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# Parsha

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PARSHAS BAMIDBAR | 29 IYAR 5769 | 23 MAY 2009

## Parsha Perspectives

RABBI LEIBY BURNHAM

ויעשו בני ישראל ככל אשר צוה ה' את משה עשו

*"And the children of Israel did according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses, thus did they do. (Numbers, 1:54)"*

**A** quick review of this verse presents an obvious question: Why does the verse twice tell us that the Jewish people did as G-d told Moses?

The *Alshich*, a 16th century commentator from Safed, explains this verse based on a lesson taught in the Talmud.

*"A good thought is regarded as a good deed, for it says 'then spoke those who fear G-d, each man to his fellow, and G-d listened and he heard, and a Book of Remembrance was written before Him for those that fear G-d, and those that contemplate his name' (Malachi 3:16) What does 'and for those that contemplate his name' mean? Rav Assi said: Even if a person contemplated fulfilling a mitzvah, and was prevented from performing it, G-d credits him as if he had fulfilled it" (Tractate Kiddushin, 40A)*

This is something unique to spiritual practice. In the physical world, if one contemplated buying a stock or a piece of real estate, but was prevented from doing so, he wouldn't miraculously find his bank account filled with profits from the sale that never went through. If one planned on planting flowers in time for the growing season but couldn't, they won't bloom from thin air. In the spiritual world however, if one truly intended to do something, but was somehow prevented from bringing his intent to fruition, G-d considers it as if it were done.

The reason for this is that ultimately "*Rachmana liba ba'i*, the Compassionate One (G-d) wants our heart" (*Zohar, Ki Teitzi* 181B). G-d is not looking for automatons who perform the *mitzvos* out of rote. He is looking for passionate souls, people whose only desire is to do the right thing, who thereby intend to elevate the world around them. It is not simply our actions, but the meaning behind them. Often the meaning is more valuable than the action. Someone who has all the right intent and strives to do the right thing is worthy of reward, even if in the end, he is prevented from doing the deed.

Based on this unique system, the *Alshich* teaches us that we are doubly rewarded every time we do a *mitzvah*: once for the intent and attitude we had before doing it, and again for actually doing it! (An exception to this rule would be when we inadvertently do a good deed, in which case we would get only the single point for the action, and none for the thought.)

This concept helps explain the difficulty with the passage cited above. The verse is essentially teaching us that even though the Jews only did what G-d told Moses to command them once, G-d considered it as if we did it

twice. The verse then would read "And the children of Israel did according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses (in thought), thus did they do (in action)."

A story that is repeated four times in the Talmud demonstrates this idea. Shimon *Ha'amsunni* (or possibly Nechemia *Ha'amsunni*) spent his entire professional career researching a legal concept, and had compiled a magnum opus detailing hundreds of applications of this concept. He continued for years applying his theory until he was confronted with a seemingly minor detail that completely derailed his theory. Realizing his error, he picked up and walked away from his entire life's work. (Imagine a professor today walking away from twenty years of research because one small detail seemed to contradict his theory!)

His students asked him what would become of the hundreds of legal applications he had devised? He answered, "the same way I was rewarded for my expositions, I likewise will be rewarded for walking away from them." He understood that G-d recognized his passionate search for the truth, and that even if years of his work would end up not bearing fruit, it was just as valuable in G-d's eyes.

This idea should help us to recognize the value of making a sincere commitment to taking spiritual growth steps, and not to allow the fear of failure to stop us. As long as we make the appropriate commitment, our success will already have begun as soon as we embark on the journey.

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Congratulations to my partner, Leah, for her son, David's engagement. Mazel tov! Love, Jenny

# Parsha POINTERS

## Talking Points

BAMIDBAR

RABBI ELAZAR MEISELS

### 1. LOSS LEADERS

*"And Moshe and Aharon took these men, whose names had been selected." 1:17*

**These men** – The twelve tribal leaders [whose names had just been listed in the previous verses.] – Rashi

Moses adjured them, "If you will listen to them, [rather than leading them,] you will be held responsible for their missteps. This can be compared to a serpent whose tail complained to the head that it, too, wanted a chance to lead. The head, unwilling to stand up for itself, agreed to follow the tail and suffered miserably through the experience. Bereft of eyes to perceive danger, the tail led the snake into thorns, fire, lime pits etc. Whose fault was it? None other than the head which refused to stand strong in face of the tail. Similarly, when the leaders lead, the Almighty empowers them and grants them success. When they choose to listen to their followers instead, they fall in their wake." – Midrash Rabbah, Devarim, 1:10

After the verse listed each of the twelve men individually, it then stated that Moses and Aharon took them. Why did it need to add to that, "those whose names had been selected?" Sifsei Kohein explains that herein lies a hint to the eventual downfall of these leaders who refused to accept leadership responsibilities and guide the nation with a strong hand. Instead, they ignored Moses' warning and preferred to take their directives from the people and be led around by them. Thus, the verse adds, "those whose names had been selected;" it was only their "names" that had been selected, but their hearts were not entirely into it.

### 2. MORE POWER TO YOU

*"And the Jewish people did in accordance with all that G-d had commanded Moshe, so they did. 1:14*

**And the Jewish people did in accordance** – They did not lay hands upon the Tabernacle for eternity [other than the Levites, of course, whose job it was to assemble and dismantle it.] – Ibn Ezra (Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra)

*And the Jewish people did...so they did*

*– Why does it say "they did," twice? They did not begrudge the Levites for living in close proximity to the Tabernacle while they were on the outskirts of the encampment. They also did not begrudge them the honor of assembling and dismantling the Tabernacle, whereas they weren't ever permitted to touch it. – Sifsei Kohein*

It is interesting to note that while the Israelites did not begrudge the Levites their good fortune and exalted rank, the tribe of Levites itself was not entirely successful in avoiding jealousy. Korach, a prominent Levite, led the rebellion against Moses and Aharon in the hopes of securing himself an even loftier position. Perhaps a lesson that can be derived from here is that once a person tastes power, it's not as easy to be satisfied with his helping, as it is to forgo it altogether. The Israelites did not lust for power because they hadn't even tasted it. The Levites, who sampled its intoxicating sensations, found it hard to remain satisfied with their portion.

### 3. IT'S IN THE WILL

*"And the Children of Israel acted in accordance with all that Hashem had commanded Moshe; so they encamped in accordance with their tribal flags and so they journeyed; every man according to his families, by his father's household." 2:34*

**Acted in accordance with all** – All the years that they spent in the dessert. – Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni

**By his father's household** – Why did it have to say, "By his father's house?" If they encamped and traveled with their tribe, it must have been together with their fathers' family since that was how tribal affiliation was determined. When the Almighty instructed Moses and their travel formation, Moses was greatly troubled as he feared that this arrangement would lead to bitter dissension, for no tribe would be satisfied with its place. The one on the south would want to be on the north side. One tribe would desire to be closer with a different neighbor, with whom it had more in common. This one would want to be more toward the rear, while another one would want to be more forward. Insisting that they all remain in their assigned place was a recipe for disaster. The Almighty reassured him that he had nothing to fear as they already understood that this was to

be the arrangement based on an incident that had occurred with their ancestors many years earlier. Prior to his passing, the Patriarch Jacob gathered his children and shared some final thoughts with them. He blessed them, exhorted them to follow in the ways of the Almighty, and insisted that they accept upon themselves the yoke of Heaven. Following that, he gave instructions on how his bier was to be transported to Canaan for burial. Only his sons were to carry it. His grandsons, whose mothers were Canaanite women, were not permitted to touch it. Joseph, the viceroy of Egypt was instructed not carry it, in deference to his royal status, as well as the Levites, since they would later carry the Holy Ark. Each son was assigned a place around the casket. He also promised them that if they accepted the arrangement as he had laid it out for them, the Almighty would later follow a similar pattern when they traveled according to their tribal designations. Thus, explained the Almighty to Moses, there was no need to fear dissension in this matter as they would be glad to follow in the directives of their fathers who had long ago accepted this arrangement. Therefore, the verse stresses that they traveled according to their tribal designation "each man together with his father's family." – Midrash Rabbah 2:8

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## PartnerTALK

### FINDERS KEEPERS, LOSERS WEEPERS

RABBI ELAZAR MEISELS

Dear Rabbi,

*A few weeks ago, I found a portable hard drive in a park near my home. It had no name on it, but I presumed it had valuable information on it. Shortly thereafter, I saw a sign asking if anyone found a portable hard drive and promising a significant sum to whomever returned it to its owner. I was very happy to return it to the owner but declined to take the reward that was offered. The owner looked like she was insulted, but I just didn't feel right taking money for doing a mitzvah. Was I wrong in refusing her?*

Dalya

Dalya,

Your question touches on an important principle in Jewish law regarding whether someone may accept payment for performing a *mitzvah*. Rabbi Yaacov ben Asher (known as the *Tur*), in his commentary on *Shulchan Aruch* (The Code of Jewish Law - *Yoreh Deah* 366) quotes the Talmud (*Nedarim* 37a), which insists that one not accept payment for the performance of a *mitzvah*. Of course, as with all aspects of Jewish law, nothing is quite as simple as it appears initially, and there are permissible means by which one may accept payment. For example: although a Torah teacher may not charge for teaching Torah, he may receive a steady salary so long as the payment covers his time which he could have used to earn a steady income in some other field, and the regular expense that the parents would have incurred to pay someone to watch their children during that time. A similar argument applies to a *mohel* (ritual circumciser), and many others whose job entails primarily the performance of a *mitzvah*.

Consequently, one may not charge the

owner of a lost object a fee for returning it to him (*Tur Yoreh Deah* 265:1 and *Ramban* quoted in 366.) If, however, the finder incurred an expense in returning it to its rightful owner, he may request reimbursement for the expense only. This expense can entail anything from shipping fees, time off from work, phone calls or any other expense experienced in the act of returning it to its rightful owner. He may not, however, ask for or expect a reward, regardless of the object's value.

If the owner offers payment, ideally he should refuse and explain that he does not wish to accept payment for the performance of a *mitzvah*. If the owner insists that he accept the reward, it is permissible to do so, for he is not accepting it with intent to be compensated for the *mitzvah*, but rather to spare the feelings of the grateful owner.

Interestingly, this does not preclude the possibility of offering a reward to one who returns a lost object. If one wishes to do so, he certainly may because his intent is not necessarily to compensate the finder for returning it, but to motivate the finder to expend the effort and expense often

required to return it (*Teshuvos V'Hanhagos* 3:463.)

Furthermore, it is important to note that the finder does not necessarily need to go out of his way to return the lost object to its owner. Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, better known as The *Chazon Ish*, (quoted in *Teshuvot H'hanhagos*) ruled that all that is required of him is to inform the owner that it has been found and arrange an appropriate time, or means of pickup, and his obligation has been met. If the owner forgoes the opportunity, the finder may inform him that the object will no longer be held for safekeeping and he is exempt from further involvement.

In conclusion, you were certainly correct for not wanting to accept a reward unless you incurred expenses in returning it, in which case you were permitted to accept that amount in return. If you are correct that the owner truly felt bad about your refusal to accept the reward, it would have been advisable to accept it, or at least a minimal sum, to avoid hurting her feelings.

All the best,  
Rabbi Elazar Meisels

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# THE Back PAGE

## TABLE TALK

FOR DISCUSSION AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

**א** In commanding Moses and Aaron to take a head-count of the children of Israel (1:2), G-d uses the word **סָאוּ** (*se'oo*) for the word "count," instead of the more common words for counting (ex: *s'for*, *m'ney*). In Joseph's interpretation of dreams, when Pharaoh's wine steward is told that he will be reinstated to his position, a form of the word *se'oo* is used to imply a life-changing positive development (Genesis 40:13). When informing Pharaoh's baker that his dream foretold his beheading, a similar expression of *se'oo* describes a terribly negative development (Genesis 40:19). What message could the Torah be giving about the Jewish head-count in using this uncommon word for counting, which elsewhere carries both extreme positive and negative connotations?

**ב** In explaining why the Tribe of Levi was singled out and not counted in the general census taken of the Jewish people (1:46-49), Rashi explains that the census heralded an ominous outcome. Those included in the census would eventually partake in the sin of the Golden Calf and, as a result, die in the wilderness. As the Tribe of Levi was not involved with the Golden Calf, G-d wanted them left out of the census. If Levi didn't eventually join those who sinned, what difference could it make if they were counted with the others or not?

## Soul Talk

Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein (*Ohr Yechezkel*) offers several insights as to why the Jewish people had to stand **כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלֵב אֶחָד**, "as one man with one heart", at Sinai in order to properly accept the Torah.

He quotes Rabbeinu Yonah (*Shaarei Teschuvah* 1:13), who expounds on the verse that states **לְתַאֲנֶה יִבְקֶשׁ וְנִפְרָד בְּכֹל תּוֹשִׁיָה יִתְגַּלֵּעַ**, "One who removes himself in order to court lust will be exposed in every Torah conclave" (*Mishlei* 18:1). Rabbeinu Yonah ponders: Why does the verse refer to one who courts lust as removing himself? He answers that one who chases after his desires removes himself from the ability to create or sustain relationships. Since no two men share the same (exact) desire, their ability to stand united is lacking; since their goals are different, their paths will perforce also be different. Therefore, following the will of the heart will most certainly result in seclusion. However, when one's goal is discovering the truth and meaning of Torah, ultimately he will unite with all those searching along with him. Sharing a goal and its aspirations will only bring unity.

Likewise, Rabbi Levenstein explains, the Jews stood at Mount Sinai completely united, devoid of any personal desires, focused on attaining one goal: Torah. This is the meaning of "as one man with one heart" — they were joined together in their quest for Torah.

Rabbi Levenstein delves deeper into the experience of unity achieved at Sinai. The *Zohar* (the primary text of the *Kabbalah*) states: The Jewish people, the Torah, and Hashem are one. Inside every person is a *neshamah* (soul), a spark of the Divine. Were we to heed its call and tend to its needs exclusively, we would lead totally spiritual lives. The *neshamah* scorns everything worldly, as a prince despises the food of a pauper. The *neshamah's* only desire is to attach itself to Hashem and the Torah, its original and only life source. Every morsel of holiness and spirituality nourishes it. Therefore, as the Jews stood at Mount Sinai waiting to receive the Torah, there was absolutely no separation between them. Their souls, pure and holy fragments of the Divine, melded completely with Hashem and His Torah. This oneness, says Rabbi Yechezkel, is what we express in awe during the *Minchah* (afternoon prayer) service on *Shabbat*: **אַתָּה אֶחָד וְשִׁמְךָ אֶחָד וְנִי כְעֶמֶךָ**, "You are One and Your Name is One, and who is like Your nation Israel, united as one in the land?" And when the Jews, in unity, cleave to Hashem and yearn for His ultimate unity, only then can they be described as "united as one."

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