**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BAMIDBAR**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Bamidbar tells of God’s commands to *Benei Yisrael* regarding their arrangement during travel and when encamping. These instructions included the assignment of a special banner, or flag, to each tribe (2:2).

The Midrash, in a famous passage (*Bamibdar Rabba* 2:2), tells that this command was given in fulfillment of *Benei Yisrael*’s wish: “At the time the Almighty appeared at Mount Sinai, 220,000 angels descended with Him, and they were all arranged in banners… When Israel saw that they were arranged in banners, they started desiring banners…” God granted *Benei Yisrael* their wish, and commanded them to carry special banners as they traveled. Many writers addressed the question as to the special significance of these banners, and why *Benei Yisrael* desired to have banners like the angels.

Rav Yitzchak Kunstadt, in his *Luach Erez*, suggests that carrying a banner symbolizes leadership and influence. Standard bearers during war represent the army, and also lead the soldiers who can see the banner from a distance and thus find their way. (Indeed, the term “standard bearers” has been adopted to refer to leaders and figureheads generally, people who represent and direct a certain movement or cause.) At the time of the Revelation at Sinai, Rav Kunstadt explains, *Benei Yisrael* saw that all the angels carried banners. They were all “standard bearers,” worthy and capable of exerting influence, each in its own distinctive way. *Benei Yisrael*’s desire for banners was the desire to wield influence, to have an impact upon others, a desire they assumed they could never satisfy because they felt that not everyone can be an influential figure. In the idyllic conditions of the heavenly sphere, every angel carries a “banner,” fulfilling a vital role that has a profound impact. *Benei Yisrael* longed for this privilege, of each person carrying his or her own banner, exerting positive influence.

God announced to *Benei Yisrael* that He was granting their wish, instructing them to carry banners “*le-veit avotam*” – “according to their father’s home.” Rav Kunstadt explains this to mean that although the vast majority of people are unable to serve as “standard bearers” for the entire nation, or even for large groups of people within the nation, we are all capable of wielding influence “*le-veit avotam*,” within our own circle of family and friends. We are far from the perfection of angels, but we are still worthy of carrying banners, because we are worthy of positively influencing those who are close to us, the people in our close circles. This is the meaning and significance of the banners.

Each and every one of us is able, and required, to carry a “banner,” to lead in our own unique way. Only very few people will lead in the sense of public leadership, but this does not mean that the rest of us are absolved of the responsibilities of leadership. We are all obliged to lead and inspire by example, to try to live as positive role models whom the people in our lives can admire and seek to emulate, and in this way we have a significant impact upon the world. Each person has somebody or several people in his or her life whom he or she can positively influence, and so we must all see ourselves as “standard bearers” who are called upon to guide and inspire, so together we can make the world just a bit better.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Bamidbar (3:2) lists the names of the four sons of Aharon who were anointed along with Aharon as *kohanim*, the first two of which – Nadav and Avihu – were tragically killed by fire on the first day they served as *kohanim*. As many commentators noted, the Torah surprisingly introduces this list by mentioning both Moshe and Aharon: “These are the descendants of **Aharon and Moshe** on the day when the Lord spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai.” This verse gives the impression that the Torah is now going to list the names of the children of both Moshe and Aharon, but then it lists only the names of Aharon’s sons. Rashi, based on the Gemara (Sanhedrin 19b), writes that Aharon’s sons were considered Moshe’s sons “because he taught them Torah,” adding, “This teaches that whoever teaches his fellow’s son Torah is considered as though he gave birth to him.” This list is introduced as a list of both Moshe and Aharon’s sons because Aharon’s sons were considered also Moshe’s offspring, since he was their teacher.

Many later writers raised the question of why specifically Aharon’s sons are said to have been Moshe’s “children” because he taught them Torah. Moshe, of course, taught all of *Benei Yisrael*. Why, then, are Aharon’s sons singled out as having been considered like Moshe’s sons?

*Chatam Sofer* offers a fascinating explanation of the Gemara’s comment, suggesting that it refers not to all of Aharon’s sons, but only to the two older sons – Nadav and Avihu – who perished. To explain the Gemara’s intent, *Chatam Sofer* cites Rashi’s comment in Sefer Vayikra (10:3), based on *Torat Kohanim*, that Nadav and Avihu were on a greater spiritual level than even Moshe and Aharon. They were righteous men, *Chatam Sofer* writes, but with one significant flaw that ultimately led to their tragic death – arrogance. The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 20:7) tells that Nadav and Avihu were not interested in getting married because they felt that no woman would be good enough for them. And the Gemara (Sanhedrin 52a) relates that Nadav and Avihu actually looked forward to the time when Moshe and Aharon would be gone so they could lead *Benei Yisrael*. Their arrogance can also be seen in the fatal mistake they made – deciding on their own to bring an unwarranted incense offering, for which they were punished. According to *Chatam Sofer*, Nadav and Avihu were indeed greater than Moshe and Aharon and worthy of leadership – if not for their arrogant character. They had outstanding credentials, but were plagued by a degree of pride and sense of superiority.

This, *Chatam Sofer* suggests, might be why the Torah makes specific mention of Aharon’s sons being considered Moshe’s sons. Despite their lofty stature, they nevertheless are to viewed as “products” of Moshe because he taught them. Anybody we learn something from, even if we have reason to believe that we are on a higher level of knowledge or piety, deserve our appreciation and respect, insofar as they helped mold and shape us. And thus specifically Nadav and Avihu, who are said to have achieved a higher level than Moshe, are described as Moshe’s children, underscoring the fact that they learned from him, notwithstanding their stature of greatness.

Interestingly, *Chatam Sofer* suggests that this might be the intent of the Gemara’s famous comment in Masekhet Megilla (29a) that two large mountains in *Eretz Yisrael* – Karmel and Tavor – wanted to be chosen as the site of *Matan Torah*, but God declared that they were “blemished” in comparison to the small, modest Mount Sinai. *Chatam Sofer* suggests that the Gemara here speaks allegorically of Nadav and Avihu, who were “taller” than Moshe, exceeding his stature – except for their “blemish” of arrogance, which disqualified them for leadership. They were deemed unsuitable for the role of leader because a leader must be like Moshe Rabbeinu – humble and respectful of all people, without viewing others as beneath him in any way.

Monday

The Midrash (*Bamibdar Rabba* 2:2), as we cited earlier this week, relates that at the time of *Matan Torah*, *Benei Yisrael* saw legions of angels with special flags that accompanied God when He descended upon Mount Sinai. *Benei Yisrael* envied the angels, the Midrash tells, and desired to have flags, too. God granted their wish, and, as we read in Parashat Bamidbar (2:2), He commanded that each tribe should have its own special flag.

Many different approaches have been taken to explain the significance of the flags, and why *Benei Yisrael* so strongly desired flags like the angels. One possibility, perhaps, is that the flags represent pride in one’s identity and mission. A nation’s flag, for example, serves as a proud symbol of the nation’s unique, distinctive identity, and this is true as well of flags used by groups or movements. When *Benei Yisrael* saw the angels with their flags, they envied the way each angel took pride in its unique, distinctive mission. As perfect, unflawed beings, which reside in the heavens and are assigned roles directly by the Almighty, the angels could all take pride in their unique identity and the distinctive role assigned to them. Many among *Benei Yisrael* felt that they could not experience this sense of pride – just as many of us feel we cannot experience pride, because we feel ashamed of our mission and role in the world. Some people are forced to spend a great of their time struggling to scrap out a living, doing menial jobs that they see as undignified. Some people are beset by health problems or family problems that occupy much of their time or sap their physical energy, preventing them from realizing outstanding achievements. Some people have made grave mistakes that cause them a great deal of anguish and caused problems which they now need to solve. Many of us do not feel particularly proud or gratified over the role or task we now need to fill, and we find ourselves feeling envious of the “angels” we see around us, those who fills roles that seem far more respectable and dignified.

God responded to *Benei Yisrael* by assuring them that each and every tribe has its flag. Symbolically, this might mean that each and every one of us can rightfully take pride in whatever position or situation in which we currently find ourselves. Whichever task we now need to fill, we should take pride in working to fill it to the best of our ability. We have no reason to envy the “angels,” those outwardly “perfect” people who seem to always be doing impressive things. We each have our own individual “flag” – a role to fill in which we should take pride, if we approach it seriously and are committed to filling it as best we can.

Tuesday

Earlier this week, we noted the Torah’s seemingly peculiar introduction to its list of the names of Aharon’s sons – “These are the offspring of Aharon and Moshe…” (3:2). Although the Torah lists only the names of Aharon’s sons, it introduces this list by speaking of the offspring of both Aharon and Moshe. Rashi, based on the Gemara (Sanhedrin 19b), explains that Aharon’s sons were considered Moshe’s sons because Moshe taught them, and, in Rashi’s words, “whoever teaches his fellow’s son Torah is considered as though he fathered him.” Therefore, Aharon’s sons are introduced as the products of both Aharon and Moshe.

Rashi’s remark resembles the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Sanhedrin (99b), “Whoever teaches his fellow’s son Torah is considered as though he made him.” The Gemara famously reaches this conclusion on the basis of the Torah’s reference to “*ha-nefesh asher asu be-Charan*” – people whom Avraham and Sara had “made” when they lived in Charan, and who joined them when they migrated to Canaan (Bereishit 12:5). *Targum Onkelos* there explains this as referring to people whom Avraham and Sara influenced to worship the true God. The Torah speaks of Avraham and Sara as having “made” these people, showing that teaching somebody is considered like “making,” or creating, that person, insofar as the teacher builds the student’s character and inner world.

Rav Eliyahu Baruch Finkel noted the distinction between Rashi’s comment and the Gemara’s remark. Rashi analogizes a teacher to a parent, whereas the Gemara compares a teacher to a craftsman, who creates something. The difference between these two analogies, Rav Finkel explained, is subtle but significant. A craftsman creates his product and then does not necessarily continue to have any connection to it. A parent, however, does not simply create a child, but remains attached and committed to the child forever.

Accordingly, these two passages reflect the dual nature of education and its goals. On the one hand, the teacher must strive to be the student’s parent – a figure whose example and instruction continue to guide, influence and inspire the student throughout his or her entire life, much as a parent’s example and instruction continue to accompany a child throughout his or her life. At the same time, however, a teacher’s job is to “create” students in a manner that enables them to stand on their own. A good teacher does not produce carbon copies of himself or herself, but rather produces students with the training and skills to develop their own approach. Even as they continue to be guided and influenced by the teacher, the goal must be for them to emerge as independent scholars, whose conclusions, methodology and perspectives may differ from those of their mentor. Of course, at a certain point a student can no longer lay claim to the title of the teacher’s student if he or she veers too drastically from the course charted by the teacher. Nevertheless, a successful teacher is the one whose students assume a level of independence in their thought, even as they remain loyally committed to their teacher’s general approach and forever carry with them the teacher’s unmistakable imprint.

Wednesday

In the final verses of Parashat Bamidbar, God issues a special instruction to the *kohanim* to manage the members of the Kehat family of *Leviyim* when the nation would prepare to travel in the wilderness. The tribe of Levi was charged with the responsibility of transporting the various parts of the *Mishkan* during travel, and the members of the Kehat family were assigned the most sacred articles of the *Mishkan*. God commanded the *kohanim* to see to it that when the Kehatites approached the “*kodesh ha-kodashim*” – the most sacred articles of the *Mishkan* – each Kehatite was assigned to the article under his charge. One explanation of this command is that God feared that the Kehatites might all seek or demand the privilege of carrying the *aron*, the most sacred article of the *Mishkan*, such that the other articles would be left disgracefully neglected. To avoid this dishonor to the other articles, the *kohanim* were instructed to arrange a set, fixed system, whereby each Kehatite was preassigned to a particular article, thereby ensuring that all the articles were properly cared for.

We might add that on a symbolic level, this command to the *kohanim* is directed also at all people who approach the “*kodesh ha-kodashim*” – who admirably set high spiritual ambitions and passionately seek to pursue excellence in their service of God. As in the case of the Kehatites, there is danger that such people might neglect the less sacred “articles,” the more basic ideals, obligations and responsibilities entailed in Torah life. Ambition is critically important, but it can sometimes blind us to our elementary requirements, as we set our sights upon lofty achievements and in so doing overlook the Torah’s simpler and more rudimentary requirements. As we work to become outstanding, we might fail to be good and decent. And thus we are reminded that as we approach the “*kodesh ha-kodashim*,” driving ourselves to actualize our full potential rather than feel content with spiritual mediocrity, we must ensure to tend to all the various “sacred articles” included in the “*Mishkan*,” all the values, principles and requirements that fall under the very large rubric of Torah obligation. Our desire for spiritual excellence must not lead us to overlook the more basic obligations of integrity, courtesy and decency, which must form the foundation upon which our pursuit of loftier goals can then be built.

Thursday

Parashat Bamidbar opens with God’s command to Moshe and Aharon to conduct a census of *Benei Yisrael*, and His appointment of a leader for each tribe to assist in the process. God told Moshe and Aharon that they would be assisted by “one person for each tribe,” adding that “he is the person who is the head of his father’s household” (1:4). He then proceeded to name the leader chosen for each tribe.

The reference to these leaders as “the person who is the head of his fathers’ household” (“*ish rosh le-veit avotav*”) seems difficult to explain, though it is commonly understood that this is just another term for tribal leadership. More specifically, Netziv explains this verse to mean that the people who were already accepted by their tribes as leaders were now officially appointed by God to a leadership role. God told Moshe and Aharon those who had already been serving as “*rosh le-veit avotav*” – de facto leaders – would now be officially named as leaders. This term, according to Netziv, refers to an unofficial leadership role, one that was not formally assigned, and God now told Moshe and Aharon that these leaders would now be assuming formal posts.

A clever reading of this verse is cited in the name of the work of *Melekhet Machashevet* (in Rav Shmuel Alter’s *Likutei Batar Likutei*). The term “*rosh le-veit avotam*” could perhaps refer not to a tribal leadership role, but rather to effective leadership in one’s family. God was informing Moshe and Aharon that the figures he was now assigning to positions of leadership were people who were admired and respected by their family members because of their characters. Only people who act properly at home, who earn the respect and love of their family, are fit for positions of communal leadership.

While it is unlikely that this is the actual intent of the verse, this creative reading reminds us that one’s commitment to family must not be sacrificed for the sake of leadership. To the contrary, proper conduct among one’s family is seen as a prerequisite to leadership. Only if a person satisfies his most basic obligation – to tend to his family – can he then aspire to proceed further and seek to help his community and his nation. If one neglects his familial duties for the sake of pursuing a leadership role, he no longer has the necessary credentials for such a role, as only a person devoted to family can then devote himself to the community or the nation at large.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Bamidbar refers to the tribe of Levi as “*shomerim mishmeret ha-kodesh*” (“watchmen of the sacred guard” – 3:38), and the Gemara (Tamid 26a) cites this verse as a source for the *mitzva* of *shemirat ha-Mikdash* – requiring stationing guards from the tribe of Levi around the Temple. As the *Mishnayot* discuss in the beginning of Masekhet Middot, *kohanim* would stand guard at various points inside the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, and *Leviyim* would stand guard at various posts in the area outside the Temple.

The first Mishna in Masekhet Tamid specifies the different locations inside the *Beit Ha-mikdash* where *kohanim* were stationed to stand guard, two of which were guarded by the “*rovim*” – young *kohanim*. The *mefaresh* (the anonymous commentary to Masekhet Tamid) explains that these were *kohanim* who had not yet reached the age of *mitzva* obligation – meaning, they were below the age of thirteen – and were thus unable to serve in any other capacity. Since those above the age of thirteen preferred serving in the other priestly roles, these young *kohanim* were assigned as guards.

Later writers questioned how it was possible for *kohanim* below the age of *mitzva* obligation to fill this role which is mandated by the Torah. Seemingly, just as in all other areas of Torah law, halakhic obligations can be fulfilled only by those who have reached the age of *mitzva* obligation. Indeed, the *Mishneh Le-melekh* (Hilkhot Beit Ha-bechira 8:5) disagrees with the *mefaresh*’s interpretation, and asserts that the Mishna refers to teenage *kohanim*. The Rambam writes that although *kohanim* are qualified to perform the service in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* from the age of thirteen, in practice they did not begin until the age of twenty. It thus stands to reason that when the Mishna speaks of youngsters serving the role of guards, it refers to the teenage *kohanim* who were technically qualified to serve in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* but in practice did not perform ritualistic functions, and instead were given the role of guarding the *Mikdash*.

Others, however, suggest defending the claim of the *mefaresh* that this role was served by *kohanim* below the age of bar-mitzva. The *Minchat Chinukh* (388:2) asserts that this *mitzva* is an obligation cast upon the nation at large, who are to see to it that the Temple is guarded by members of the Levite tribe. The *kohanim* who guard are not the ones who fulfill the *mitzva*; rather, the obligation is fulfilled collectively by *Am Yisrael*, whose leadership ensures that the *Mikdash* is guarded as the Torah commanded. As such, those who guard do not need to be adults who have reached the age of Torah obligation. For that matter, the *Minchat Chinukh* writes, a *cheresh* (deaf-mute) and *shoteh* (a person with mental dysfunction) are likewise suitable for fulfilling this role, despite being exempt from Torah obligation. The *Minchat Chinukh* draws a comparison to the consumption of sacrifices, which is a *mitzva* cast collectively upon the *kohanim*, as noted by the Rambam (Hilkhot Ma’aseh Ha-korbanot 10:1). Later (10:17), the Rambam writes that even young children of *kohanim* are permitted to eat the priestly portions of sacrifices. This would seem to prove that *mitzvot* assigned collectively to the *kohanim* may be fulfilled even by those under the age of bar-mitzva, and this would also be the case with regard to the obligation to guard the Temple.

Rav Avraham Borenstein of Sochatchov, in his *Avnei Neizer* (Y.D. 449), dismisses this comparison drawn by the *Minchat Chinukh* between guarding the *Mikdash* and the consumption of sacrifices. He writes that children are of course capable performing an act of eating, and thus their consumption of sacrifices suffices to fulfill the *mitzva* that the sacrifices be consumed. Other *mitzva* acts, however, are halakhically meaningful only if they are performed by people obligated in the *mitzva*.

We might respond that the *Minchat Chinukh* perhaps adopted a minimalist view of the obligation of *shemirat ha-mikdash*, perceiving it as requiring nothing more than the physical presence of *kohanim* at various spots in the area of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. As such, there is no difference whatsoever between standing guard and eating food in this regard; in both instances, the act is being done, and thus the obligation is fulfilled. The *Avnei Neizer* perhaps assumed that since the guarding was done out of respect and honor for the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, it requires not just the physical presence of people, but a certain level of cognizance and awareness, which only a person who has reached the age of bar-mitzva is capable of. And for this reason, perhaps, in the view of the *Avnei Neizer*, the law allowing minors to partake of sacrifices does not serve as a valid precedent for allowing minors to guard the *Mikdash*.

[For the previous S.A.L.T. click here.](http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-thursday-3-sivan-5778-may-17-2018)

**THE FIRST DECADE OF SALT ARCHIVES CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/salt-archives.html](http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-surf-little-torah-archives)

**MORE RECENT INSTALLMENTS OF SALT DIVREI TORAH CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files](http://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files)