devil, 'Why did you do such a thing?' He replied, 'What else could I do, seeing that they put it down on my ear?' The other [Mar, the son of Rabbi Ashi] retorted: 'What business had you in a public place? You are the one in the wrong, therefore you must pay for the damage.' Said the devil, 'Will the Master give me a time wherein to pay?' A date was fixed. When the day arrived he defaulted. He came to court and [Mar the son of Rabbi Ashi] said to him, 'Why did you not keep your time?' He replied, 'We have no right to take away anything that is tied up, sealed, measured or counted, but only if we find something that has been abandoned'" (Chullin 105b). This means that demons have no power over something that is counted and sealed, hence Hashem ordered the Children of Israel to be counted. (Note: As for the Sages having said that a numbered thing carries no blessing, see Tosaphot Taanith 9b, where the subject is explained.)

– Me'am Loez

A Soldier Should Know His Orders!

It is written, "Everyone who was able to go forth in the army in Israel" (Numbers 1:45).

When the gaon Rabbi Chaim of Sanz was 14 years old, he already knew all 613 mitzvot by heart according to the Rambam's order. When some people asked him why he had learned the mitzvot by heart, the boy replied: "I realized that good soldiers should know their commanding officer's orders. If we want to be good soldiers in Hashem's army, we have to know all our orders and directives. What orders concern us, if not the 613 mitzvot? Since I want to be a good soldier in Hashem's army, I learned all 613 mitzvot by heart."

An Upright Jew at Home and Away

It is written, "As they encamp, so shall they journey" (Numbers 2:17).

We often encounter people who observe mitzvot, study Torah, and even pay great attention to all details pertaining to their conduct. Yet under what circumstances do they act as such? It is when they are at home, settled down in peace, for then they can organize their lives. This, however, is not the case for those who are traveling, people who are far from home and really do not have a head for such things. In that case they are liable to even neglect many mitzvot and drop their Torah study entirely, since they find excuses for themselves.

Concerning this sad behavior, the Torah tells us: "As they encamp, so shall they journey." It is not enough for Jews to be upright "as they encamp," referring to when they are at home and living in peace. Jews must also be upright and observe all the laws of the Torah when they are away. Even while journeying, a person must conduct himself in the same way as when he is at home. On this the Torah tells us, "You shall speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the road" (Deuteronomy 6:7), meaning that when traveling we must act the same as when we are at home. We must overcome the hardships and weariness of travel without letting the slightest detail slip from our observance of the holy Torah.

Everyone Can

It is written, "Number the children of Levi" (Numbers 3:15).

The Rambam writes at the end of Hilchot Shmita that the tribe of Levi was selected to serve G-d in order to teach the Children of Israel His laws and

decrees. This is true not only for the tribe of Levi, but for all men who sense a calling and understand that they must separate themselves to stand before Hashem and serve Him, know Him, and so on. Such a person will sanctify himself with a great degree of holiness, and Hashem will be his portion and heritage for all time.

From these words of the Rambam, we learn that every person is given the choice to devote his life either to this world, which is ephemeral, or to the World to Come, which is eternal. If a person conducts himself like the Levites and Hashem becomes his heritage, the very fact that he has taken this decision sanctifies him for all time.

The Redemption of the Firstborn is Like 84 Fasts

It is written, "Moses took the redemption money" (Numbers 3:49).

We have a tradition which states that whoever partakes of the meal for the Pidyon HaBen ("Redemption of the [firstborn] Son") is considered to have fasted 84 times. Rabbi Chaim Chizkiyahu Medini states in his book Sdei Chemed: "When I was staying in holy city of Jerusalem in 5559, I was invited to a meal for the Pidyon HaBen, but I did not go. I was then told that we find in certain books that such a meal is as valuable as 84 fasts. I don't know the source of such an assertion. It's simply what people say." Books of Chassidut note that we find an allusion to this in the expression, "Moses took hapidyom [the redemption] money" (Numbers 3:49), the word pidyom being formed by the letters peh (numerical value: 80) and dalet (numerical value: 4) along with the word yom ("day"). Hence it follows that the meal of the Pidyon HaBen (since the verse in question deals with the redemption of the firstborn) is as valuable as 84 fasts.

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

Quality and Quantity

It is written, "The number of the Children of Israel will be like the sand of the sea, which can neither be measured nor counted" (Hosea 2:1).

On one hand the verse states, "The number," yet on the other hand, "which can neither be measured nor counted"! The Sages explained: "This is no contradiction: [The latter case] speaks of the time when Israel fulfills the will of the L-RD, [while the former case speaks] of the time when they do not fulfill His will" (Yoma 22b).

How are we to understand that when the Children of Israel repent, their number suddenly increases to the point that they can neither be measured nor counted? In the Torah we find some people who were, in terms of quantity, single individuals, but in terms of quality they were like a great number of people. Our Sages said as much with regards to Moses, who was as valuable as the entire Jewish people, and also with regards to Yair the son of Manasseh, who was worth as much as the greater part of the Sanhedrin (Bava Batra 121b). Hence the Sages wanted to teach us that when the Children of Israel fulfill Hashem's will, each of them becomes so great and important that their number, in terms of quality, increases to the point that there is no way of numbering them, hence they "can neither be measured nor counted."

The book Kav HaYashar (262) cites a story from the Zohar: Rabbi Yossi died, and when his son cried out and implored G-d's mercy, Rabbi Yossi's soul returned to his body. However in exchange for Rabbi Yossi's soul, the Angel of Death was given the lives of twelve people.

A MATTER OF EDUCATION

The Goal of the Chosen People

The book of Numbers comes after the Jewish people's reception of the Torah and the building of the Sanctuary in the book of Exodus, as well as after the primary mitzvot between G-d and man were given to the people in the book of Leviticus. In the book of Numbers, the Torah essentially teaches us the arrangement of the people around the Sanctuary as G-d's people. It is in this way that certain mitzvot also appear in the text, mitzvot such as circumcision, the Passover offering, and living in the sukkah, each of us being a part of the chosen people who must be devoted to G-d's word. Thus for the holiday of the harvest, of first fruits, and Shavuot, when we also celebrate the giving of the Torah, the awareness that we as a people have been chosen to fulfill Hashem's Torah sinks into us.

Many among us ask, "How are the Jewish people different from others, such that we must carry the Torah's yoke?" The first answer given to them is the following: "Who chose us from among all the peoples?" Some begin with, "At first our forefathers were idolaters," and explain that the path of Hashem is founded upon our Patriarch Abraham. Yet in general, the explanation given for our selection from among all the peoples is that we have been chosen to suffer in this world in order to earn the World to Come. However this is not enough. It is not enough to express the truth, nor is it enough to encourage an intelligent person to suffer wholeheartedly for a future reward, the likes of which he hasn't the slightest notion (as our Sages said concerning the World to Come: "Eye has not seen, O G-d, beside You" [Berachot 34b]). The correct explanation is that the Torah, at its core, is a truth that befits all men who differ from animals – not just a truth for Jews – as the Rambam says regarding the mitzvot at the end of Hilchot Temurah: "These are extraordinary instructions," and at the end of Hilchot Teshuvah: "The truth because it is the truth."

The uniqueness of the Jewish people lies in the fact that it is the only one that remains of all the peoples of the world to accomplish the task of all mankind. What can this be compared to? It is like a tavern where non-alcoholic drinks are given at no cost to a person who commits himself to not drinking, in order to drive home all who drank that night. The same applies to the Jewish people, for Hashem made us to be "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6).

GUARD YOUR TONGUE

Reviewing the Laws of Speech One Hundred Times

Any Jew who has not studied the book Chafetz Chaim at least one hundred times – to the extent of perfectly understanding it and knowing whether or not he may say something before he speaks – such a person must question himself before speaking, for he must know if what he plans to say is liable to be Lashon Harah.

The Chafetz Chaim himself said, "People ask me questions in every field of Torah, questions pertaining to things that are quite easily permitted, as well as for things on which there are many reasons to be strict. It is only with regards to Lashon Harah that people still do not come to ask me questions. I don't understand why they don't come and ask me if a given thing is permitted or forbidden to say, for I would compose a comprehensive reply, with every source drawn from Scriptural verses, until it is clear weather it is permissible to say or not."

To all who claim that they are "bored" or "have nothing to do," we ask: Have you already gone through the laws relating to speech one hundred times? If not, then you have a lot of work to do!

A TRUE STORY

What Constitutes Great Family Lineage?

On the verse, "They established their genealogy according to their families, according to their fathers' houses" (Numbers 1:18), Rashi comments: "They brought their genealogical documents and witnesses, who verified the circumstances of their birth."

A story is told of the tzaddik Rabbi Israel of Rozhin concerning the greatness of one's family lineage. As Rabbi Israel was writing up the Tenaim for his grandson (who was becoming engaged to the daughter of the tzaddik Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch of Rimanov), he described to Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch and the others present the long line of his ancestors, who went back to King David. The multitudes of chassidim present drank in every word that emerged from the mouth of their honored Rav. After finishing, he turned to Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch and said to him: "Now, my dear mechutan, tell us about your family line!" At that point Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch stunned everyone present with the following words: "It is true that I don't come from a great family of rabbis or tzaddikim. My parents were simple people and good Jews who earned a living with much difficulty. When they died, I was but a boy of 12 years old, so I was obligated by financial reasons to learn how to mend clothes as a tailor's apprentice." Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch then began to show visible signs of emotion, yet he continued: "From that tailor I learned two things that have stayed with me my entire life: Not to ruin new things, and to repair old things as much as possible."

Rabbi Israel of Rozhin approved and said with tremendous emotion, "I cannot think of a family with a better lineage for my grandson than yours."

You Shall Not Take Interest

One day a wealthy and generous Jew came before the Chatam Sofer and asked to speak with him in private, a request that was granted. Having looked all around, the man said, almost in a whisper: "Rabbi, I've already lost almost all my possessions, and I'm practically bankrupt!" The Chatam Sofer slowly looked him over with pity, and the man recounted everything that had recently happened to him and which had brought him to this point. "Now a large fair is going to take place," the man continued, "one in which all the important merchants will participate. If my spot is taken there, everyone will instantly become aware of my situation and my downfall will be complete."

The Chatam Sofer gave him an encouraging smile and asked, "How much does it cost to go to the fair?" The man replied with a sigh, "One hundred rubbles, but even that I don't have." The Chatam Sofer responded, "My son, I will lend you 100 rubbles to go. And even though you have no money to do business there, the money that you have generously distributed to Bnei Torah will watch over you. In the meantime, I will lend you whatever you need to cover your initial costs."

Since he was in a very difficult situation, and even though it wasn't pleasant for the man to accept the money, he agreed to the offer and proceeded to the fair. The Holy One, blessed be He, demonstrated His benevolence to him, and he was immediately offered to purchase an item on credit. He completed the purchase and then resold the item at a much higher price, making a tidy profit in the process. Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, showed the man His kindness throughout the day. He purchased and resold items like a skilled merchant, and in the end he returned from the fair having made a considerable amount of money. He then went to the Chatam Sofer to repay his loan, and out of gratitude he also purchased a diamond ring for him as a gift.

The Chatam Sofer put the ring on his finger, and he did not stop exclaiming: "What a beautiful ring. What taste! What a piece of art!" After a few minutes, he gave the ring back to the man and thanked him profusely, but said, "This is interest, and the Torah forbids taking interest."

Naturally, the man agreed with this Halachah, but he could not help wondering. "Could you please tell me," the man asked, "if the Torah forbids you from taking the ring, why you did not immediately return it to me, instead of holding it in your hand for ten minutes?"

EISHET CHAYIL

Modest Clothing is An Asset on the Day of Death

It is written in the book of Proverbs: "Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she joyfully awaits the last day" (Proverbs 31:25). The last day is the one in which a person ends his life and prepares to give an accounting for all his deeds. This is the great and terrible Day of Judgment, when people are judged without pity on their actions in life. King Solomon is telling us: Who is the woman who will be able to joyfully await that day, having a smile on her lips? It is she who fulfilled what it written at the beginning of the verse, namely a woman whose "strength and dignity are her clothing." The word oz ("strength") evokes the word azut ("courage"). She wears modest clothes with courage and bravery, not feeling shame before anyone, be it at home or at work. She goes everywhere with strength and pride in her glorious and decent clothes. What exactly does hadar ("glory") signify? It evokes the word hidur ("adornment"), meaning that she adorned her manner of dress more than necessary, wearing clothes that were more than appropriate. She is the woman who will joyfully await the last day!

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

The Imrei Emet: Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter of Ger

During Chanukah in the year 5625, our teacher the Chiddushei HaRim of Ger gave a Chanukah gift to all his grandsons. To his grandson Rabbi Aryeh Leib (the Sefer Emet), he said: "I give you 'a son' for Chanukah. You need a son." In fact one year later, on Tevet 7, 5626, his eldest son was born. The boy would grow up to lead the Chassidic community of Ger in Poland, being known as the Imrei Emet, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai.

From his earliest years, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai was known for his great intelligence and extreme diligence. Each moment was precious for him, and even when he was waiting for a meal, or for a train that was to take him somewhere, he was constantly with a book. It was from him that we have the marvelous adage, "Why do we give a fiancé a gold watch? To teach him that every moment in life is as precious as gold." Rabbi Avraham Mordechai was extremely learned, to the extent that his collection of sefarim constituted the second largest in the world, after that of Rome.

On Shevat 5, 5655, his father the Sefat Emet passed away, and he had to assume leadership of the community. He led with both gentleness and firmness, and from all corners of the country people brought him their problems, both simple and difficult, to the point that he was known as one of the greatest figures of his generation. In fact together with the Chafetz Chaim and Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, he founded the Agudath Israel movement.

Rabbi Avraham Mordechai assumed this responsibility for 43 years, and with the arrival of Shavuot on Sivan 6, 5708, his soul ascended to Heaven from Jerusalem. He is buried in the courtyard of his home, the courtyard of the Sefat Emet yeshiva in Jerusalem, located on Sefat Emet Street. May his merit protect us all.