

**LIGHT
FROM
THE
FUTURE
PARSHAS BAMIDBAR**

BY

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LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE - PARSHAS BAMIDBAR

**LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE
ESSAYS ON PARSHAS BAMIDBAR**

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**Dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who,
more than any Jewish leader, has prepared us
for Moshiach and the imminent Redemption**

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INTRODUCTION

The following collection of essays on *parshas Bamidbar* was taken from the weekly Torah messages that I have been sending to hundreds of individuals over the past 22 years.

These messages were written in the spirit of the talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Several of them are actually based on or adaptations of his essays and discourses on the parsha.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe declared that we are living in unique times. He applied the words of the Midrash to our day:

“The time of your Redemption has arrived.”

The Rebbe stated further that the straightforward way for us to bring about the actual Redemption is by learning what the Torah says about Moshiach and Redemption. While learning Torah in general has the capacity to change our mindset, learning

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about Moshiach and Redemption has the capacity to alter of exile-constrained way of thinking and cultivating a liberating manner of thinking.

In this spirit, each one of these messages concludes with an application of the Torah lesson of that week to our understanding of Moshiach and Redemption, as well as to help us prepare for the coming of Moshiach and the imminent Redemption.

It is my fervent hope that these essays will contribute to the process of changing our *galus/exile* mindset into a Moshiach mindset, which is effected by the study of these themes in Torah.. And may this effort contribute to the imminent Redemption through our righteous Moshiach. Amen.

The Parsha of Bamidbar is about the desert, which metaphorically, has been interpreted to mean the period of exile. From this parsha we can glean useful lessons how to live an “oasis” life in these last moments of exile even as we set our sights on getting out of the desert and enter into the Promised Land with Moshiach at our head!

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ESSAY ONE

CLARITY

G-d knows our needs better than we do.

**We need to pray to G-d so that we gain
clarity as to what we really need and what we
should want.**

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ESSAY ONE

CLARITY

A Portent of the Future

This week's parsha carries the same name as the entire fourth book of the Torah that we commence reading this week: Bamidbar-in the desert. In this week's parsha the Torah delineates the manner in which the Jewish people traveled through the desert on their way from Egypt to Sinai and beyond.

Commentators explain that this process was a portent of the journey we have made through exile, the conditions of which have been likened to the desert.

The parsha begins by describing the way the people were counted. The Torah states:

And all the people gathered on the first of the second month, revealing

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the relationship to their families, by their fathers' homes, according to the number of names, by head, from twenty years old and upward.

Rashi comments:

They brought their documents of lineage, and witnesses to the assumption of patrimony, relating each individual to their particular tribe.

Proof of Legitimacy

Commentators wonder why it was necessary for them to bring evidence to confirm who their fathers were.

Or HaCaim speculates that,

Perhaps it was necessary to provide an assumption of patrimony so that there is no suspicion of Mamzerus-illegitimacy.

The question begs itself: Why would we suspect that the men and women of that generation would be guilty of adultery?

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Furthermore, our Sages tell us that, in fact, the Jews in Egypt maintained their chastity, and only in one instance was there a breach of marital fidelity. Why then was it necessary for the people to bring proof of paternity. And furthermore, if we were suspicious of them committing adultery, how would a document allay our suspicions.

Mentioning Mother's Name in Prayer

A similar thought is expressed by the Zohar as to why when we pray for someone's health we mention the mother's name: When we pray we want to make sure of the identity of the individual for whom we are praying. And since there is no absolute certainty as to the identity of the father, it is preferable that we mention the mother's name.

Here the question that can be asked is even more urgent. When we pray to G-d for another, He obviously knows who that person is. Why then couldn't we use the father's name? And to strengthen the question, why do we call people up to the Torah using their

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father's name if there is a chance that it might not be accurate? Why only in health related matters is it crucial that we have the person's identity straight.

Lack of Clarity

One approach to this matter is that ill health is a physical manifestation of a spiritual condition where there is a lack of clarity in one's life. When a person is ill, there is a disconnection between a particular organ of the body and the energy from the soul that was intended for that organ. That organ without the infusion of energy from the soul loses clarity as to what is its function and ceases to operate as a healthy organ. The soul does not need to be healed; it is the body that has to find its way back to the place where it is once again receptive to the soul's power.

When we pray to G-d, He obviously knows what our needs are; we need to have clarity as to who we are, what we need and why we need it. That is the function of prayer, which

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is called tefilah in Hebrew. The word is said to mean “judgment” because the process of prayer is one in which we examine and clarify our state of mind, heart and body, as to their degree of receptivity to the soul.

We can now understand why the prayer is said with the mother’s name to ensure that there is not even a scintilla of doubt as to who this person really is. This obsession with clarity highlights the whole purpose of prayer in general and the prayer for the sick in particular. If we want to mend the body that has lost its identity, we must engage in a prayer that helps us clarify our situation, vis a vis G-d and vis a vis ourselves.

Yizkor

The above might also shed some light on the Yizkor prayer in which we mention both the the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs. This is rather unusual because when we mention the Patriarchs in the Amidah we do not mention the Matriarchs. Perhaps the reason for that is that the Patriarchs actually made the

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controibtion of the Patrirchs complete. They wre not regarded as distince entities. So when we pray we express our intentions succinctly and when we mention the Patriarchs it also includes the Matriarchs. There is no need to mention them separately.

Why then do we mention them separately in the Yizkor prayer?

Perhaps it can be that the Yizkor prayer is about G-d remembering the souls of our parents. Why does G-d have to be reminded if the entire idea of forgetfulness does not apply to Him? The answer is that our request to G-d to remember actually means not remembering as opposed to forgetting but rather focusing His attention and shining His light on our parents' souls.

If the entire idea of Yiskor is to highlight the memory of our parents, clarity is needed for the prayer to be meaningful. We therefore invoke the names of the Matriarchs, who symbolize the power that clarifies our identities.

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This might also explain the Chabad custom to mention the name of our parents' mothers rather than fathers. This seems to go against the general tradition to mention the father's name when mentioning the name of a deceased person. Why here do we deviate from that custom and mention the mother's name.

However, in light of the above, inasmuch as we are trying to expose the soul we are praying for to G-d, we must identify that person in the most clarified fashion, by mentioning the mother.

Clarity in our Journey

In a similar vein, when the Jewish people set out in their journey from Sinai to the Promised Land their identities had to be clear. In order to stay on course they had to know who they were in the clearest terms humanly possible. There was no room for uncertainty and doubt.

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Amalek Sows Doubts

Amalek, the evil nation that attacked them soon after departing Egypt, is said to be the symbol of doubt. Indeed, the word Amalek numerically adds up to the Hebrew word for doubt-safek. Amalek's design is to instill enough self-doubt that we will decide not to continue on our inexorable journey towards Sinai, the Promised Land and the ultimate Messianic Age.

The Age of Clarity

As we have stated in many of these essays, all indications point to our generation's pivotal role as the transitional one between the age of exile and the age of Redemption.

It is this age that the prophet Daniel referred to when he stated that "all matters shall be clarified."

Now is the time when we have to see things clearly; opening our eyes to see the G-dly reality of our existence. G-d then reciprocates by removing the last veil that hides His

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countenance from our world. And that is the Messianic Age.

This explains the Rebbe's insistence that now the feminine role is more crucial than ever. Among other reasons it may attributed to the fact that precisely at the end of our journey there are all sorts of Amalek inspired challenges to the clarity of our mission. It is feminine spiritual power that removes the cloud of uncertainty.

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ESSAY TWO

COUNTING IN THE DESERT

**Humility is not denial of one's virtues and
accomplishments.**

**True humility is realizing that all your talents
are expressions of the Divine.**

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ESSAY TWO

COUNTING IN THE DESERT

The Name

The name of the fourth book of the Torah and this week's parsha is *Bamidbar*—"In the desert." Our Sages (Yoma 68b) also refer to this book as the "Book of Numbers."

The question has been raised why we chose the name *Bamidbar* when a dominant theme of this book is the census (*Pikudim*) of the Jewish people and not their sojourn in the desert? Naming a Torah book is not an arbitrary exercise; the name must be expressive of the very content and character of the book.

A second question can be raised based on the premise that when two or more names are given to one thing, they must have a deep relationship to each other. What, then, is the

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connection between Bamidbar-In the Desert and Numbers?

Why was the Torah Given in a Desert?

To answer these questions we must focus our attention on the way the Jewish Torah reading calendar is set up. Without fail, we read Bamidbar immediately before the festival holiday of Shavuot, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai in the desert. (In some years—as is the case this year—an additional Parsha, Naso is also read before Shavuot. Bamidbar, however, **always** precedes Shavuot.)

Our Sages of the Talmud and Midrash expound on the connection between the giving of the Torah and the desert in several ways:

First, just as the desert is ownerless so too Torah is available and accessible to everyone. No one person can claim exclusive rights to the Torah.

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Second, just as the desert is a place in which no work is performed, so too one who dedicates himself to Torah is freed from all mundane affairs and exile conditions.

Third, if the Torah had been given after the arrival in Israel, people would have been preoccupied with their property and livelihood. Therefore G-d gave the Torah in the desert, where all their needs were provided for, so they had ample time and resources to absorb the Torah.

Fourth, to be receptive to Torah one must render oneself *hefker*—free for all, i.e., egoless, like the desert.

Fire, Water and the Desert

In truth, the desert is only one of several metaphors used by our Sages to describe the giving of the Torah. The Torah was given on Mount Sinai, the lowest of all the mountains, to symbolize the value of humility. Why then is the primary prefatory Torah portion named Bamidbar, implying that the primary

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preparation for Torah is the concept of the desert?

Moreover, in another Midrash three elements are linked to the giving of the Torah: Fire, Water and the Desert. Yet, only the desert is highlighted as a necessary prerequisite for the receiving of the Torah. Why not fire or water?

To answer this question we must understand how these three elements, fire, water and desert, relate to the giving of the Torah.

One approach is that fire, which rises above all else, is the symbol of arrogance. Water, conversely, by nature flows downward and thus alludes to the person who lowers himself to others—humility. The desert, as stated earlier, is also suggestive of the person who is devoid of ego.

The question arises, what distinguishes the symbol of humility associated by water with the symbol of a checked ego represented by the desert? Why two distinct symbols for the trait of humility?

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Healthy Humility

The answer is that humility is merely a description of behavior towards others. One could act humbly but not truly be humble. Also, humility is not a positive trait in all instances. For example, when resolve, courage, confidence and assertiveness are required to carry out a certain mission, some forms of humility can be counterproductive.

How do we maintain healthy humility and also be assertive when necessary?

It is only possible with the “desert” mindset.

As stated, the desert is the state of total self-abnegation, the Hebrew word for which is *bittul*. *Bittul* allows us to combine assertiveness and humility. We become totally receptive to the Divine teachings of the Torah when we are self-effacing.

Once we receive G-d's Torah in its purest state and are devoid of personal agendas, our assertiveness (which may appear to some as arrogance and an inflated ego) is actually an expression of G-d's authority, not our own. The “desert” personality is simultaneously the

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most humble person and the most assertive and authoritative person because he is channeling G-d's authority.

Such was the humility of Moses, about whom it was said, "Moses was the most humble person on the face of the earth." Yet Moses was also the most authoritative leader, whose words are a command to all of us. His assertiveness was not only consistent with his humility; it was actually a most formidable expression of it. Moses was simply a transparent conduit for G-d's word.

This may answer the question as to why the Torah is associated primarily with the symbol and metaphor of the desert, rather than with the symbols of fire and water.

To Absorb the Infinite

Torah, by definition is beyond our grasp because it is Divine knowledge. Since G-d is infinite so is His Torah. Our own minds are finite. It is impossible for a finite being to receive that which is infinite. The only way we can be receptive to Torah is by

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“removing” our personal identities and become open and empty vessels, ready to receive G-d’s message.

Hence, the concept of the desert, which symbolizes *Bittul*, is the single most important ingredient in the process of receiving the Torah. The other elements of fire (assertiveness) and water (humility) are merely the **consequences** of our self-abnegation: by adopting a desert personality we can confidently assert ourselves while remaining humble in our relationship with others.

Superiority or Inferiority Complex: Sign of an Inflated Ego

To explain:

Assertiveness, in and of itself, may signify an exaggerated sense of self-importance, unjustified confidence, mistaken trust in one’s own abilities and the correctness of one’s own ideas. A fiery and passionate leader may be the ultimate egotist. If so, he cannot be

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trusted to impart the Torah's unadulterated teachings to others.

However, even if a person appears to act like water, by showing submission to others or exhibiting signs of meekness, it may actually be due to a lack of conviction and insecurity rather than to a humble spirit. Moreover, ironically, this humility may even come from an inflated ego. The meek individual may simply be afraid to show conviction and fortitude lest he be proven wrong and subjected to ego bruising ridicule.

Both the "fire" and "water" approaches may actually be products of an inflated ego, which will make it impossible to be receptive to the Divine teachings of Torah.

In addition, those who suffer from a superiority complex, or those who are overly humble because of the insecurity that accompanies an inferiority complex (both of which are signs of an inflated focus on self) are hardly qualified to impart knowledge to others. Their arrogance and/or insecurity

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cloud their teachings, driving a wedge between them and their students.

Hence the Torah highlights the “desert” ideal in the week before the festival of Shavuot. This reinforces the notion that the desert personality, which can successfully navigate between assertiveness and humility, is the only one truly receptive to Torah.

The Paradox of Counting

We can now also return to the original question of why Bamidbar was chosen as the name for this Book and Parsha.

Let us recall that the other name of this book is “Numbers” because of the census chronicled in this week’s parsha. The significance of this counting underscores the value of each and every member of the Jewish community.

Our Sages tell us that if even one Jew were missing, G-d would not have given the Torah. Just as we could not get the Torah without the “desert-*bittul*” imperative, so too we

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could not receive the Torah without each and every Jew present and accounted for.

Superficially, these two requirements appear mutually exclusive. If we are in a state of total self-abnegation how can we be counted?

Upon deeper reflection, the process of counting, in and of itself, was the instrument by which our true G-dly identities were revealed to us. Counting individuals can have two contradictory effects. On the one hand, it establishes that you count and are important. In Jewish law, items that are counted cannot be nullified in larger mixtures. On the other hand, when we count individuals, no one counts more or less than the other. That is the ultimate expression of *bittul*-self abnegation.

Thus, when G-d counted the Jewish people He was revealing their true G-dly identity and importance; this is the true state of nullity relative to which all Jews are equal and united as one.

Naming this book and parsha Bamidbar-In the Desert thus describes that which was

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accomplished by the counting. The process of counting was parallel to the desert-*bittul* dynamic and was the instrument by which this dynamic was unleashed.

“Humble Ones: The Time of Your Redemption has Arrived”

The Midrash states that Moshiach will stand on the roof of the Bais Hamikdash and declare: “Humble ones, the time of your Redemption has arrived.”

Why does he hail the people as “humble ones?”

Because Moshiach, like Moses whose soul resides in him, is the catalyst that enables us to realize our greatest potential. This makes us worthy and able to receive the G-dly revelations that accompany the Messianic Age. By being humble, in the “Bamidbar-desert” sense of the word, and receptive to Moshiach and the Messianic Age, one makes the transition from Exile to Redemption happen in the most efficient and pleasant way.

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ESSAY THREE

EXCUSE ME, DO YOU HAVE A SECOND?

It takes just one moment or movement—the Hebrew word for moment can also be translated as movement—to turn the whole world around and bring salvation and assistance to the entire world.

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ESSAY THREE

EXCUSE ME, DO YOU HAVE A SECOND?

Substitutes

In this week's parsha, the Torah speaks of how G-d selected the Levites as substitutes for the first-born, who were initially selected to be the priests because they were spared at the plagues of the first born. Because G-d spared them they became G-d's special "possessions" as it were. However, when they participated in the creation of the "golden calf" they were stripped of their priestly distinction. In their place G-d chose the Levites who were the only tribe whose members did not participate in that horrible crime of idolatry and were therefore the natural replacements for the first born.

In truth, they were not just replacements, but their selection in place of the first-born served as the atonement for the first-born.

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Hence the Torah uses the expression of *pidyon*-redemption to describe the substitution of the first born with the unblemished Levites.

And behold, the number of Levites were almost the same as the number of first-born Israelites except for two hundred and seventy three additional first born.

Now, if each Levite was to take the place of a first-born and serve as his “redemption,” how did the 273 additional first-born find their redemption when there was no Levite to take their place?

The answer is provided in this week’s parsha. The additional 273 first-born were to give a five-shekel coin as their form of redemption.

273 Extras?

Every detail of the Torah is precise and there are no coincidences or arbitrary facts in the Torah. The fact that there were 273 “extra” first-born that had to be redeemed separately must have some significance.

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Moreover, as some commentators have pointed out, the verse that describes the 273 first-born stands by itself:

And as for the redemption of the two hundred and seventy three of the first-born of the children of Israel, that are over and above the number of the Levites.

It does not mention that they were to redeem themselves with five shekel until the next verse. It seems therefore that the Torah wishes to tell us that the fact that there were 273 additional first-born that had to be redeemed is in of itself an important piece of information.

What is the significance of the number 273?

An Instant is Not to be Trifled with

One explanation of this matter based on the exposition given in the Chassidic work entitled *Arugas Habosem* is that the number 273 is the numerical value of the word *rega*, which means moment or instant.

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And here comes the dual lesson:

First, by stating that the 273 first-born Israelites required redemption, we learn that even an instant wasted or abused necessitates redemption. There is no truth to the assumption that seconds can be trifled with. Every second is precious and must be filled with meaning and purpose.

Second, even one instant that is utilized properly can be sufficient to turn one's life around. In Chassidic literature there is an expression that is used repeatedly: "in one moment; in one instant." This echoes the Talmudic statement that "one could acquire their world in one instant." Just one significant change of heart can turn a person's life around and bring salvation to himself or herself.

Moreover, it takes just one movement—the Hebrew word for moment can also be translated as movement—to turn the whole world around and bring salvation and assistance to the entire world.

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One Instant can Save the World

When the Jewish nation was asked whether they wanted to receive the Torah, the people's response consisted of just two words in Hebrew—*na'aseh v'nishma* (We will do and we will listen.") These few words that did not take more than a moment or two to utter saved the entire world. For, as our Sages tell us, if the Jewish people had not accepted the Torah, there would have been no purpose in the creation of the world. Indeed, the Talmud relates that G-d created the world tentatively. If the Torah will be accepted then the world would endure, otherwise, G-d forbid, it would revert to nothingness.

Just those few moments made a world of difference.

Similarly, now; with just one moment's movement in the right direction, one person can literally save the world and usher in the Messianic Age of Redemption and peace. It could very well be that the entire world and all of the generations before us are waiting

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with bated breath for us to make a difference in just one moment.

Reversing Evil's Split Second

Even in the realm of evil, we are told that Bilam, the heathen prophet, had the power to curse because he knew the precise split second G-d's anger could be ignited. In just that one second, the Talmudic commentaries say, Bilam could have said the three letter word "*kalem*," which means destroy them.

Now, Bilam was obsessed with the future of the Jewish people. From his blessings we know what his real intentions were. One of his blessings concerned Moshiach. We therefore realize that he was terrified at the prospects of Moshiach leading the world because that would portend the end of Bilam's influence.

If we take the world Kalem and reverse it it spells Melech-king. This implies that Bilam's intended curse was to reverse the prospects of Jewish sovereignty, which will reach its peak in the days of Moshiach.

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Bilam, thus tried to prevent the ultimate human king, Moshiach from coming to bring G-d's sovereignty to the world. If that would happen the Bilam's would be out of business forever.

So let us reflect: If in instant of reciting Kalem could have brought destruction to the Jewish people and ultimately to the entire world, then when we invoke the memory of Moshiach by declaring Yechi Hamelech-May the king live, or perhaps just the word and thought of melech we can help to reveal Moshiach and empower him to bring the world t its state of peace and perfection.

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ESSAY FOUR

TRANSCENDENT SPACE

While we inhabit the world of time and space, we can transcend it, when we take refuge in the Tent of Meeting—houses of Worship and Torah study.

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ESSAY FOUR

TRANSCENDENT SPACE

The Beginning

This week, we begin reading the fourth book of Bamidbar or Numbers. In Jewish thought the beginning of a book is considered to be more than just an opening and introductory remark, it is the very “head” and life-force of the entire book.

However, when we read the opening verse of the Book of Numbers, we do not immediately appreciate its significance.

This is how the book begins:

And G-d spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month in the second year of the Exodus, saying.

At first glance this opening verse simply describes where and when G-d spoke to

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Moses about counting the Jews, which is mentioned in the second verse.

What deeper message can be gleaned from this introductory verse?

Generalizations and Specifics: Which Come First?

One of the classic commentators on the Torah, Or HaChaim raises another question, the answer to will shed light on the first question:

When the Torah describes the location where G-d spoke to Moses, it begins with the general location, “the Sinai desert,” and follows that with the more specific location, “the Tent of Meeting.” However, when the Torah describes the time G-d communicated to Moses, it begins with the more specific time, “the first of the second month,” followed by the more general time “in the second year.”

Why, the Or HaChaim asks, does the Torah not begin with the more specific location first

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as it does for the time? (Indeed, this would also be consistent with the way we address a letter: first the street, then the city and then the state.)

Above the Constraints of Time and Space

The Or HaChaim answers his own question:

In fact, he writes, the term, “in the Tent of Meeting” **is** the more general location. Although, from **our** perspective, the Sinai desert occupied a much larger area than the Tent of Meeting, from G-d’s perspective and the ultimate reality was that the Tent of Meeting was vastly larger than and indeed incorporated the Sinai desert. The Tent of Meeting contained the Ark, concerning which our Sages declared, “All of Israel stood comfortably between the carrying poles of the Ark.”

We are bound by the constraints of space. A large object cannot fit into a small container. G-d has no such limitations. And the Tent of Meeting, the place where G-d would meet our physical reality, the laws of physics did

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not necessarily apply. The barriers that separate us from our fellow Jew, just like the barriers that separate us from G-d, would disappear in the Tent of Meeting. Everyone could experience that while they were definitely within the confines of a given area, they would see how everyone would fit into it.

Whenever we come to a synagogue, a center of Torah, a true House of Meeting, the laws of physics are temporarily suspended. We can be in Buffalo and in Jerusalem, simultaneously, and there is ample room for everyone.

Transported to a Higher Place

We can now appreciate why this introductory verse to the Book of Bamidbar (which means “In the desert”) is so crucial.

Whenever we find ourselves in a midbar, a desert-like situation; we feel abandoned, lonely, alienated, parched and devastated, it is imperative that we realize that there is always a place, a “Tent of Meeting” through which

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we can be transported to a higher state of awareness and find comfort and inspiration. The Tent of Meeting had the advantage of being a limited and intimate area, where we could feel cozy in our relationship with G-d, unlike the vast and impersonal state of the “desert” outside. Yet, the Tent of Meeting also possessed the ability to transcend the constraints of space, allowing us to connect with our fellow Jew in every other part of the world.

Living in the Tent of Meeting Now!

Exile has been Biblically named “a desert of the nations.” We feel overwhelmed by our enemies, alienated from our G-d, and distant from our fellow Jew.

Redemption is when we will all enjoy the Tent of Meeting experience, especially in the Third Temple, whose rebuilding we are awaiting. Meanwhile, we can take refuge in the “Miniature Sanctuaries,” in the Houses of worship and Houses of Torah study that give us a foretaste of transcendent space.

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More specifically, when we engage in Torah study concerning the future, it is as if we are living in the future. If we study the Torah's teachings about the Bais Hamikdash---the ultimate Tent of Meeting—it is as if we are there.

ESSAY FIVE

COUNTING

Counting is a Jewish exercise.

**Much of Jewish practices require counting up
to them.**

**However, it is not just a means to an end.
Counting is intrinsically a holy experience.**

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ESSAY FIVE

COUNTING

A Jewish Exercise.

Counting is a Jewish exercise!

This week we start reading the fourth book of the Torah, known as *Bamidbar*, but also referred to as the Book of Counting, on account of the way the book begins with G-d's directive to Moses to count the Jewish people.

We are always counting to see if there is a Minyan in the room in order to recite certain prayers. (Although we do not count people by saying one, two etc, but rather by reciting a ten word verse.)

But counting in the Torah is not restricted to counting people.

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We are now at the tail end of a process of counting days and weeks that lead up to the upcoming Holiday of Shavuot. Indeed, this entire period is known as *sefirah*, which simply means counting. And the Holiday of Shavuot, which means “weeks,” underscores the role of time in relation to this holiday.

We count—consciously or subconsciously—six days and then we observe the Shabbos, every week. We count twenty nine-thirty days in anticipation of the new month, seven years for the Sabbatical years and seven times seven for the Jubilee year. A woman counts seven days before going to the Mikveh and a child counts twelve/thirteen years before s/he becomes a BaS/Bar Mitzvah. And the Jewish people have been counting down towards the ultimate Redemption through Moshiach, calculating and counting, when will Moshiach arrive?

While some of these rituals of counting is done verbally—“today is one day, today is two days,” etc.—most of our counting is done mentally and sometimes subconsciously. But, either way, it is important to analyze the

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phenomenon of counting in general and why it is a prerequisite for the receiving of the Torah on Shavuos.

Accords Real Value and Guarantees Stability

One approach is that anything we count we acknowledge how precious it is. The Jews were counted by G-d in the desert to show how much He cared for each and every individual.

A second approach is that in accordance with Jewish law, something that is counted does not lose its identity even if it is mixed up with a much larger quantity of something else. In the laws of Kashrut, if a non-kosher substance falls into a much larger volume of kosher meat, if the ratio is sixty to one, the entire mixture is rendered kosher, because the non-kosher lost its identity.

However, if the non-kosher product is something that is usually counted it cannot be neutralized. The principle here is that a thing that is counted can never lose its significance.

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Similarly, the Jewish people were counted to demonstrate that no matter how much we are outnumbered by other nations, we will never lose our identity.

The Value of Time

The lesson we can derive from all of the above examples of counting is the importance of time itself. And here is where the uniqueness of Judaism can be seen.

Most people appreciate the value of their possessions, but hardly anyone treasures time. Why?

Time, to many of us, is not substantive. We only appreciate time when we have a goal and we need all the time we can get to achieve that goal. Now imagine someone who was able to achieve that goal within a much shorter period, they would not feel compelled to fill all the rest of time they have with anything meaningful, unless of course, they had multiple goals, or their ambition grows with their accomplishments.

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In Judaism, time serves two functions: It is the medium through which we accomplish our goals. Knowing, for example, that life is limited, makes us conscious of our responsibilities. Deadlines or due dates are always helpful in getting people to be more productive.

Intrinsic Value

But, in addition, to this conventional approach to time, Judaism also maintains that each and every segment of time has intrinsic value. Our task is to imbue time with meaning, not just utilize time to find meaning.

In truth, the same is true of all other aspects of life. We use objects to accomplish certain tasks. The object is perceived as the necessary instrument to reach our goal. In truth, the object has intrinsic value. Our job is to instill that object with meaning, so that it realizes its G-d given potential. But, whereas for other things, we are more capable of appreciating their intrinsic value, time is not so fortunate.

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Comes the Festival of Shavuos that is entirely made up of time and is named “Shavuos,” because it is all about infusing holiness into time.

No Fixed Date for Shavuos

We can now also understand why the Torah does not fix a date for this Holiday. Instead it tells us that we observe Shavuos after counting seven weeks, or fifty days. This is to teach us that Shavuos is not just a Holiday that relates to a specific day of the year, but it is about celebrating the very concept of time.

As we wait and anticipate the final Redemption, we must also realize that what is important is to fill each and every moment of the waiting period with meaning. Every moment that we are still in exile we must count the days and minutes, i.e., instill the spirit of holiness, peace and meaning into every moment, so that the moments of exile themselves are transformed into moments of Redemption..

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ESSAY SIX

DO YOU COUNT?

**If we only knew how much we counted
we would never be the same!**

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ESSAY SIX

DO YOU COUNT?

How do You Count Infants?

The name of the fourth book of the Torah that we commence reading this week is *Bamidbar*. However, our sages refer to this book as the book of Numbers.

The name “Numbers” is based on the fact that in the beginning of the book, G-d commands Moses to conduct a census of all those twenty years and over. The tribe of Levi, however, was to be counted separately. Moreover, even infant members of the tribe of Levi were to be counted, as opposed to the other tribes, where only those over the age of twenty were to be included in the census.

Supernatural Count

The Midrash, cited by Rashi, describes Moses’

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dilemma when it came to counting the infants. Moses said to G-d: "How can I enter their homes to count their infants?" G-d provided a solution to this dilemma and said to Moses: "You do your part and I will do my part." When Moses positioned himself in front of a tent, a heavenly voice emerged from each home and stated the precise number of infants there were in them.

Indeed, Rashi states, this is alluded to in the words that appear in this week's *parsha*: "And Moses counted them by the **word of G-d.**" The "word of G-d" is interpreted quite literally by our Sages to mean that a heavenly voice emerged from each tent with a precise count of infants.

There are many intriguing aspects of the foregoing narrative.

First, what was the purpose of the census?

Second, why were there two separate censuses, one for all of Israel and a separate one for the tribe of Levi?

Third, why did G-d resort to a supernatural means of providing Moses with the count of

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infants? Couldn't they just ask each father or mother, or some other more natural method?

Fourth, what is the lesson for us, particularly as we stand in such close proximity to the momentous occasion of Shavuot, the anniversary of Mattan Torah?

We Count? Because We Count on Two Dimensions!

The first lesson is that we all count!

This lesson is followed by the realization that we count on two counts (pun intended):

First we count because we are all conscripts in G-d's army. This was the function of the first census where only those who were twenty and older and capable of fighting in the military were counted. The age of twenty in rabbinic tradition is when one's intellect has developed to the point where they can make critical decisions in life.

The message we thus derive from this census is that we must not allow our intellectual potential to remain dormant. The struggles

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and challenges of life demand that we count, i.e., recognize and actualize our abilities to make the right decisions by harnessing all of our intellectual gifts with which we were endowed.

However, there is a second and more profound dimension to our counting. We not only count as intellectuals who know how to confront the challenges of life, we also possess the “Levi” within us that comes to us at birth, which is our uncanny ability to commit ourselves to G-d and righteousness even when our minds fail to support that effort. The Levi—which derives from a Hebrew root word that means attachment—within us can reach destinations that our intellect can never attain.

Moses Baffled!

This Levi element, however, is so deeply embedded in our souls that even Moses was baffled as to how he could elicit this from every person. Moses knew how to teach and impart knowledge to all, but to find the

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infant within everyone confounded him. Moses' apprehension to enter the tents of each and every family was an expression of his inability to penetrate into the deepest precincts of the Jewish soul.

G-d's response to Moses, therefore, was "do whatever you can do, and I will do the rest." Whenever and however we reach out to another Jew, we must realize that we are not reaching down to some lowly soul. On the contrary, we are truly reaching **in** to something higher, deeper and elusive. And our first reaction should be one of humility. We should be asking, as Moses did, "Who am I to penetrate into the inner sanctum of the Jewish heart and soul?" However, G-d's response to us is to do whatever we can for the other Jew, and G-d will reveal their potential.

Reaching Alienated Souls

As we approach the Holiday of Shavuot, when we received the Torah at Sinai, we never counted so much. Our spiritual

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potential—our power of reason and discernment as well as our Levi component—were actualized. As we traveled away from Sinai, many have forgotten how much we count. The farther we traveled, the more we lost touch with our own souls. And many a Jewish leader was baffled: “How can we possibly reach these alienated souls? How can we enter their “tents” to find the innocent infant character of their souls when their tents have been inundated with un-Jewish and negative influences? Many have tragically written off so many of our brothers and sisters because of this dilemma.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe has given us the answer:

We are now standing on the threshold of the Messianic Redemption. And as we get closer and closer to the final destination in our historical journey, the Age of Redemption, G-d has given us a clear message: “You do whatever you can do to liberate that soul and I will do the rest.” Indeed, we have seen how in the last few decades countless Jews have discovered their Jewish soul. This movement

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should inspire all of us to make our final move from the state of exile to the state of Redemption.

May we all receive the Torah with joy and inspiration and at the same time receive and welcome Moshiach and the Final Redemption!.

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ESSAY SEVEN

JUDAISM AND GENEALOGY

Respect for Elders is Central to Judaism.

**But, we are living in a time that the elders
have much to gain from the youth.**

**When the respect goes in both directions we
have fertile environment for Moshiach.**

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ESSAY SEVEN

JUDAISM AND GENEALOGY

Tracing Lineage Key to Receiving the Torah

The beginning of the fourth book of the Torah – Bamidbar – describes the census of the Jewish people in the desert. Moses was commanded to gather all of the people and count them family by family.

The Torah sums up the project by stating:

They assembled the entire congregation on the first day of the second month and verified their family lineage, according to their paternal houses, keeping a count of the names...

The Midrash explains the juxtaposition of the end of the book of Leviticus that says:

These are the commandments that G-d commanded Moses at Mount Sinai for the children of Israel

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with the opening of the book of Numbers that deals with Jewish genealogy in the following manner:

The nations of the world complained why G-d chose the Jewish people to give them the Torah at Sinai. G-d's response to them was that the Jewish people were indeed deserving because they were able to trace their genealogy unlike the other nations.

Thus after the Torah mentions how the Torah was given at Sinai to the Jewish people in the end of Leviticus, it follows with a narrative concerning their genealogy to justify why the Torah was given to them specifically and not to other nations

Commentators ask, couldn't other nations trace their lineage as well? Indeed, the descendants of Yishmael and Esau can even trace their lineage to Abraham and Isaac. What was so unique about the genealogy of the Jewish people?

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Alternate Translation: Like Children

One explanation bases itself on an alternate translation of the words “And verified their family lineage” (In Hebrew: “*Vayisyaldu al Mishpechosam.*”) These same words, when translated somewhat more literally, yield the following: “And they regarded themselves as children in comparison with their ancestors.”

In other words, even the grown and mature people always looked up at their parents and forebears and always regarded themselves as children in comparison with them. This is certainly out of character with societies that prefer to see themselves as being far more sophisticated than their old-fashioned parents and grandparents.

Secular Versus Jewish Approach to Elders

In the secular mindset, it is almost axiomatic that we are so much more advanced than our ancestors; that we are more sophisticated.

The Jewish nation at that time viewed themselves humbly as little children in

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comparison with their forebears. And that trait of humility—made them worthy of receiving the Torah.

But if it was humility alone that was their claim to the Torah, why does the Torah emphasize the genealogy aspect of it? Why not simply describe the Jewish people as a humble people?

The answer is that while humility is indeed important, it is the humility that manifested itself in the way they viewed their relationship with their elders that was crucial to their ability to receive the Torah.

When people are asked to subject themselves to an outside authority, it certainly requires that they be receptive to the dictates of others. And this trait of humility and receptivity was powerfully expressed at Sinai when the Jewish nation responded in unison “*Na’aseh v’nishma*—We will do and we will listen.”

But it was not so surprising that they exhibited that humility. Anyone who witnessed the awesome experiences of the

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Exodus from Egypt and its aftermath would be hard pressed to resist and not humbly accept the Torah. It was as if G-d “twisted their arm” with love to accept the Torah; they had no choice, as it were.

But for that acceptance to be transmitted to future generations not directly exposed to the Sinai experience it requires a powerful link with the generations before them. If the new generation views itself as sophisticates and trailblazers that look back not with awe and reverence but with scorn and derision at their elders, they could never humble themselves sufficiently to unconditionally accept the Torah they received from their parents and grandparents.

The Other Side of the Coin

There is also the other side of the coin. The same phrase *Vayisyaldu al Mishpechosam* that was retranslated “And they regarded themselves as children in comparison with their ancestors,” can also be rendered, in the

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very opposite manner, as: “their children dominated their families (elders).”

This translation reflects a modern phenomenon that has been predicted thousands of years ago by the prophet Malachi, that a day will come, before the coming of Moshiach that the hearts of the fathers will be restored through the children.

A New Phenomenon

In these days, when even the parents and grandparents have no conscious memory of the Sinai experience even in its transmitted form because the link of tradition has been severed often due to circumstances beyond their control, the children, miraculously, are searching and discovering the treasure of Sinai and inspiring their elders with the beauty of Judaism.

This new phenomenon, coupled with the reverence of our ancestors, is what prepares us for the upcoming holiday of Shavuot, the anniversary of the Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai some 3320 years ago. It is

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therefore so fitting to celebrate this twin phenomenon by having the parents bring their children and children bring their parents to hear the reading of the Torah and the narrative of the experience of Sinai this coming Shavuot holiday.

This twin phenomenon, of the parents' influence on children and the children's influence on their parents will also prepare us for the future Redemption, at which time the Sinai experience will reverberate throughout the world permanently.

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ESSAY EIGHT

WHEN COUNTING REALLY COUNTS

Love is strongest when it is tested.

**Love is tested when we are most vulnerable,
down in the dumps and distracted.**

**G-d demonstrated His love for us precisely in
these situations.**

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ESSAY EIGHT

WHEN COUNTING REALLY COUNTS

Counting with Love

The Book of Numbers is so called because it begins with the counting of the Jewish people, which occurred shortly after the Mishkan—the portable Sanctuary—was dedicated. (In Hebrew this book is known as Bamidbar-In the desert, but also as the book of *Pikudim*-Counting)

This week's parsha begins by relating that on the first day of the second month of the second year since their departure from Egypt G-d commanded Moses to count the Jewish people.

What was the purpose of this census?

Rashi, citing the Midrash, observes that G-d:

counts the Jews 'all the time' because
of His love for them. When they left

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Egypt He counted them, when they perished as a result of the golden calf
He counted them to know the number of the survivors, and when He came to rest His Divine presence among them [in the Sanctuary] He counted them.

Rashi concludes:

On the first day of Nissan the Sanctuary was erected and on the first day of [the next month of] Iyar He counted them.

The obvious question here is:

If G-d was eager to show them how much He loved them why did He wait from the first of Nissan to the first of Iyar—an entire month—to count them?

Second, how can Rashi say that He counts them “all the time,” when—as Rashi himself mentions—He only counted them **three** times?

The answer will become clear when we examine these three occasions and what was unique about them.

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Three Manifestations of Love through Counting

Counting is a dramatic way of demonstrating how much one values something or someone else. When you count something it is an indication that that something is special and really counts in the eyes of the “counter.” But the counting, in and of itself, is not what makes someone beloved, rather it is the other way around; one who is beloved is counted. Counting is the outer manifestation of that which exists beneath the surface.

And there are three situations where counting expresses this very point more than in any other time.

Three Lowest Points for Love

Upon reflection it becomes evident that there are three occasions where love is traditionally at its lowest point; where those who love are less likely to be demonstrative of their love. If, even in these “valleys” the show of love is pronounced, it demonstrates the presence of a magnitude of love that is of a totally

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different order; it defies all the rules of conventional love.

As we shall see, it was precisely at these three junctures in the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people that G-d counted them and demonstrated the unique quality of their relationship.

The first situation where love is usually low key and even suppressed is at the point where the other person makes his or her entry into our lives. At the very beginning of a relationship, when, we are not sure of the other's character and reliability, we are hesitant to embrace him or her fully. We do not know how well our relationship with the other develops. So we take a wait-and-see attitude. We are not ready to show all of our feelings. We are reluctant to invest too much emotion in a relationship before we know how the relationship will evolve. And while we are beginning to have feelings for the other, because we are vulnerable, we try to minimize the overt expression of those feelings.

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The parallel to this situation in terms of G-d's special relationship with the Jewish people is the Exodus from Egypt.

When the Jews left Egypt, we are told, they were spiritually “naked.” They had never fully detached themselves from the idolatry of Egypt and their will still was plagued by their slave mentality. Their success as a free nation that would be capable of forging a permanent relationship with G-d was highly speculative.

For G-d to show His love for them in the most expressive way—by counting them—was, in human terms, a great risk. What would happen if the relationship would sour and unravel? Yet G-d took the “risk” and counted them no sooner did they leave Egypt to show us the extent to which He loved us.

When the Relationship Sours

There is a second situation where showing emotion in a relationship is least likely and may actually be out of place. This is so when a relationship does in fact sour due to the unfaithful behavior of the significant other.

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Even if the differences can be worked out and the two partners do reconcile, it is usually not the time when we are comfortable enough with the other that we can show them our positive feelings. At best, the love will be somewhat subdued. The relationship is at a low point—we still feel the pain of the betrayal—and we will maintain a safe distance. At that time, it hard to show positive feelings.

The aftermath of the golden calf debacle was precisely that low point in the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people.

Yet even when they betrayed G-d by worshipping the golden calf that eventually led to the death of many, He did not hesitate to show His love for the Jewish people who survived that catastrophe. G-d insisted on counting them again.

Once more, G-d did the unconventional thing by overtly expressing His love for the Jewish people. In most human relationships that would prove to be extremely difficult if not impossible.

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When the Honeymoon is Over

And there is a third situation when the overt showing of His love would seem to be out of place. When a person feels comfortable enough with someone they love, and the infatuation with the other is over, the outward expressions of love generally diminish. Much of the love expressed at the beginning of a relationship may be attributed to external factors. We call that infatuation. And even if the love persists it usually lacks the overt display of it.

Not so with G-d and His love for the Jewish people. G-d did the unconventional again. A month after the Sanctuary was dedicated—the first of Iyar—He gave the order to count them.

If G-d would have counted them on the day the Sanctuary was dedicated, or shortly afterwards, it would have not been unusual. The day the Sanctuary was dedicated was a high point in the relationship between G-d and His people. That overt expression of love by counting them would have been

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redundant. G-d showed His love in many other ways, including the fire that descended from Heaven—fire the symbol of passion—and consumed their offerings.

However, a month later—when in human terms the ardor would have worn off somewhat and the passion would have dissipated—G-d sought to prove that His love for them was of a totally different order. Even when they returned to the quotidian aspects of life—the wedding celebrations and the honeymoon were over—G-d asks them to be counted. His love did not diminish even one iota.

This then is why Rashi states that He counts them “all the time.” Rashi is thereby suggesting that G-d’s display of His intense love for them in the three least likely times is an indication that He certainly expresses His love for them in all the other times as well. Counting is merely a way of showing love; and indeed, His counting them at these inauspicious times was a sign that His love for them/us is unwavering even when it is least likely to be there.

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Why does He Love us so Much?

What is it about the Jewish people that evokes such unmatched G-dly love?

Even when we first left Egypt and were still mired in the spiritually challenged mindset of Egypt—we were spiritually naked—G-d nevertheless initiated the love for us because He trusted us despite our shortcomings. We demonstrated that we could be trusted because we trusted G-d.

This is why, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, the famed Chassidic Master states—the Torah refers to Passover as the “Festival of Matzos,” because it expresses the faith **we** had; that we were willing to go into the wilderness without any supplies, as is alluded to in the fact that we had to bake matzos because we did not have time to bake bread. Our faith and trust in G-d generated a reciprocal expression of faith and trust in us.

In truth, it may have been the other way around. Because G-d had faith in us, it inspired us to have faith and trust in Him.

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What was it after the Golden Calf debacle that prompted G-d to show us overt love?

Even after we worshipped the Golden Calf, G-d showed us incredible love because at that point we achieved the status of *ba'alei teshuvah*, returnees to the right path, which has a qualitative advantage over someone who was always righteous.

The Survivors

Hence Rashi says that G-d counted them to know the count of those who survived. The Hebrew word for survived “*nosarim*” also has the connotation of those who experienced an “increase” –alluding to the increased passion and love that one who sinned and returns has. This is echoed in the Biblical verse,

I have seen that there is an advantage
to wisdom over foolishness as the
advantage of light over darkness.

Chassidic thought interprets this to mean the advantage of light when it comes **out** of darkness. The light is more valuable when it

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is preceded by darkness. This state of Teshuvah—return generated G-d's response of love—he counted them again to reflect His appreciation for their Teshuvah and for the heightened level of love that they exhibited.

Not Even Abundant Waters can Dampen the Love

What was it about the third time He counted us that prompted G-d to do so?

When the ardor wore off, and we seemed to have lost our initial inspiration, G-d, nevertheless, sees deeper into our psyche and realizes that the love we have for Him has not really diminished. That love that emanates from the depths of our soul can never be extinguished.

This love that we possess at all times—even when we least feel it—is expressed in the Biblical verse: “The abundant waters cannot extinguish the love.” Even the distractions—that have been compared to ‘turbulent waters’—caused by our preoccupation with earning a living and coping with life's day to

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day concerns, do not truly extinguish the fiery love that our souls feel for G-d, regardless of what our conscious mind experiences.

By G-d counting us then He:

(a) shows us that we have that love within us regardless of how we feel on a conscious level;

(b) empowers us to navigate the turbulent waters and successfully reveal the passion again.

We're Still being Counted

We are living in unique times. With all the problems and threats that seem to exist with respect to the state of the Jewish people and the world at large, we must not ignore all the overt signs of how G-d is continually "counting" us.

From the miracles that accompanied the return of the Jewish people to their homeland and all the subsequent miracles we experienced in the many wars that we waged

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to defend ourselves against those who sought our destruction, to the miracle of the collapse of the Soviet Union and all the prosperity we enjoy—compared to previous times—we see demonstrably how G-d's love for us has not waned. Indeed, these miracles are a harbinger of the Messianic Age when the love will be clear for all to see because it will not be marred by all the negative forces that are extant today.

Three Impediments

However, there are three factors that threaten our feeling that we are the truly loved and that we are poised to enter into an even more passionate phase of our relationship with G-d:

When a Jew insists on seeing things through the eyes of history in which our existence was so precarious and the suffering was immense we develop a slave/exile mentality just as our ancestors did when they left Egypt. They found it hard to believe that everything will

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be fine even as they witnessed unprecedented miracles.

We too—despite the numerous miracles of Biblical proportions that we've experienced—and even though we have been told in unequivocal terms by the greatest Jewish leaders, especially the Lubavitcher Rebbe based on Biblical prophecies etc., that the Redemption is imminent, and even though we have already been shown samples of these future cataclysmic changes for the good—we still insist on viewing the present and the future with jaundiced, exile tinted and tainted lenses.

And while it is not our fault that we feel this way, precisely at this time, it is imperative that we focus on the positive; even as we do all that we can to combat the forces of evil, whether external or internal, equipped with the knowledge and the certainty that we will prevail!

If G-d has put His trust in us, we must put our trust in Him; that He will make good on all of His promises to us.

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But then a second impediment to our positive outlook emerges. We have, as a result of our association with other cultures and ideologies, created new gods and worshiped them. When we reflect on how far we have strayed from G-d it is hard to imagine How G-d could possibly still care for us as a people the way He did in the past. Haven't we forfeited our special relationship with G-d by betraying Him so many times? There are so many of us who have embraced all sorts of political, religious and social ideologies that are in direct conflict with Judaism; how then, as a people, can we expect that G-d will dramatically show us His love?

There's a Precedent

The answer is that there is a precedent for this very phenomenon.

When we tend to think that we are too far gone and cannot bounce back, the story of the golden calf comes to mind. The Talmud states that the worship of the golden calf was so outrageously out of character with the

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Jews at that time that it can only be explained in terms of G-d having “orchestrated” it to teach us that no matter how low we fall, we can always bounce back. This was dramatized by G-d counting us precisely at that juncture.

Similarly, our generation with all of its spiritual degradation and lowliness is not beyond redemption. On the contrary, it is precisely at this point when we have “bottomed out,” that G-d remembers us, counts us and helps us lift ourselves out of the morass we have created. There is no reason to despair.

Distracted

But the third impediment to our anticipation for the future Redemption is not the exile mentality or the degeneration of our spiritual and moral lives, but the distraction caused by the day to day involvement with staying afloat in a highly competitive and cruel world. As was mentioned earlier, we are flooded with the waters of life’s demands that distract us from what should be our primary focus—

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preparing ourselves for the future Redemption. The knowledge that we are so distracted, in and of itself, makes us feel we are unworthy of G-d's love and attention.

Comes the third counting of the Jews, with which this week's parsha commences, that occurred a month after the honeymoon was over. It in effect declares: The "turbulent waters" will never extinguish the internal love of every Jew to G-d, Torah and to Israel. And, therefore, every effort must be expended towards the goal of recognizing that we possess that love and towards its actualization.

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ESSAY NINE

NO EXCHANGES

The bond between G-d and the Jewish people
is innate and immutable.

Torah, G-d's wisdom, is the medium which
illuminates and activates their relationship.

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ESSAY NINE

NO EXCHANGES

The End is Wedged in the Beginning

In Torah study, there is a rule that there always is a connection between the end of one text and the beginning of the next.

As we begin a new book, the Book of Bamidbar, also known as Numbers, let us reflect on the connection between the end of the preceding book, Vayikra-Leviticus, and the beginning of Bamidbar and see what lessons we can derive from this connection.

Vayikra concludes with the law concerning tithing of animals. A Jew was required to take every tenth animal of his flock and offer it as a sacrifice in the Beis Hamikdash, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

The Torah then adds the following admonition:

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He should not select a good or a bad one, nor should he offer a substitute for it.

In other words, when the person counted ten animals, the tenth one is holy and cannot be exchanged for a superior or inferior one.

This command is followed by the concluding verse in Vayikra:

These are the commandments that G-d commanded Moses at Mount Sinai for the children of Israel.

Bamidbar begins with G-d's command to Moses to take the census of the Jewish people.

What is the connection between the end of Vayikra and the beginning of Bamidbar?

Reciprocation

R. Yitzchak Karo explains that the law against substituting a sacrifice also applies to our relationship with G-d. Just as we are not permitted to substitute another animal for

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the tenth one, we cannot also substitute anything else for G-d.

The beginning of Bamidbar, which is about G-d's command to count the Jewish people, teaches us that this relationship is reciprocal. Rashi explains that counting the people was G-d's way of showing His love for them. When one counts something it demonstrates that one ascribes value to those particular items.

Counting the Jewish people thus suggested that G-d would never exchange them for any other nation. Just as we cannot substitute anything for G-d, so too G-d will never look for a substitute for the Jewish people.

This reciprocal love that we have for each other is captured by King Solomon in the Song of Songs: "My beloved is to me and I am to My beloved."

The Linchpin

However, we must still search for the connection between the very last verse of

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Vayikra, which summarizes the idea that the commandments of the Torah were given to Moses and the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. How does this theme tie in with the idea of no substitution and counting?

Upon reflection it seems that the verse concerning the giving of the Torah is the linchpin that links the two foregoing forms of exclusivity and reveals their joint meaning.

Immutable

At first glance, the connection between Torah and the theme of reciprocal exclusivity between G-d and the Jewish people seems fairly simple. Just as there is no substitute for G-d, or for the Jewish people, so too there is no substitute for the Torah and its Mitzvos. The very same commandments that were given at Mount Sinai are no less relevant today than they were then.

A basic principle of Judaism, in fact, one of the Thirteen Principles of Faith enumerated by Maimonides, is that the G-d given laws are immutable. No one can abrogate them or

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even slightly change them. Just as G-d is immutable so are His teachings and commandments.

Indeed, the Talmud, commenting on the words in the last verse of Vayikra: **“These are the commandments...”** states: “A prophet may not introduce any new laws from Sinai onward.” The Torah as it was given then cannot—and will not ever be substituted.

Dispelling Antinomian View of Moshiach

Contrary to a misconception that came from non-Jewish sources, Moshiach will not change the Torah, G-d forbid, or in any way diminish its importance or replace it with a new Torah.

Maimonides explains that, on the contrary, Moshiach’s role is to strengthen our observance of the Mitzvos and enable us to fulfill all of them in the most complete fashion.

The first lesson that emerges from this bridging between Vayikra and Bamidbar is:

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When a Jew is faithful to the teachings of the Torah and subordinates his will to it and not the other way around, the Jew demonstrates his fidelity to the notion that there is only one absolute G-d, which, in turn, will enhance G-d's absolute and exclusive love for us.

True Meaning of Exclusivity

Upon further reflection, we can find a deeper understanding of the connection between the exclusivity of Torah and the exclusivity of G-d and the Jewish people.

The unity of G-d implies that there is nothing else in existence other than G-d, not only that there is no other G-d. Everything that exists is a manifestation of G-d's creative power. What appears to be an independent existence is only a mirage. The reality of the world is that it is an extension of G-d's will. If G-d would withdraw for one instant, the world would revert to utter nothingness. Hence the world's true nature is G-d.

However, G-d possesses the power to conceal His presence. The very word for world in

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Hebrew—Olam—means concealment. In the process of creation, G-d utilized this concealing power.

If G-d Himself created the concealment of His presence, how do we pierce through that Divine veil to see the reality of G-d's exclusivity?

We do so through the Torah.

Torah is called a light for good reason. In addition to lighting up our lives with direction and meaning, it illuminates the reality of existence. Torah enables us to remove all of the covers that obscure the reality of G-d. The teachings of Kabbalah, and particularly Chassidus, are directed to this end.

Thus, Torah is the means through which the lesson of the ending of Leviticus comes to life. When the message of Sinai is clear, as indicated in the very words “**These** are the Mitzvos...” and we do nothing to dim the Torah's radiance, we become acutely aware of G-d's exclusivity.

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Torah: Telescope and Microscope

The Torah is also the means through which the exclusivity of the Jewish people is highlighted.

This premise is based on the Chassidic interpretation of the verse:

Look down from Your holy abode in
heaven, and bless your people Israel...

The Hebrew word for heaven-*shamayim*—is a composite of two words: *aish* and *mayim*, fire and water. *Shamayim* thus is a metaphor for the Torah which is itself compared to both fire and water. When G-d “looks” through the prism of Torah at us, it helps to spotlight and magnify our innate qualities and render us worthy of His greatest blessings. Chassidic thought explains that the Torah is like a microscope through which hidden qualities are identified and magnified.

When we remain faithful to the dictates of the Torah—as indicated in the last verse of Vayikra—it enhances our unique status and makes us worthy of being counted, which is the theme of the beginning of Bamidbar.

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In short, the Torah serves both as a telescope and a microscope. As a telescope the Torah enables us to see far beyond the limits of human reasoning to recognize the reality of G-d's exclusivity. As a microscope the Torah enables G-d and us to see beneath the facade of our beings, so we can discover and actualize our innate holiness

Three Knots, Two Connections

There is a yet a third message conveyed by juxtaposing the theme of Torah with the theme of exclusivity of G-d and the Jewish people. This message relates to the connection between G-d and the Jewish people.

To put it succinctly: The link between G-d and the Jewish people comes through Torah. The degree to which we are connected to G-d, and He is to us, is commensurate with the degree of our fidelity to the Torah.

This idea of Torah linkage is alluded to in the words of the Zohar:

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There are three knots that are tied together, Israel is bound to the Torah and the Torah is bound to the Holy one Blessed is He.

A question has been raised about the way the Zohar puts this. If we are connected to Torah, and the Torah is connected to G-d, then there must be only two knots. Why does the Zohar speak of three?

The answer given in Chassidic philosophy is that there is a third connection that we enjoy with G-d, one that is direct. We are connected to G-d as well as to the Torah. However, that connection between us and G-d can only be appreciated and activated through the medium of Torah.

In effect, there are two avenues through which we connect to G-d: The first is indirectly through Torah. However, the Torah also illuminates the other more direct and unconditional connection we have.

It may be suggested that concluding Vayikra with the theme of fidelity to Torah alludes to

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the power Torah has to reveal the deepest bond we have with G-d.

In times of exile, we don't see clearly the role that G-d plays in this world and we certainly do not intuitively see G-d's exclusivity. Likewise, the status of the Jewish people is left compromised due to galus conditions and conditioning.

To remove the screen that separates G-d from us and us from Him, it is imperative that we turn on the lights of Torah, specifically, the parts of Torah that are designed to bring unfiltered light to the world—the light that existed on the very first day of creation that transcended the limits of the world. These are the very teachings of Chassidus, particularly, the parts that discuss the theme of Geulah, the ultimate, true and complete Redemption.

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ESSAY TEN

**ARE YOU ON
AUTOMATIC PILOT?**

**Life is about appreciating all the gifts that
were given to us by our forebears.**

**But true life requires that we do not rely on
those gifts.**

**We must roll up our own sleeves and forge
ahead to bring Moshiach!**

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ESSAY TEN

ARE YOU ON AUTOMATIC PILOT?

What's Your Pedigree?

In the beginning of this week's parsha, Bamidbar—which is also the beginning of the fourth book of the Torah—the Torah records G-d's commandment to Moses to count the Jewish people:

The Midrash Tanchuma applies the verse in the book of Psalms to this event:

He (G-d) has not done so for other nations, and they do not know His ordinances.

These enigmatic words of the Midrash beg for an explanation. The verse from Psalms that the Midrash cites refers to the

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commandments of the Torah; that they were given exclusively to the Jewish nation and not to the other nations. What connection does that have with the counting of the Jewish nation?

To understand the message of the Midrash we must cite another Midrashic comment that refers to the complaint some of the nations had to G-d for having given the Torah to the Jewish people exclusively:

When Israel received the Torah, the nations of the world were jealous and they said, “why were these people more deserving than those?” G-d immediately suppressed their complaints and said to them: “Bring your genealogical documents as the Children of Israel did.”

In other words, the Midrash informs us that our eligibility to receive the Torah is based on our ability to trace our ancestry back to the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

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Thus, the original statement of the Midrash that links the giving of the Torah to the counting of the Jewish people is understood.

By counting the Jewish people, which involved tracing their ancestry back to the Patriarchs, G-d had a sound response to the complaint of the nations. G-d chose to give the Torah to the Jewish people exclusively because they have such an illustrious genealogy.

Our Children or Our Parents?

At first glance, though, this Midrashic insight seems to contradict another one that asserts that G-d would not have given the Torah on the grounds that they had such illustrious ancestors. The Midrash records G-d's demand of the Jewish people to produce guarantors as a prerequisite for them to receive the Torah. G-d declined to accept their proposal that their prophets and forefathers would be the guarantors. Only when they offered their children did G-d consent to give them the Torah.

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From this Midrashic commentary it appears that having a good pedigree does not suffice. How do we reconcile this with the earlier Midrashic comment that G-d focused on their genealogy as the reason He chose to give the Torah to the Jewish people?

One can resolve this apparent contradiction by drawing a distinction between the way **we** needed to validate our eligibility to receive the Torah and the way G-d had to defend His selection of the Jewish people to the other nations.

If G-d would have told the other nations that the Jewish people were chosen because of their promise to educate their children, they too would have made that promise. The only argument they could not refute was that they did not have a good track record of transmitting values to their children. They could not point to any ancestors that succeeded in perpetuating the seven commandments that were given to Noah after the flood. How then could they be trusted to transmit the Torah that they

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requested to their children and grandchildren?

Internalizing Torah

When G-d approached the Jewish people, He was not content with them pointing to their ancestors as guarantors.

To be sure, having that noble and virtuous ancestry greatly enhanced the probability that they would continue in their path. But that would not suffice. Because without the guarantee that the parents will make a concerted effort to raise their children in the path of Torah, relying on the past—even if it were to work, which is not a foregone conclusion—would make the survival of Judaism an automatic process. Jews would just glide effortlessly down the road to perfection.

G-d wants our input and toil into the process and not just rely that we inherited the power and energy from earlier generations. Neither does G-d want us to rely on our prophets and great leaders. G-d's wants every

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individual to be part of the process of receiving and internalizing the Torah.

This explains the Chassidic greeting for the upcoming Festival of Shavuot, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah at Sinai:

May you receive the Torah with joy and inwardness.

The term “inwardness” implies that the Torah cannot be a superficial matter that is passed down as a tradition. Torah must be internalized by each individual as if he or she was the only person to have ever received the Torah. When we receive the Torah with true joy it is the indication that for us Torah is alive and not just a relic of the past.

There is a well-known story of a chasid who asked his Rebbe—the *Tzemach Tzedek*, the third Rebbe of Chabad—for a blessing that his child be raised in a good and conducive atmosphere so that he would “automatically” become a G-d fearing Jew. The Rebbe was clearly not happy with that request. His sharp response to this chasid was that his grandfather, the Alter Rebbe (the founder of

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the Chabad movement), and his father-in-law and uncle, the Mittlerer Rebbe, toiled for so many years to remove the term “automatic” from the lexicon of Chassidism.

From Sinai to Moshiach

The giving of the Torah at Sinai marked the beginning of a journey that is supposed to end with the coming of Moshiach. The revelation at Mount Sinai brought the Divine presence into this world. However, that revelation was concealed and it was up to us to devote our lives to bring the Divine back into the physical world we inhabit.

This is why we were given the Mitzvos. They are physical actions ordained by G-d to make even the physical world a “dwelling place” for G-d.

The final Redemption is when this process is completed and the world will permanently reflect its Divine source. It is when the world will be in total harmony with the Divine.

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However, even as we stand today at the end of the journey, on the very threshold of the final Redemption through Moshiach—it might occur to us that it is not so crucial to invest our own sweat and toil in order to usher in the Messianic Age.

We may argue that we have thousands of years of tradition behind us. We have the cumulative benefits of thousands of years of self-sacrificing efforts of our ancestors. We can therefore erroneously conclude that it suffices for us to be passive. Minimal efforts could be enough. Why not rest on our laurels and let the momentum of the past—the spiritual tsunamis of the past—push us over the top into the Messianic Age?

To dispel this “argument” the Rebbe—over twenty-five years ago in an historic talk given on the 28th day of Nissan, 5751—told us that he has done all that he was capable of doing to bring the Redemption. Now, he declared, he was passing it on to us. “Do all you can,” the Rebbe stated, “to bring the Redemption.”

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The Rebbe exhorted us then to exercise our stubbornness and stiff-necked personalities as Jews to bring about the Redemption.

To be sure, we are blessed with all of the resources bequeathed to us by our forebears and prophets. We have all of the blessings of the Rebbe and other great leaders all the way back to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs.

G-d can therefore certainly turn to the other nations and say to them, paraphrasing the abovementioned Midrashic comment about the giving of the Torah:

Look at their pedigree. Look at what they have accomplished over the last three thousand years plus. They have accepted the responsibility of accepting the Torah and through thick and thin of exile they persevered. They are a most deserving people to be redeemed and once and for all free of all the hatred and jealousy directed towards them!

Yet, **we** have to say to G-d, “We make our commitment to you that we will not rely on

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the past our solely on the efforts of our leaders. We will instill our faith in You, in your Torah and in Moshiach into the hearts and minds of our children. They will see that we are not passive in our dedication to making Your plan for the world come to fruition!"

ESSAY ELEVEN

THE CENSUS TRIUMVIRATE

The Torah connects us to G-d and to each other in at least three ways.

It is G-d's communication with the Jewish people and our communication with Him.

Torah also empowers us to find and cultivate our own individual niche.

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ESSAY ELEVEN

THE CENSUS TRIUMVIRATE

Why Three Census Takers?

This week's parsha, Bamidbar, discusses the census of the Jewish people in the desert that was taken by Moses, Aaron and the Nasi/leader of each of the twelve tribes. In the Torah's own words:

Take the sum of the entire congregation of the children of Israel...You and Aaron should count them... there should be with you a person from each tribe, one who is head of his father's house.

The Torah then proceeds to list the heads of the twelve tribes who were to accompany Moses and Aaron for the census.

Why was it necessary for Moses to have others with him in fulfilling his task? If three

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people were enough—despite the enormity of the task—then one or two could have sufficed as well.

Revealing their Talents

In truth, the counting of the Jewish nation in the desert was not an ordinary census. Counting them was intended to bring out their hidden talents. The fact that it was done in the desert—and the Torah makes appoint of stressing that it was in the desert—indicates that the purpose of the census was to empower them to withstand the pressures of living in a desert.

These 600,000 plus Jews, we are told, were general souls that encompassed within them the souls of all subsequent generations of Jews. The census thus helped to illuminate Jewish souls by unlocking the spiritual energy of all future generations. And since this census occurred when the Jewish people were in the desert—as the Torah underscores in the very beginning of this parsha—it follows

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that it applies specifically to the period of Galus/exile which is likened to a desert.

Two Intertwined Names

Indeed, the fourth book of Torah has been given two names: “Bamidbar/In the Desert” and “*Chumash Hapikudim*/the Book of Numbers.” These two names reflect an intrinsic connection between these two themes.

Being in a desert—literally and figuratively—requires special energy to enable us to cope with its hostile environment. The desert that the Jews traversed is described in the Torah in most foreboding terms:

Great and fearful desert (Devarim 1:19);

Who led you through that great and awesome desert, where there were snakes, serpents and scorpions, and thirst but no water. (Devarim 8:15).

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These descriptions aptly describe the horrible physical and spiritual conditions of life in exile.

According to the great Kabbalist, the Ari, our generation—the one the Rebbe has repeatedly designated as the “last generation of exile and the first of Redemption”—is a reincarnation of the generation of the desert. It follows then that the details of the census of the Jews in the desert has a direct and powerful message to our generation in particular.

The three census takers represent three forms of positive energy that were generated and channeled to us. And these three forms of energy are especially relevant to our generation as we stand on the threshold of the final Redemption:

Moses: Seeing the World through G-d's Prism

Moses was G-d's foremost representative to the Jewish people and indeed to the entire world. Moses brought the Torah down from Mount Sinai and introduced it to us; this is

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the event that recurs every year during the upcoming Festival of Shavuos. Moses' reality is primarily a Torah reality, which means that he sees things from G-d's perspective.

Moses' involvement in conducting the census empowered us to see things from G-d's perspective. Whenever we study Torah we get a glimpse into that Divine mindset. This is particularly so with respect to the study of the inner dimension of Torah revealed by the Ba'al Shem Tov (whose passing coincides with Shavuos), which focuses on G-d, His attributes and His relationship to our world.

When we see things through the prism of Torah—G-d's prism—it helps us weather the stormy events of exile. Torah provides us with a radically different and sanguine way of viewing life.

No wonder King David (whose passing also coincides with the upcoming Festival of Shavuos) speaks in his book of Tehillim, especially Psalm 119, of how the Torah saved him during his periods of distress. The entire universe is inconsequential when compared

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to one small detail of Torah. Torah is the celestial song that drowns out all of the static caused by exile. Torah neutralizes all the spiritual snakes and scorpions that threaten our well-being.

Aaron: Igniting the Sparks

To complement Moses' contribution to the census Aaron, the second census taker, was the ultimate representative of the Jewish people. Aaron was their patron and confidant. Aaron was a man of the people. And it was Aaron, who was charged with the responsibility to light the Menorah; it is he who inspires us to ignite our own inner flame and passion for all that is holy and good.

Exile has the facility to dampen our spirits and cool off the ardor we have for anything spiritual. We will not be receptive to Moses giving us the Torah, which enables us to see things from G-d's perspective, if our senses are numbed. Aaron wakes us up and inspires us to bring out the best in ourselves. Aaron, even more than Moses, was able to unite the

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people, because he was able to touch them and reveal their true love for one another just as he was able to arouse their souls' passion for G-d.

Tribal Leaders: Revealing our Individuality

To make the census complete and enable it to unleash our full potential to cope with exile and to ultimately break out of the exile referred to as the "desert of nations" we also need the third census takers, the leaders of each of the twelve tribes.

As much as Moses and Aaron deals with the Jewish people on a national level, it is crucial that each tribe and segment of the nation appreciate its own individualistic talents and contributions towards our liberation from Galus.

If a Jew only appreciates his or her role as a member of a collective entity and loses his or her individuality he or she will look for other avenues and outlets for self-expression, but such an attitude might instead get them into a deeper form of exile.

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While an individual must learn to subordinate his or her own private interests to the needs of the community, one must also first have an individual identity which one can then subordinate and surrender. To be a nothing and a nobody leaves you without anything to contribute. Just as a pauper cannot contribute financially, so a spiritually impoverished individual has nothing to offer.

The role of the leaders of each of the tribes was to inspire each member of their tribe with the beauty and importance of the individual's role and talent.

A person who lacks identity and personal achievement will be a depressed person, just as a person who is entirely self-centered cannot be a truly happy person. True and complete joy derives from the combined realization of the unique importance of every individual in the scheme of Creation and the necessity for each of us to strive to surrender our egos to a higher cause.

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The Three Pointers

To counter the effects of exile and thereby usher in the Age of Redemption we must be mindful of three objectives:

We must not allow ourselves to be constrained by conventional thought processes. We must—through Torah study, especially the teachings of the Torah concerning Moshiach and Redemption—endeavor to reorient the way we see the entire world. We must gain a view from on high; a panoramic view of all of existence.

That birds eye view, in and of itself, is a redemptive experience, because we are free from seeing things narrowly and myopically. It is therefore the means through which we introduce the energies of Moshiach. This is Moses' contribution in the census.

We must also incorporate the “Aaron doctrine” of igniting the spark and passion of our souls and of the souls of each and every Jew with whom we have contact. Unity in and of itself—a product of Aaron's inspiration—is a precursor and catalyst for Redemption. In

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addition, Aaron's lighting of our souls will liberate them from their imprisonment in the desensitized environment of both the external and internal forms of exile.

Leader of the Tribes' Dynamic

We must also liberate our own individual talents that distinguish us from everyone else, with the proviso, of course, that it does not lead to an inflated ego and a divisive mindset. Succeeding in this "leader of the tribe's census dynamic" enables us to liberate that unique purpose for which we, as individuals, were sent into this world.

Torah: Water, Fire and Desert

The Midrash, commenting on this week's parsha that highlights the desert, discusses the three salient characteristics associated with the giving of Torah.

The Torah was given with (or in) three items: water, fire and in the desert.

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It may be suggested that these three components of Torah correspond to the three census takers. Moses, the Torah tells us, was “brought out of the water.” For that reason Pharaoh’s daughter named him Moshe. And just as water flows downward, so did Moses bring us G-d’s wisdom from on high down to our world. And just as water symbolizes humility—for it flows down to lower places—so too was Moses the most humble person on the face of the earth.

Aaron lit the menorah. Aaron is associated with the love, passion and fire. Aaron succeeded in inspiring us to rise to higher places, as fire flickers upwards.

The desert, as the Midrash observes, belongs to no one. It is *hefker*, free for all. This implies that nobody can claim that the Torah belongs to one group of Jews or another. This reflects the contribution of the individual tribal leaders who connect their constituents as individuals with the Torah. Without these tribal leaders, the Jew might feel a connection to Torah as a part of a large impersonal and amorphous conglomeration *rather than as an*

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individual. The “desert” component of Torah underscores the relationship that every Jew has, as an individual, with the totality of Torah.

All of the Above!

Moshiach, as the ultimate leader who will liberate us from all aspects of exile, embodies all the three qualities of Moses, Aaron and the tribal leaders. Moshiach must be steeped in the Torah and indeed possesses the soul of Moses. Moshiach must also be the one to inspire the Jewish people and gather them together with feelings of love and unity; the role of Aaron. And Moshiach must also know how to cultivate the individual talents of every Jew and cherish his or her individual contribution. And, indeed, Moshiach's greatest contribution is that he gets us to achieve all of these qualities.

ESSAY TWELVE

THE MODERN DAY LEVITES

The Jewish people have weathered all types of storms.

Besides history's worst physical threat to our existence, the Holocaust, Jews have been subjected to two existential challenges.

The first is the challenge of secularism.

The second, no less daunting, is the challenge to forge ahead towards the Final Redemption through Moshiach.

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ESSAY TWELVE

THE MODERN DAY LEVITES

Counting the Levites Separately

Bamidbar, the book of Numbers, begins with the census of the Jewish people. According to Rashi, G-d's census was a sign of endearment; it indicates how each one of us is precious to Him.

This census counted every 20 year old male; that being the age of military conscription.

However, this census excluded men of the tribe of Levi:

But, you shall not count the tribe of Levi, and you shall not take their census among the children of Israel.

The Levites, the Torah continues, would be counted separately and include all males from the age of one month.

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Rashi provides the rationale for the Levites exceptional status:

G-d foresaw that all those who were 20 years and above and counted will be decreed to die in the desert. He said, 'Let not these [Levites] be included for they are Mine; because they did not err with the [Golden] Calf.'

Did the Levites Rebel Against Entering the Land of Israel?

Sifsei Chachamim asks, why did G-d have the notion that counting the Levites with the rest of the community meant that they would be punished alongside those who followed the Spies into their rebellion against the Land of Israel? Rashi himself stated that the Levites did not join their brethren in rebellion against the Land. Indeed, the Spies who slandered the Land of Israel represented all of the tribes except the Tribe of Levi.

Sifsei Chachamim answers that the Levites did not initially participate in the rebellion

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because no Levite spied on and slandered the Land. However, when we are told that all of the Jewish people accepted the report of the Spies and wept, it is possible that even the Tribe of Levi joined in the tears.

However, this approach is difficult to understand. If indeed the tribe of Levi participated in the collective rejection of the Land of Israel, why wouldn't G-d condemn them to perish in the desert with their brethren? Why did He spare the Levites from the fate of the rest of the Jewish community?

Spared Collective Punishment

Another approach to understanding Rashi's assertion is based on a Midrash that states that G-d punished everyone who had reached the age of 20 even if they personally did not participate in the sin. The Tribe of Levi was spared the collective punishment meted out to all those above 20 regardless of their innocence.

However, this approach merely leads us to another question. Why would G-d punish

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people who had not sinned with the Spies? The fact they did not join the majority of Jews in crying that night should have earned them special merit and distinction deserving of rich reward. Yet, the Midrash implies that they would have been punished with all those who sinned.

Furthermore, this approach does not explain how counting the Levites separately and from the age of 30 days immunized them against suffering in the future?

Resisting Mass Hysteria

A simple and straightforward answer can be offered.

By choosing them at such a tender age, G-d signaled that He had invested them with an inner fortitude. This enabled the Levites to reject the mass hysteria that overcame the other children of Israel upon hearing the slanderous report of the 10 Spies. Had they not been so endowed, there would have been a significant chance that they too might have sinned.

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One can still raise a question. Rashi stated that the reason G-d separated the Levites to protect them in the future was that He considered them to be His, for they had not erred with the Golden Calf. Why then did G-d need to separate them to protect them from the sin of the Spies, when they had already demonstrated their loyalty to G-d in the Golden Calf debacle?

The fact that they had the inner fortitude to resist the sin of the Golden Calf, it appears, failed to protect them from the mass hysteria that gripped the Jewish nation when they heard the slanderous report about Israel. Why? Why would they need an extra boost of support from the time they were 30 days old until age 20 to keep them from going with the tide?

Contrasting the Sins of the Golden Calf and the Spies

Upon closer examination the sins of the Golden Calf and the Spies reveal several significant differences:

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First, the Golden Calf was not a national sin. Only part of the community committed it, as is evidenced by the fact that only a minority were directly punished. By contrast, **all** of the Jewish men (only the men, of course; the women did not sin) beside the Levites cried that night.

G-d therefore was concerned that the mass hysteria would have a deleterious effect on the Levites too. When an entire nation does something it is hard to stand apart. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges to our devotion to G-d has been peer pressure. For this reason the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) begins with the words, “Do not be ashamed [to perform Mitzvos] because of the cynics.”

G-d therefore separated the Levite men into a distinct category of activists endowed with the power to resist **any** pressure; to stand up to the entire nation, if need be.

Second, the sin of the Spies was qualitatively different from the sin of the Golden Calf. The idolatry of the Golden Calf compromised the

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Peoples' belief in the unity of G-d. By contrast, the sin of the Spies resulted from a heightened sense (albeit, misplaced) of spirituality. They believed that going into Israel would leave them with a watered down spiritual existence. Staying in the desert allowed them the luxury of living an entirely ethereal life.

It would thus have been much more difficult for the Levites, known for their heightened spirituality and passion for G-d, to distance themselves from the sin of the Spies, who sought to remain in the desert to be more spiritual. They too desired this lofty existence. G-d therefore instilled in them a deeper consciousness that would allow them to execute faithfully G-d's plan even when it was at odds with their spiritual ambition.

Misplaced Spirituality

In the final analysis, misplaced spirituality can be as detrimental to our lives as misplaced physicality. Judaism is not about spirituality for its own sake; Judaism is about G-d.

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To be sure, leading a spiritual life and engaging in spiritual activities is an extremely important part of Judaism; but it is not the end, it is merely a means to an end. The true goal is contributing to G-d's plan for the universe, which included primarily conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel.

When our material existence gets in the way of fulfilling G-d's plan we readily recognize it as a deviation and a sin.

It is no less a deviation when our spiritual ambitions get in the way of fulfilling G-d's plan for the universe.

We are now in a similar position as the Jews were following the Exodus.

The Modern Day Golden Calf and Spies

We too are poised to enter the Promised Land with Moshiach at our head. We too have to contend with twin threats and challenges to our role:

The first is the fight against the powerful heresies of modern society. Chief among

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them are the secular theories that attempt to lure us away from belief in a Creator. This and many other alluring philosophies and -isms are the modern day Golden Calves.

But even when we successfully withstand the challenges from the false g-ds and Golden Calves of modernity, we are confronted with the challenge of carving out a comfortable niche in Galus-exile with all the spiritual amenities it has offered.

The Rebbe Rashab (Rabbi Sholom Dovber Schneersohn, the fifth leader of Chabad) spoke prophetically of two periods prior to the coming of Moshiach, based on the end of Psalm 89:

As your enemies reviled, O G-d, as
Your enemies reviled [*Mishi'checha*]
Your anointed one's steps.

The Rebbe Rashab prophesied that before the coming of Moshiach there will first be a period of reviling G-d; where ideologies and -isms would spring up and wage war against G-d. He was presciently referring to the rise of communism and other stark heresies that

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threatened to take over the world and which fought tooth and nail to eradicate every trace of G-d and religion.

However, the Rebbe Rashab predicted that there would also be a time when even those who are devoted to serving G-d will hold back their belief in and anticipation for Moshiach.

One may suggest that these two stages parallel the sin of the Golden Calf and the desert generation's refusal to enter into the Promised Land.

The Rebbe Rashab then declared that the students of the Lubavitch Yeshivah he founded were the "Soldiers of the House of David" whose task was to wage war against these two obstructions to Redemption.

Under the leadership of our Rebbe, these students morphed into a world-wide movement of Shluchim-emissaries dedicated to spreading the light of Judaism throughout the world. Thank G-d, as a result of these efforts the Soviet Union, that apparently

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unbreachable bastion of heresy, was vanquished.

The Rebbe then set out to tackle the second challenge by appointing and empowering all of us to be the modern day Levites. Our mission is to prepare ourselves and the entire world to greet Moshiach and enable him to usher in the Final Redemption.

No longer can we remain content in our exile, even though we can now devote ourselves unhampered to Torah study, Mitzvah observance and achieving the greatest spiritual heights.

Like the Levites of old, we successfully withstood the challenge of adversity and the Golden Calves of society. G-d has therefore empowered us as well to withstand the allure of the spiritual treasures and comfortable niche we have carved out in Galus.

We are the generation of Levites who will not succumb to the Spies. We will lead our generation and all past generations into the Promised Land with Moshiach at our head!

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ESSAY THIRTEEN

ANGEL FLAGS

**The Jewish people are divided into four
camps.**

**These four camps reflect four aspects of our
relationship with G-d:**

**Torah study, prayer, performance of Mitzvos
and serving G-d in all of our ways by doing
everything with a higher motive and purpose.**

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ESSAY THIRTEEN

ANGEL FLAGS

All of Your Heart's Desires

Every detail of the Jewish people's sojourn in the desert was choreographed by G-d. The twelve tribes were divided into four formations, each consisting of three tribes. While each tribe had its own distinctively colored flag, there were an additional four flags, one for each of the tribal formations.

The Torah, in this week's parsha describes it thus:

The children of Israel should encamp, each man by his banner, according to the insignias of their father's household, at a distance surround the Tent of Meeting shall they encamp.

The significance of flags was not lost on our Sages as they state in the Midrash:

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When G-d revealed Himself to the Jewish people at Sinai, 22,000 chariots of angels descended with Him... and they all came with flags.

Upon witnessing that they came with their flags, the Jewish people began to desire flags. They said "If only we could have flags like theirs... If only He would bestow upon us His love...

Said G-d to them: "What do you desire? To make flags? I swear that I will fulfill your wish as it is stated "G-d will fulfill all of your desires."

Immediately, G-d notified Moses of His love for Israel and said to him: "Go make them flags just as they desired."

Why did the Jews become so enamored with flags after they saw the angels' banners? Why did they accept the notion that simple flags could be construed as a demonstration of G-d's love?

We can understand why each tribe would want to have its own flag. They had unique spiritual identities that were reflected in the

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colors and images emblazoned on each flag. But how should we understand the need for the four additional flags?

Another question:

Why did G-d only bring a relatively “small” delegation of angels with Himself to Sinai, specifically 22,000? Of what significance is that number? The *Tosphos* commentary explains that the number of angels corresponded to the number of Levites at that time.

However, this explanation itself requires a further explanation: Why didn't G-d bring 600,000 angels, corresponding to the total number of all the classes of Jews who were counted and not just the number of Levites?

The World of Angels

The following analysis is partially based on the Chassidic work, *Arugas Habosem*, but first we need an introduction to the world of angels and their role in and relevance to our lives.

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An angel, or *Malach*, which means messenger, is a spiritual creature G-d uses to carry out missions. Angels are not inanimate instruments like the forces of nature, which are also G-d's instruments and in some instances are also referred to as angels.

A *Malach* is a spiritual being whose entire existence is devoted to getting close to G-d. Since it has no *yetzer hara*, evil inclination, it has nothing to distract it from that goal or even water down its passion. It is constantly surging forward, attempting to get closer. Angels are described in the Book of Yechezkal as having the constant movements of *ratzo*, advancing to get closer to G-d, and *shov*, retreating when they realize that He is beyond them.

When G-d gave us the Torah, He appeared with a "delegation" of his angels to demonstrate their passion for G-d to us. In doing so, G-d instilled within us our own passion for Him and for the Torah that He gave us. Indeed, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, according to our Sages, was a dramatic expression of the mutual love

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between G-d and the Jewish people. It was the ultimate love-fest!

The Talmud relates that when G-d gave us the Torah He held the mountain above our heads and “coerced” us to accept it. Chassidic teaching explains that the mountain that hovered over our heads actually was an expression of His profound love, which “compelled” us to receive the Torah. How could we have refused the Torah when it was given with such love? Moreover, it is compared to a Chupah, the wedding canopy; a most romantic view of the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

By coming with His angels, G-d reinforced our understanding of His love for us, which engendered a reciprocal love from the people to Him.

Celestial Animals, Animal Souls and Levites

Moreover, angels are also called animals; they are the spiritual counterparts and sources of physical animals and of our own animal souls. By descending with His celestial animals G-d

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demonstrated His desire for our Animal souls to share the love with our G-dly souls. When the Animal soul is aware of how the angels, the celestial animals, are so passionate for G-d, it too acquires some of that ardor.

The tribe that was closest to experiencing this angelic passion for G-d was the tribe of Levi. The Levites were made responsible for, among other tasks, singing the holy melodies during the daily services in the Bais Hamikdash. The Levis' service was charged with incredible spiritual emotion and generated the angelic *ratzo*, advance to get closer to and be absorbed in the G-dly light.

By bringing 22,000 angels, G-d instilled within the 22,000 Levites the special passion that was vouchsafed primarily for that particular tribe. While the other tribes had to focus more on the act of *shov*, retreating, and by so doing bring G-d's unity into the parameters of our world, the tribe of Levi was commissioned to inspire and awaken the hidden love of the other tribes.

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Maimonides writes that every Jew can be a Levite in terms of their spiritual character. It is just that members of the tribe of Levi have it naturally, while everyone else has to work at it. The Levites specialized in that mode of service most of the time while the rest of the nation did it more sporadically. Hence the 22,000 Angel instilled their passion into every Jew vicariously, through the tribe of Levi.

The Four Flags

Passion for G-d alone is inadequate without action. The Torah requires us to express that passion for G-d in four areas of service: Torah study, prayer and the performance of Mitzvos. The fourth service dimension is to serve G-d in all of our ways by doing everything with a higher motive and purpose. Each dimension or area of service had a unique banner.

Each grouping of tribes focused its efforts on one of the four areas represented by these four banners. Adoption of the idea of the angels' flags implied that these four

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dimensions of service to G-d empowered the Jewish people with the ability to study Torah, pray, do Mitzvos and serve G-d in all of our ways, instilled with a powerful sense of celestial angelic love for G-d, which should permeate even our animal souls.

This mutual love affair between G-d and Israel continued and was strong as long as the Bais Hamikdash stood and the Levites performed their unique musical service in the Temple. Their heavenly melodies ignited the heavenly sparks within the entire Jewish nation. Where can we find that same passion in our lives today?

“For We are Waiting for You”: We Must Want to Want

To answer this challenge, we can get our inspiration from the angels, albeit in a different fashion.

The word in Hebrew for angel is *malach*. This is an acronym for four Hebrew words “*Ki mechakim anachnu lach*”-For we are waiting for You” which appear in the *kedusha* prayer

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recited on Shabbos. These words describe our longing to be reunited with G-d in the future Bais Hamikdash, when His sovereignty will be revealed forever and our eyes will perceive His kingship.

When we examine the sentences of the *kedusha* that precede this phrase, we see that they discuss the love and passion for G-d displayed by the angels. What is the reason for juxtaposing the love of the angels with our waiting for the coming of Moshiach and the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdash?

We now understand that the role of the angels is to inspire us with their passion. By extension, we can understand that in the present day and age, when we no longer have the same powerful experience of the Divine as we had in the times of the Bais Hamikdash, we may rely on the inspiration of the angels to have the passion for G-d's presence amongst us restored.

In other words, even when we don't feel the thirst for G-dliness, we must, at least, harbor the sincere desire for restoration of that

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feeling of love. We must want to want to get closer to G-d.

We can now understand the desire of the Jewish people to have flags like the angels did. They realized that their feelings of closeness to G-d during the revelation at Mount Sinai would not endure. When one is exposed to an overwhelming Divine experience without an opportunity to internalize it, the experience and inspiration will dissipate.

The Jewish people recognized that the angels' flags would serve them in good stead. They would be a constant reminder of the passion for G-dliness they should generate even when they were no longer at Sinai or in the Bais Hamikdash. The people needed a tool that would help them preserve their inspiration toward G-dliness for posterity.

Thus, the Midrash states, they desired flags as a constant reminder of their love for G-d. The flags would help them maintain a desire for them to have that desire. G-d responded

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affirmatively and enthusiastically to their request.

Raising the Moshiach Flag

The lesson for our times is clear. One vestige of our previous intensity of love for G-d, even in Galus, is when, at the very least, we express our heartfelt pleas for Redemption. Even if Galus conditions have desensitized our feelings for the four areas of service to G-d, we can salvage ourselves by raising the “flag,” the symbol of our desire for Moshiach, and exclaim to ourselves and those around us, “We want Moshiach Now!”

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ESSAY FOURTEEN

THE COVER UP

**To see the good in everyone one must first
see the person as part of a whole healthy
and vibrant organism: the Jewish nation.**

**One must also be involved in and dedicated
to helping overcome that individual's
weaknesses.**

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ESSAY FOURTEEN

THE COVER UP

Do Not Look

The end of this week's parsha describes the manner in which the Levites transported the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary in the desert.

Before carrying the various vessels, the Levites had to stand away from the Kohanim, whose job it was to disassemble the Mishkan and wrap each vessel in special coverings. Only then were the Levites instructed to carry the vessels.

The very last verse of the parsha therefore reads:

Thus shall you do for them so that they shall live and not die: when they approach the Holy of Holies, Aaron and his sons shall come and assign

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them, every man to his work and his burden. But they shall not come and look as the holy is inserted, lest they die.

Rashi explains that the Levites were forbidden to gaze at the uncovered vessels when they were ready to be transported. They had to wait for the Kohanim to cover the vessels. Only then would the Levites be summoned to transport the vessels. Violation of this law, the Torah warns, means death!

We must try to understand why the Levites were prohibited from seeing the vessels in their exposed state. Didn't the Levites see some of these vessels when the Mishkan was erected and functioned? Why was it a crime for them to see the vessels when they were about to be transported.

Vessels Standing Alone

A contemporary commentator, *Avir Yoseph*, attempts to resolve this anomaly by distinguishing between seeing the vessels when they were in the Mishkan and after

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they were removed from the Mishkan. In the former situation, the Mishkan and its vessels evoked a sense of respect and awe. When each vessel stood by itself, however, the beauty and distinction of these vessels were less apparent. The Levites might have disgraced these holy ritual objects by treating them as insignificant.

This answer begs another question. Why were the Kohanim allowed to see the vessels in their disjointed state? The need for somebody to cover them does not answer the question; it just shifts it. Why would G-d allow the possibility that the Kohanim might develop a less than reverential attitude towards those vessels?

Kohain and Levite: A Study in Contrasts

One may offer two simple ways of distinguishing between a Kohain and a Levite in this regard.

First, the very fact that the Kohain was performing a Mitzvah by covering these vessels as a way of preserving their integrity

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guaranteed that they would not develop an irreverent attitude towards them.

The underlying rationale for this premise is that when people are involved in the service of G-d, in whichever way, it enhances their state of reverence for G-d and for all that is G-dly. This is true even if one's formal service of G-d has nothing to do with this particular function of covering the vessels. How much more so would it be true when the act of covering the vessels by the Kohanim was itself an act of reverence. There was no chance that the Kohanim would become indifferent to these vessels.

The Levites, by contrast, had no responsibility vis-à-vis the vessels. Their role only began after the vessels were covered and ready to be transported. Thus, there was a danger that they may look at the unclad vessels through fleshy and jaded eyes.

A second difference is that the Kohanim used these vessels as they performed the service in the Mishkan. Due to this use, they already had a holy attachment to the vessels. So, even

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when they were removed from the Mishkan to ready them for transportation, the holy attachment felt by the Kohanim would not be lost or diminished.

Jewish Vessels

One can derive an important moral lesson for today from this discussion: we must not allow ourselves to look at another Jew in a way that can lead to disrespect and even contempt.

The entire Jewish nation can be likened to the Mishkan. Our nation is made up of many vessels, or individuals, each with a different function. If one of the vessels of the Mishkan were missing, the Mishkan would not be functional. So too, each and every Jew is indispensable for the integrity and legitimacy of the entire Jewish nation.

In and Out of Context

When an outsider sees the interaction of all the different classes and roles, in the larger context of the nation, one is amazed at the

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beauty and grandeur of the nation. However, if the individual Jew is not in his or her active and interactive mode, it will tend to diminish that individual's importance, at least in the eyes of the beholder. In order to appreciate something fully, one must see that thing or individual in context. The context paints a positive background for that thing or individual that may even cover up some small flaws. When viewed out of context the individual is left exposed to the scrutiny and judgment of outsiders.

The collective light of the Jewish people is so powerful that we cannot help but to be struck and overwhelmed.

Standing in Front of the Mountain

This indeed was the experience when 600,000 men from the age of 20 and up, with all of the women and youth amounting to several million more souls, stood together as one person at the foot of Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. It boggles the mind to think of the energy they generated. Indeed,

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the Talmud relates that the energy reverberated throughout the entire world.

This explains the enigmatic statement we made on Passover night:

If He would have brought us close to Mount Sinai and had not given us the Torah, Dayeinu, that would have sufficed.

Commentators have puzzled over this statement. How could the act of standing in front of a mountain have intrinsic value?

One of the answers they have given is that the Jews stood at that mountain with unprecedented unity. All by itself, that was an incredible gift from G-d for which we express gratitude in reciting the Dayeinu.

In light of the above, this answer can be understood even more profoundly. It is not just the virtue of the unmatched unity that excites us and for which we express gratitude. It is also the collective power generated by so many Jews standing together harmoniously; every component was in total sync with every other component. An onlooker would have

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been stunned and overwhelmed by witnessing that phenomenon even without witnessing the actual giving of the Torah.

However, when a Jew stands alone, physically or figuratively, and is seen out of context, the outsider, who has no genuine understanding of the secret of the Jew, is likely to see the individual in a distorted and diminished light.

Kohain and Levites: Love versus Judgment

This explains why only the Levites were commanded not to see the naked vessels out of the Mishkan.

A Levite is associated with the Divine attribute of judgment. When he sees a (spiritually) naked vessel (read: Jew) his acute sense of judgment is activated. The Kohain, by contrast, is identified with the Divine attribute of kindness. The Kohain was therefore chosen to see the skin lesions of the Metzora to determine if he should be declared ritually unclean and quarantined. Only a man of kindness is permitted to look for and find fault in another. His discovery of

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the other's lesions (shortcomings) is not judgmental. He is motivated by the desire to help heal the other.

Thus, the Kohain was permitted to see the uncovered vessels because of two abovementioned factors:

a) As agents of Divine kindness it was their job to help cover the vessels/Jews. As the Kohain is dedicated to helping others he will not become desensitized even when he sees their all-to-human faults.

b) They were intimately involved with these sacred vessels (read: Jews) when they were part of the collective. When they saw an individual in context, as part of the whole, and only thereafter saw him alone in decline, knowledge of this individual's original state will prevent the Kohain from judging him unfavorably now.

The secret to seeing the good in everyone is twofold. First, one must be able to see how this person is part of a whole healthy and vibrant organism: the Jewish nation. And one must also be involved in and dedicated to

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helping overcome that individual's weaknesses.

Hakhel

This year (5776) is the year of Hakhel, the post Sabbatical year, when in the Holy Temple era all Jews gathered during the Holiday of Sukkos to hear a reenactment of the revelation of Sinai.

The power of Jews gathering together in the spirit of healing the faults of individuals and giving them the dignity they deserve parallels the unity of the Jewish people gathered at Sinai. This is especially true on the Shabbos before Shavuot, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

Moshiach's Role

All of this is also prelude to the coming of Moshiach and the true and complete Redemption.

For the Redemption to be complete, Moshiach will gather together the Jewish

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people from the most physically and spiritually remote regions of the world. But Moshiach will be confronted by many Jews who are “isolated vessels” and have lost touch with the Jewish nationhood, the collective Mishkan. Ordinary observers would look at these lost souls and fail to see their true value. They would find it very difficult to see that these lost ones are holy vessels, connected to every other vessel and that they are an integral part of the Mishkan collective.

Moshiach’s distinction is that he, like the Kohain, can see every Jew’s relationship to every other Jew and the Mishkan-Bais Hamikdash. When Moshiach observes the flaws in individuals, he seeks only to overcome the flaws and repair them so that the individuals can once more experience their connection to the Mishkan.

In preparation for the final Redemption and gathering of world Jewry in the third Bais Hamikdash, it behooves us to look for opportunities to bring many Jews together, reach into their hearts and souls and reveal

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their active identity as sacred vessels of the spiritual Bais Hamikdash.

ESSAY FIFTEEN

**KEEP THE PASSION
UNDER WRAPS**

**There is nothing more desirable than passion
for G-d and His teachings.**

**Yet that passion must be directed towards
making our world a “dwelling place for G-d.”**

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ESSAY FIFTEEN

KEEP THE PASSION UNDER WRAPS

Protect the Family of Kehos

At the end of this week's Parsha, Bamidbar, the Torah admonishes Moses and Aaron to prevent the death of the family of Kehos.

This is what you should do for them so that they live and do not die when they approach the holy of holies... They shall not come to see when the holy things are covered up and die.

According to Rashi, the family of Kehos was charged with carrying the holy vessels of the Temple when the Jewish people would be on the road traveling through the desert between encampments. But, the Torah admonished them not to get near these vessels until after the priests would cover

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them up. Only after they were out of sight, would the family of Kehos be permitted to approach the vessels and carry them to their destination.

Why End on a Negative Note?

The question has been raised. Why does the Torah choose to conclude this parsha on such a negative note – the potential death of the family of Kehos? Doesn't Jewish law dictate that a Torah reading should always end with a positive theme?

True, it is about saving them from death, but it is still not a very uplifting conclusion.

This question gets even stronger considering the fact that this is the last Shabbos Torah reading before the onset of the Festival of Shavuos, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Why would we want to preface such a negative experience (the death of the family of Kehos) to the most positive experience of Sinai?

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Connection to Sinai

Upon deeper reflection one can find a direct connection between the two themes – the need for the family of Kehos not to see the holy vessels and the giving of the Torah.

In the narrative of the events that led up to the revelation at Sinai, Moses was told by G-d to admonish the Jewish people not to get too close to the mountain. Moses responded to this command that the Jewish people would never violate G-d's will. Why did he have to admonish them and threaten them with death? G-d then repeated His warning.

Why was G-d so concerned that they would violate His command not to approach Sinai?

The answer is that when a person is exposed to the sublime Divine experience, it ignites the passion and love for G-d. When one's soul is on fire, it cannot restrain itself and seeks to get closer to G-d; even if it means that it will ultimately leave the body to become reunited with G-d. Despite the delight the soul would experience as a result, it is not what G-d had

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in mind for the soul when He sent it into the physical body.

In our Parsha too, there was a danger that a member of the Kehos family, as a result of his close proximity to the vessels of the Temple through which G-d's presence was made manifest, would seek to get closer to them and touch them.

The vessels were like live wires, conduits of G-dly energy. Touching them would be akin to touching a live wire without proper insulation.

The covering of the vessels when they were not in use was intended to serve as insulation that would not cause them to be “electrocuted.”

G-d therefore admonished Moses and Aaron to see to it that they did not allow their souls to become ignited with such G-dly passion to the extent that they would expire.

The fact that they did not have to worry about gazing on the vessels when they were in use in the Temple can be explained.

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When is there the danger that one may be carried away with harmful passion? Only when that passion is separated from the Divine command associated with the passion.

In this case, when the vessels were being used in accordance with G-d's will, they did not pose a danger, because the powerful energy they conducted was insulated by G-d's command. Doing a Mitzvah carries with it the protection from any harm the Mitzvah can cause. The concern was for them to see the exposed vessels that would ignite unbridled spiritual passion within them at the wrong time, with possible fatal consequences.

Cover Your Passion

The lesson from this is clear. While holiness and spiritual experiences are wonderful, there is a time for the "holy vessels" to be covered up and concealed from sight, so that it does not prevent us from bringing its holiness into the physical world. For, our Sages tell us, that after all, the whole purpose of G-d giving the Torah to us and not leaving it for the angels

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was to enable us to transform the physical existence into a dwelling place for G-d. Only humans who are attached to the physical reality can accomplish that.

An angel, even if it would enter into the physical world would be ill-equipped to change it and elevate it as was seen by the time angels did inhabit human bodies. They lacked the proper balance. They were either too spiritual for the world or they became too materialistic and hedonistic to be able to bring G-dliness into the world..

Preparation for Sinai: Don't Go to Sleep!

This also explains why we read about the covering of the vessels right before the Holiday of Shavuot. It is to underscore the objective of Torah is to make this physical world a dwelling place for G-d and not to attempt to escape from this world.

The Rebbe explains why the Jewish people were faulted for sleeping so comfortably the night before the Revelation at Mount Sinai. Their intention was to allow their souls to

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disengage from the physical world through sleep and thereby become more receptive to the spiritual revelation at Sinai.

This, was a well-intentioned but misguided way of preparing for an event that has as its objective bringing G-dliness down into the world and not trying to detach oneself from it.

Our Preparation for the Messianic Age

The complete realization of the goal of the revelation at Sinai, to transform the physical world into G-d's abode, will be fully realized with the coming of Moshiach. As a preparation for this imminent event, we must focus not on removing ourselves from society to satisfy our soul's spiritual yearnings, but to engage the world around us and introduce G-dliness within the physical realm.

While holiness and spiritual experiences are wonderful, and necessary at times, there is a time for the holy vessels to be covered up and concealed from sight, so that it does not

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prevent us from bringing its holiness into the physical world.

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ESSAY SIXTEEN

PLEASE, FORCE ME!

Education is the art of revealing something ostensibly new but was always a part of the student's consciousness.

The revelation at Sinai "merely" revealed our innate connection to G-d and His teachings that was instilled in us by our Patriarchs and Matriarchs.

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ESSAY SIXTEEN

PLEASE, FORCE ME!

The Complaint of the Nations

This week's parsha "Bamidbar," always precedes the festival of Shavuot, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. We should take note of the way it begins because it can shed light on our understanding of the momentous event which occurred at Sinai.

The parsha commences with G-d's commandment to Moses to count the Jewish nation.

Take the sum of the entire congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' houses...

The Midrash relates that when G-d gave the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai,

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the nations of the world lodged a complaint to G-d as to why they were deprived of this great gift.

G-d's response to them was that the Jewish people were able to trace their genealogy as evidenced by the way they were counted "by their families and their father's houses." They were therefore entitled to receive the Torah.

Is it All about Genealogy?

What exactly is it about our genealogy that made us worthy of receiving the Torah?

To answer this question the nineteenth century sage, Rabbi Moshe Sofer, cites a passage of the Talmud where a parallel "complaint" the nations of the world addressed to G-d is discussed: The nations of the world, the Talmud states, argued that it was not fair that G-d coerced the Jewish people to accept the Torah when he placed the mountain over their head and declared: "Either you accept the Torah or you will all be buried underneath this mountain." "Why

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did you not compel us to accept the Torah?" the nations argued.

The Value of Coercion

To understand why indeed did G-d force the Jews to accept the Torah and not the other nations, we must first address a more fundamental question: Of what value is the Torah if we had to be forced to accept it?

One explanation is that forcing someone to do something has value only in two circumstances:

First, in the case of a child or otherwise immature individual it may make sense to use some measure of pressure to get that child to do something good when one can assume that eventually—with proper guidance and support—the child will grasp the value of that coerced behavior and do it willingly. We may force a child to clean his room with the understanding that a time will come that the child will appreciate the value of having a tidy room on his or her own.

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Second, one may use some measure of force when we know that deep down the person has a core belief in the value of that behavior, but where external circumstances might have clouded the person's thoughts so that he or she will resist doing that which he or she knows is right.

Usually, these core values are ingrained in a person due to the close relationship they have with their parents and grandparents. These family traditions and values will ultimately find their way into the hearts and minds of their children. And although they might stray from that path, some minimal pressure will allow them to express the latent feelings they already have in them.

They were Coerced to Express their True Desire

Of these two scenarios it is the latter one that primarily applied to the Jewish people. They had a family tradition going back to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of the Jewish people that programmed them with a sense

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of devotion to G-d and His teachings. And notwithstanding the fact that their experience in Egypt obscured these feelings, the pressure G-d put on them to accept the Torah sufficed to awaken the inherent love they had for it; that they inherited from their fathers and mothers.

This then is the meaning of the Midrash that G-d gave the Torah to the Jewish people because they had a strong family tradition that enabled them to accept the Torah. It inculcated within them a fierce determination that come what may they will never abandon the Torah.

What about a Convert?

Of course, a convert to Judaism, who is prepared to accept all of Judaism's dictates, is accepted as a full member of the Jewish community.

In one important respect, the convert is superior to one who is born Jewish. The Jew, for better or worse, is the beneficiary of generations of tradition that traces back to

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the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. The convert's connection to Judaism is entirely voluntary. There is no family tradition and no Mount Sinai hovering over his or her head that compels him or her to embrace Judaism. It is the most free, independent and volitional commitment.

In Maimonides words to a convert who experienced discrimination, "While we trace ourselves back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, you have a direct link to the Creator."

The Prototype

The revelation of G-d at Mount Sinai is the prototype of the permanent revelation of G-d in the Messianic Age. One difference between these two events is that whereas we had to be coerced into accepting the Torah to reveal our inner desire for it, our acceptance of Moshiach and the Messianic Age should be and will be without the slightest reservation—with great joy and sincerity.

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ESSAY SEVENTEEN

UNITED NATION

The Rebbe emphasized that our focus on unity should shift from repairing the past disunity to being prepared for the ultimate unity of the future.

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ESSAY SEVENTEEN

UNITED NATION

Indirect Head Count

This week, we begin the Book of Numbers. It is so called because it begins with G-d's command to Moses to count the Jewish people. Now, despite the fact that there was an express commandment to count the Jewish people, G-d told them not to make a direct head count. In an earlier Torah portion, the Jews were told to contribute a Half-Shekel, and that they would count the Half-Shekels to determine the number of Jews.

Our sages devoted much attention to this rather unusual phenomenon. On the one hand, there was a need to count the Jews, and on the other hand, they were not permitted to count them directly. If G-d wanted them counted, why couldn't Moses count them directly?

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What is Jewish Unity Based on?

To understand the dynamics of counting, Chassidic thought focuses on the ideal of Jewish unity. Our sages have declared that all diverse segments of the Jewish nation are inherently one unified and inseparable entity.

But this assertion needs to be clarified. One cannot claim that this unity is based on political uniformity, cultural harmony; religious similarity or any other intellectual, emotional or ideological factor. Indeed, it seems that one can find more divisive influences within the Jewish community than unifying ones.

For example:

Geographically:

For the bulk of our history, Jews did not live in the same country, or speak the same language.

Linguistically:

From before the destruction of the first Temple, Jews have been speaking different languages. Hebrew, or the Holy tongue, has

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not been the most common spoken language of the Jews. Jews spoke Aramaic, Arabic, German and a host of other languages for most of their history reserving Hebrew for the reading of the Torah and prayers.

Culturally:

Jews are as culturally distinct from one another as there are cultures. Although recent migrations of Jews to Israel may have reduced those differences somewhat, it is undeniable that Ashkenazic Jews, Sephardic Jews, Yemenite Jews etc. have vastly different cultural practices.

Ideologically:

Concerning our views and opinions, the Talmud states, “just as there are no two people who look alike, there are no two people who think alike.” Jewish fragmentation is so endemic to Jewish existence, that we often will remark, half-jokingly and half-seriously, “two Jews three opinions.”

Who has not heard of the story of the Jew who was stranded on a desert island, who built two synagogues, one that he would

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attend and the other he would never step foot into...

Observance

Although we'd like to see how all Jews would become observant the stark and sad reality is that most Jews today are not observant or minimally and marginally observant. And even with regard to those who are observant, the differences and the gulf between them belie the assertion that we are all one.

Crisis Unites

How then can we say that we are the most united people, and that we are essentially one?

Some might point to the way we coalesce at times of crisis. Many will remember the Six Day War when Jews of all stripes banded together to show their support and solidarity for Israel..

But alas, these events seem to be the exception not the norm. How can we then justify the assertion of our sages that the

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Jewish people are essentially one?

One Soul, One Origin, One Destiny

The answer is that our unity derives from our G-dly soul. When we look at a person we only see their most external and peripheral characteristics. If we get to know the person, we can often learn much about their mind, disposition, character etc. But, it takes a very spiritual individual to recognize the truly G-dly dimension of one's existence.

But the fact that it is the most difficult to observe is not an indication that it is anything but the most essential aspect of one's identity. Indeed, everything else that identifies us derives from the essential soul that we all possess.

And because the G-dly soul is our essence, it manifests itself in rare occasions, such as in times of crisis, as during the Six Day War. Throughout history there were countless examples of how otherwise alienated Jews gave their lives not to betray their identities as Jews. During those times, the true and

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most essential aspect of our lives comes to the fore.

Thus, while we are, outwardly, perhaps the most colorfully divided of people; there is an intrinsic unity that pervades all of us.

Indeed, our differences are not always bad and a sign of fragmentation and discord. Sometimes they are a manifestation of the infinite nature of our G-dly soul that can express itself in any number of ways. From that perspective we are all very different and unique.

And because we are in possession of the same soul, we also were chosen for the same future. Our destiny is what unites us even more; for a time will come that all Jews will recognize their G-dly mission given to them at Sinai.

Individuality within Unity

We can now understand why there was a need to count the Jewish people, but not to do it directly. By counting them it

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emphasized the individuality and uniqueness of every Jew.

Counting them directly, however, would have implied that they were inherently divided. By negating the concept of counting while simultaneously affirming it underscored the paradoxical nature of the Jewish nation: they are the most individualistic and colorful people, and simultaneously the most spiritually unified people

Preparing for the Future Unity

Unfortunately, we often see our differences far more than we see the inherent unity. This can be attributed primarily to the Galus-exile dynamic. It has the capacity to focus on the divisions and obscure the inner unity.

Thus our Sages tell us that exile was caused by our lack of unity. This implies that Galus is characterized by concealing the reality of our united existence.

One way of bringing Galus to an end is by appreciating the individual qualities of every

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Jew, while realizing that we are all one. This will prepare us for the coming of Moshiach.

The Rebbe emphasized that our focus on unity should shift from repairing the past disunity to being prepared for the ultimate unity of the future.

At that time the prophet says we will return to Israel as a Kahal Gadol, a great **unified** congregation.

At the same time, however, we will also be recognized as individuals, as the prophet says, “You will be collected for the Redemption **one by one**.”

The Messianic Age dynamic will demonstrate that our differences are not inconsistent with our unity but rather a consequences of the infinite G-dly energy that unites us and manifests itself in countless ways.

ESSAY EIGHTEEN

LEARNING AND YEARNING

The Torah was given in a desert.
It is a place where we thirst for much more
than what we have.

The desert dynamic of Torah reminds us to
pay attention to our soul's' cry, "when will I
enter the Promised Land where my soul's
thirst for G-dliness will be satisfied."

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ESSAY EIGHTEEN

LEARNING AND YEARNING

A Desert Torah?

Much has been said of the fact that in most years, we read the opening parsha, of the fourth Biblical book, “*Bamidbar*—In the desert”—which carries the same title as the book itself—on the Shabbos that precedes the Festival of Shavuos. The most obvious connection between this specific theme of the desert and the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai is that the Torah was given in the desert. However, the fact that the Torah was given in the desert and not in the Land of Israel, itself, begs for further clarification.

Several explanations have been advanced as to why G-d chose to give the Torah in a desert.

The Midrash explains that the message

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conveyed by the giving of the Torah in the desert is that the Torah can be claimed by all, just as there is no monopoly on owning desert land. (That was, before oil was discovered.)

Alternatively, the desert is the symbol of humility, a necessary trait for sincere and enduring acceptance of the Torah.

However, if we put so much weight on the symbolism attached to the theme of a desert in conjunction with the giving of the Torah, a powerful question arises:

Insignificant Location

Usually, when a major event occurs in a designated area, there can be two possibilities. Either, the place is chosen because of its uniqueness. Or the event gives the place a new face. Uniqueness is either the cause or the effect.

In our own day and age, we can think of numerous memorials that were established in places where some major event—victory or

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catastrophe—occurred. “Ground-Zero” is an example that readily comes to mind. Occasionally, that place will be designated as a national landmark. Historically, watershed events serve as foundations for an enduring civilization that grows out of that event and within that location. Cities, and even societies, are often built on the grounds of historical and cataclysmic events.

Yet, when it comes to Sinai—both the desert and the mountain—began as and remained totally insignificant geographic locations. The desert remained a desert and the mountain carries absolutely no holiness for Jews. And while we have answers as to why G-d chose that location for the giving of the Torah, we do not have an adequate rationale for the lack of an impact that Torah had on that location.

More importantly, we must ask ourselves, what possible lesson can we learn from this apparently negative phenomenon—that the giving of the Torah at Sinai had little or no impact on the environs in which it was given?

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What has the Torah Taught You?!

A blunt message from the lack of significance attributed to the Sinai desert and Mountain is that one can study Torah with total devotion and still remain a spiritual nobody. This can be illustrated by a story of a Jew whose rabbi asked him what he had learned. The Jew quickly rattled off a litany of tractates of the Talmud and other Torah literature that he had studied. The rabbi was unsatisfied with his response. "You've been telling me what Torah texts you have learnt, however you said nothing what these texts have taught you!"

To be sure, as our Sages told us, one should learn Torah even if it is done superficially and for some ulterior motive. Torah possesses intrinsic holiness. Yet, its stated goal is to affect our lives in a positive way and get us out of the "desert" into the "Promised Land."

We Must Know We are in a Desert

On a deeper level, it can be said that had the Torah changed the desert and transformed it into a blossoming and verdant inhabited area,

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in both the physical and spiritual sense of these terms, we would have lost the value of yearning for a better situation. In order for us to grow, we must develop a sense of yearning for a better world. The experience of emptiness that generates a feeling of yearning can be a positive force when it leads us to act in a way that will get us out of our internal exile.

When we feel depressed, we might find some comfort in the knowledge that it might be a result of our soul's sense of emptiness and yearning to go higher. When we quench our soul's thirst by way of the study of Torah and observance of Mitzvos, the soul feels satisfied and the depression may leave us as well. And no matter how good we are, we are still in what is Biblically known as the "desert of nations," the physical and spiritual state of exile that we yearn to get out of.

Putting it simply: To get out of the desert, we must first know that we are in a desert.

King David eloquently expresses this idea in his book of Psalms (Psalm 63) when he

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speaks of how his soul thirsts for G-d in a “parched and weary land.” The desert symbolizes the emptiness we feel being in exile far away from Jerusalem and the Holy Temple. And while even in exile we adhere to the Torah scrupulously, we still feel a void in our lives, because we have not yet arrived in the Promised Land and the holy city of Jerusalem.

The Torah was thus deliberately given in a desert and remained so, so that we are constantly reminded of the need to pay attention to our soul’s cry, “when will I leave this wilderness and enter the Promised Land where my soul’s thirst for spirituality and G-dliness will be satisfied.”