

The Path To Follow

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Learning Torah in Joy While Changing for the Better

Parsha Nasso deals with the families of the tribe of Levi (Bamidbar 4:21-49). The tribe of Levi was composed of three families: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. During the 40 years that the Children of Israel journeyed in the desert, they encamped sometimes here and sometimes there, and one of the tasks of the Levites was to unload and set up the Sanctuary wherever the Children of Israel encamped.

In the Sanctuary, as well as in the Temple, the primary work of the Levites consisted of singing when offerings were being made, meaning to be joyful. From here we learn the great importance of joy for all men. Someone who is not cheerful is simply unhappy, and if he is unhappy, he has no desire to live. Such a person can be a billionaire, owning vast possessions, but will be unhappy because he is not cheerful.

In reality, how can we acquire joy? Some non-Jews may say that they acquire it by going out at night to enjoy themselves. However this is a grave mistake, for who can be certain of returning happy after such a night? Others say that tremendous wealth brings joy, but this is also a mistake, for very wealthy people in particular are unhappy. In fact the Sages have said, "The more possessions, the more worries" (Pirkei Avoth 2:7). That said, where can we find happiness?

Happiness and joy are found within the family. However even within the family, we need things that lead to joy, or that prevent joy from departing. Anyone with some experience in life knows that the world is filled with problems. However it is precisely under difficult circumstances that we find joy.

In Bnei Brak and Jerusalem, among families that have 10 or 12 children – where people live restricted lives, with no chance to breathe – that is where we find joy. Look at how they spend Shabbat, at how they are always happy, always with a smile on their faces! And when asked how they are, their response is always: Baruch Hashem, very well!

With whom can we find such joy, such happiness? Only with those who possess Torah. King

David said, "The Torah of Hashem is perfect, restoring the soul" (Tehillim 19:8). There are some people who take medication for illnesses of the soul, but King David said: "The orders of Hashem are upright, gladdening the heart" (v.9). The Torah infuses man with joy, reviving his soul.

Furthermore, "the testimony of Hashem is trustworthy, making the simple one wise" (v.8) The Torah is true, and brings such joy that it can transform even the greatest of fools into sensible men. We learn this from the Levites, who were always joyful.

This is what the Holy One, blessed be He, told Moshe: Nasso [which, among other things, means to count] – count and divide the families of the Levites in such a way that each family has its own task in the Sanctuary. The first are the Gershonites [Hebrew: Gershoni]. What does the term Gershoni [Bamidbar 4:24] contain? If we divide it, we obtain ger [a convert] and shoni. Now the term shoni evokes shinui [change] or shoneh [studying] halachot, studying the entire day, as it is said: "Whoever shoneh [studies] halachot every day is assured of life in the World to Come" (Megillah 28b).

We may say that it is not only a convert who changes, but anyone who was previously a stranger to Torah, who used to scorn the Torah's words, but now begins to study it. Since he has understood the results of doing so, as well as what eventually results from it, nasso – he elevates himself. Yesterday he was far from Torah, while today nasso, meaning neshev (let us sit down to learn): He takes heart and sits down to learn, just like a convert who yesterday was far from Torah but today has drawn closer to it.

Even within the Jewish people, we see how many gerim [converts] have elevated themselves. Targum Onkelos on the Torah was written by Onkelos the convert, a nephew of the Roman Emperor Titus (Gittin 56b). He nevertheless converted to Judaism and translated the entire Torah into Aramaic. The great Tanna Rabbi Akiva descended from a convert, as well as Rabbi Meir Baal Haness, who descended

from Emperor Nero (ibid. 56a). Shemaya and Avtalyon, the teachers of Hillel and Shammai, were also converts who descended from Sen-nacherib.

This is what the Torah is telling us by the term Gershoni: Learn from this ger [convert], who has now come closer to Torah. Likewise you – who were far from Torah but have now come closer – you can also change, for the study of Torah effects a change in man, transforming him in a radical way.

Now that you have changed for the better, you can emulate "Nasso et rosh [Raise the head]... to serve and to carry [the Sanctuary]" – you can raise the banner of the Torah, the torch that illuminates. The Torah needs us to raise and carry it, without which it would remain buried in libraries.

However if we study and observe mitzvot, we thereby elevate the Torah, and then those who study it will no longer be gerim, strangers, for they will have effected a radical change in themselves and be transformed into completely different people.

Furthermore, the term ger (when we include the term itself) has the same numerical value as dar (to dwell). This means that when we change and begin to study Torah, we dwell within it. The Torah then becomes our home, as it is written: "Your Torah is in my innards" (Tehillim 40:9). The Sages have said, "With the beginning of Adar, rejoicing increases" (Ta'anith 29a), which means that when a person enters a dira (dwelling) – a word that evokes Adar – which is the Beit HaMidrash, he is filled with joy, for the Torah rejoices man when he enters its "dwelling" to study it.

This is the lesson that we must draw from Parsha Nasso after the holiday of Shavuot: To change and elevate ourselves, and to grow in the study of Torah and the observance of mitzvot amid joy and inner spiritual happiness. This is because the Torah brings joy to man, and we will find ourselves in its dwelling if we study it, as it is written: "Your Torah is in my innards."

The Mysteries of the Sambatyon River Part I

The final point among the questions raised by the wicked Turnus Rufus: “Why is the Sabbath distinguished from other days? ... How can you prove it to me [that this day is indeed the Sabbath]?” was answered by Rabbi Akiva by resorting to a stunning and well-known supernatural proof:

“Let the Sambatyon River prove it, which carries stones the whole week, but allows them to rest on the Sabbath” (Bereshith Rabba 11:5).

The name of this river, “Sambatyon,” writes the Ramban, comes from the fact that it stops on Shabbat, for in the language of that country, Shabbat is called “Sabbat” (just as it is in Arabic) and the suffix yon is added to adjectives in that language as well.

When we speak of the “Sambatyon River,” we must first state that it is not a “river” in the normal sense of the word. The word “river” is borrowed, for no water flows through it, as it does in every other river. The entire nature of the Sambatyon is that it rages with tremendous noise, its currents moving massive amounts of sand and large stones, like an overflowing river.

In Torah literature, we find a certain number of descriptions of this river by the “emissaries of the rabbanim.” These men were tasked with finding the Ten Tribes of Israel and the “Bnei Moshe,” some of whom lived beyond the Sambatyon River, starting with Rabbi Eldad the Danite, who himself was from the tribe of Dan, Rabbi Petachya of Regensburg (the brother of Rabbi Yitzchak Halben of the Ba’alei HaTosafot), Rabbi Meir Shatz, the author of Seder HaHakdamot, and Rabbi Baruch of Sefat, who was the emissary of the gaon Rabbi Israel of Shklov. They all went in search of the Bnei Moshe, who lived beyond the Sambatyon River. We have also heard from Rabbi Moshe Yaffe of Chevron and Rabbi Shimon Horvitz, who left behind testimonials and markers, quite accurate, concerning the location of the Sambatyon River.

We shall try to address all of these issues in this weekly column. We shall cite the fascinating and intriguing descriptions of these emissaries – what their eyes saw and what lies hidden behind it – without omitting what happened during their travels in other

lands, as reported in accounts written by their own pen for the following generations. We shall discuss all of this, along with the halachic questions pertaining to crossing the Sambatyon River on Shabbat, as well as the exact location of this river, which may have retained all its mystery.

Eldad the Danite

First of all, let us begin with the identity of Eldad the Danite, as he writes in the account in which he describes his genealogy: “Eldad the son of Machli, the son of Otiel, the son of Yekutiel, the son of Yair, the son of Eldad, the son of Machli, the son of Avner, the son of Shemaya, the son of Ofri, the son of Chori, the son of Elkana.”

Let us also recall that his account, which merited the description *Hilchot Eretz Israel*, is mentioned by the Tosafot and several Rishonim on tractate Chullin. The Chida also mentions it in his book *Shem HaGedolim* and other works.

Without a doubt, the high point in the account of Eldad the Danite is a moving description that casts great light on the supernatural way of life among the Bnei Moshe, who lived on the other side of the extraordinary Sambatyon River. As he writes in his letter:

Near the place where the children of our prophet Moses dwell is the great Sambatyon River..... It forms a square, and it would take three months to go around it on the inside. There are many houses and castles. They have nothing unclean among them, neither bird nor animal. ... There are no wild beasts, dogs, cats, vermin, or flies. In fact they have absolutely no unclean animals whatsoever. They only have oxen, sheep, and poultry....

The cattle bring forth twice a year, and they sow wheat and barley. Besides this, they have all the fruits in the world, all kinds of beans, zucchinis, watermelon, onions, and other produce.

They have the fear of G-d before their eyes. They have the entire Bible, the Talmud, and the Mishnayot.... When they read, they say: “Joshua, son of Nun and disciples of Moses, said that the blessed L-rd taught him....” They do not mention a Sage if they do not

know him. The only language they know how to speak and write is the sacred tongue.

They possess the laws on the wine of non-Jews, the laws of shechita, and the laws on treif animals, being more strict than the commentators, for Moses was stricter in all these things than what the commentators say.

They never take an oath, and never profanely mention G-d’s holy Name. They even punish those who use His Name to attest to anything, for they say: “What is the use of swearing by His holy Name, knowing that children die young as a result?”

They live to the age of our father Moses, 120 years. Children never die in the lifetime of their fathers, who live to see three or four generations. There is little or no fear of thieves, wild beasts, wicked and evil spirits, or anything bad, so that children take turns guarding and watching the flock. All this is the result of their being good, never uttering a lie, living according to the law, strictly observing their relations, and abstaining from sin.

They live beyond the river of Ethiopia, from which they are separated by the Sambatyon River. The width of the Sambatyon is a full 220 yards, and it contains sand and stones. The noise of these stones makes it sound like thunder and hurricanes. They rise up and go down, and at night this noise can be heard half a league away. ... The [Sambatyon’s] stones, which make so much noise and move up and down, cease moving from the start to the end of the Sabbath. Around the river there is a fire that descends from heaven every day of the week. There it remains, except on the Sabbath, so that no man can approach the river, for the fire burns everything within its reach.

In light of this account from Eldad the Danite, and with a certain degree of reluctance (since in the final analysis, according to him, no man can come within a kilometer of the river), let us point out that the gaon Rabbi Meir Shatz, the author of the poem *Akdamut Milin* (which is usually read on the festival of Shavuot, prior to the Torah reading), was able to cross the Sambatyon River during a sacred mission to save the Jews of Worms. In next week’s article, we shall give a complete and fascinating account of his adventures.

Individuals Among the Public

It is written, “They shall confess their sin which they committed” (Bamidbar 5:7).

Rabbi Moshe Chagiz Zatzal asks how we can confess all kinds of sins during the Al Chet prayer on Yom Kippur, since we know that we did not commit every sin listed in this prayer. How can a man be allowed to stand on that holy day and say something about himself that is a lie?

He answers this by the fact that “all Israel are guarantors for one another,” and although we personally did not commit this or that sin, we share the responsibility of sins committed by other Jews.

As proof of this, he cites the verse mentioned in this week’s parsha: “They shall confess their sin which they committed” (Bamidbar 5:7). At first, the text speaks in the singular: “A man or woman who commits any of the sins” (v.6), and the ending is also in the singular: “He shall make restitution for his guilt in its principle amount” (v.7). That said, why state “They shall confess their sin which they committed” in the plural?

This teaches us that the public must confess even the sins of individuals, for “all Israel are guarantors for one another.”

Her Reward

It is written, “But if the woman had not become defiled, and she is clean, she shall be exempted and bear seed” (Bamidbar 5:28).

The Gemara states that if a woman was previously barren, she shall have a child (Berachot 31b). If she delivered a child in pain, she shall deliver a child with ease. If she had one child, she shall have two. This seems surprising, since the accusations against this woman arose from the fact that she isolated herself with a stranger, aroused her husband’s jealousy, and no longer obeyed him. That said, why does she have such a great reward?

Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian Zatzal says that this teaches us a great principle in serving G-d: This woman, who arrived at such a low point that she isolated herself with a strange man, despite warnings to the contrary from her husband, actually overcame a great trial. We can now see that by her spiritual strength, she overcame her desires and did not succumb to sin. Hence “she is clean.” Such a courageous act, namely to have conquered her instincts, earned her an enormous reward, despite the fact that – had she not repented – she also would have received the punishment for having isolated herself. Yet for having controlled her desires, she will have her reward: “she shall be exempted and bear seed.”

Not the Tribe of Levi

It is written, “One leader each day, one leader each day, shall present his offering” (Bamidbar 7:11).

This is surprising: The tribe of Levi, which was chosen to serve before Hashem, was not included in the inauguration of the Altar, nor did its leader participate in bringing an offering, as did the other tribal leaders. What is the significance of this?

The book *Sha’ar Bat Rabim* offers a nice explanation: On the verse, “Please speak in the ears of the people: Let each man request from his fellow and each woman from her fellow silver vessels and gold vessels” (Shemot 11:2), the Midrash states that only the Israelites who endured enslavement in Egypt received this order. As a reward for their burdensome work, they were now allowed to take gold and silver vessels from the Egyptians. However the tribe of Levi was not allowed to do so, for the members of that tribe were exempt from work in Egypt. Hence they

were not allowed to benefit from these gold and silver vessels, for doing so would have constituted theft.

For the inauguration of the Altar, each tribal leader received the order to bring a silver bowl, a silver basin, and a gold ladle of ten shekels. However the tribe of Levi would have been unable to comply with such an order, for the Levites were poor and lived from tzedakah, from tithes and offerings.

By Allusion

Chartzanim

It is written, “...from chartzanim to skins” (Bamidbar 6:4).

Rashi explains that the term chartzanim signifies seeds.

Now the term chartzanim has the same numerical value as hagarinim (“the seeds”).

– Birkat Peretz

Teshuvah

It is written, “He shall bring his offering to Hashem: One unblemished sheep in its first year” (Bamidbar 6:14).

The last letter of each word in Hebrew together form the term teshuvah (“repentance”).

In other words, it is not enough to bring a burnt-offering or a sin-offering, for a person must completely repent at the same time.

The Way of Our Fathers

All the Children of Israel Are Important to Him

We see that the Torah goes into great detail as it describes the offering of each tribal leader individually, even though each offering was the same as every other. This comes to teach us that the kohen must not say, “This wealthy man, because I will bless him, will bring me many gifts. I will therefore bless him, but not this poor person, who does not bring me gifts.”

This is why the Torah states, “They shall place My Name upon the Children of Israel, and I will bless them” (Bamidbar 6:27). In other words, the kohen does not have the right to say: “I will bless this person, but not that person because he does not give me much.” This is because blessings are found with Hashem. He is the One Who blesses the Jewish people, and the kohen only places His Name upon them.

This is also why the passage on the tribal leaders is juxtaposed to the blessing of the kohanim. It tells us that just as the Torah was careful to detail the offerings brought by each tribal leader – despite the fact that there were no differences among them, doing this to show us that they were all equal – likewise the kohen must consider all Jews as equal in regards to the priestly blessing, taking nothing else into consideration when he blesses.

Hence the Sages instituted the priestly blessing to include the phrase: “Who blesses His people Israel with love,” for just as the Holy One, blessed be He, blesses Jews with love, and just as everyone is equal before Him, without any distinction in His eyes, likewise the kohen must bless everyone with love, not favoring one person over another.

The Upper and Lower Te'amim

During the public reading of the Torah on Shavuot, we read the following passage from Parsha Yitro: "In the third month of the Children of Israel's departure from Egypt, on this day they arrived in the desert of Sinai" (Shemot 19:1). The Sages have taught us just how important it is to read this passage on that day: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to the Children of Israel: 'My children, if you read the Torah narrative of the giving of the Torah every year, I will give you merit as if you stood at Mount Sinai and accepted the Torah'" (Yalkut Shimoni, Yitro 271).

The reading of the Ten Commandments, which is found in Parsha Yitro during the giving of the Torah, and the second account found in Parsha Va'etchanan, contain two different series of te'amim [cantillation notes; singular: ta'am]. One series is known as ta'am elyon (the upper ta'am) and the other as ta'am tachton (the lower ta'am). The custom among Sephardim is to use the upper te'amim for the public reading of the Torah, while someone who reads the Torah privately uses the lower te'amim, contrary to other communities, which have other customs.

Numerous Torah scholars, both commentators and grammarians, have looked into this issue, and opinions are as varied as faces. Some scholars say that we should act in one way, while others say that we should act in another. The first to publicly discuss this issue was Rabbi Zalman Hanau Zatzal in his book Sha'arei Tefillah. What follows is a brief excerpt:

"I examined the Ten Commandments. They contain two series of te'amim, which are called upper te'amim and lower te'amim. Yet among ancient authors, I found no mention of which ta'am we should use. I have no doubt that the Rishonim did not address this issue because it was so clear to them, for their hearts were as vast as an immense hall, and they understood the issue so well that they did not need to address it. As for the Acharonim, they did not attempt to discuss this issue because of their poor understanding of grammar, as well as all that concerns the cantillation marks, for in our time the wellsprings of this wisdom have been blocked. [This wisdom] has become foreign to us, the most powerful [scholars] become lost in it, and the Torah has almost been forgotten for lack of understanding.

"I committed myself to examining this issue, for the Sephardim have the custom of employing the upper te'amim while singing in public, and employing the lower te'amim in private. While I immersed myself in trying to learn the reason for this custom, I discovered that in his book Ohr Torah, our teacher Rabbi Menachem Di Luzano wrote that at one point a group of Torah scholars were before him, and the question was raised as to the reason for the two series of te'amim in the Ten Commandments, with one saying one thing and the other something else. Finally the Rav Zatzal said that the upper te'amim were for public readings, and the lower te'amim for private readings. He said this without any proof whatsoever, and without giving any reason, and the Sephardim act according to his opinion."

Naturally, this response did not satisfy Rav Hanau, who also did not accept the Ashkenaz custom, as mentioned in the book Massat Binyamin. In the end, he concluded that we must make a compromise: We must employ the upper te'amim on Shavuot, but the lower te'amim on Shabbat Yitro and Shabbat Va'etchanan. All the Ashkenazim adhere to this view, and this custom has spread throughout Germany and Poland. Actually, it is based on nothing, and it is not fitting to base ourselves on this compromise, which rests on absolutely nothing.

To summarize a long and complex article which describes the different kinds of te'amim and their names, Rav Hanau concluded that, in fact,

both series of te'amim have a solid foundation: The upper ones are those which were given to Moshe by G-d on Sinai, and the lower ones represent what Moshe said to the Children of Israel below. From here we draw a halachic conclusion: Each time that we read the Ten Commandments in the Torah, we must read them with the lower te'amim, for that is what Moshe said to the Children of Israel below, which is how their name is derived: Lower te'amim."

These remarks aroused the anger of the Gaon Ya'avetz, who wrote: "I stood trembling and stunned by what my eyes saw, and I asked myself why he neglected the tradition of the Sephardim, and why he insulted them by saying that [their custom] was based only on imagination, without any foundation whatsoever." After raising several other points, which were expressed very harshly, he concluded by citing the opinion of the Maharam ben Chaviv: "The upper te'amim are written for large vocal ranges and strong voices, whereas the lower ones are for small vocal ranges and weak voices." Furthermore: "The upper te'amim are written above the letters, and the lower te'amim are written below the letters. The tradition of the Sephardim is very ancient, and it is the true one." [In passing, we should mention that among our holy books found in the Cairo Geniza, a certain number of pages from the Bible were found that contain different sets of te'amim: The Babylonian method, according to which the te'amim are found above the letters, as is the case in our time, and the method of Eretz Israel, according to which the te'amim are found below the letters.] He also found a simple reason for using upper te'amim for public readings of the Torah, and lower te'amim for private readings of the Torah: "There is a great difference between them, and this makes it easier for one who reads alone. It is the nature of the sacred tongue to make reading easier, without lengthening verses."

In short, numerous pens have broken trying to explain the significance of the upper and lower te'amim, as well as the customs associated with the reading of the Torah, but no consensus has been reached. As we have mentioned, the custom of the Sephardim and eastern Jewish communities is that in reading the Ten Commandments, in all cases, we use the upper te'amim, and for reading the Torah in private, such as when we read the weekly parsha once and the Targum twice, or simply when we are learning, we use the lower te'amim (Kaf HaChaim 494:20). The Ashkenaz custom, which is mentioned in Mishnah Berurah 494 (Biur Halachah), states that on Shavuot we read the Ten Commandments in public with the upper te'amim, while in Parshiot Yitro and Va'etchanan we read it with the lower te'amim, even in public. Some have the custom of always using the upper te'amim when reading in public, and using the lower te'amim only when reading in private.

Guard Your Tongue

Regretting Past Sins and Preparing for the Future

If a person has transgressed by having listened to Lashon Harah and believed it – whether it deals with someone's relationship with G-d or with others – then in order to rectify this sin, he must do the following: Resolve to remove these things from his heart and no longer believe them, commit himself to no longer accepting Lashon Harah about a fellow Jew, and confess this sin. As such, he can rectify the positive and negative commandments which he violated by having accepted Lashon Hara.

– Chafetz Chaim