

Bamidbar 5786

May 16, 2026 27 Iyar

Responding to Kobi Cornwall and Zoe Feller

Kobi and Zoe, thank you for two thoughtful divrei Torah on our parasha. You both drew a lesson out of this parasha about responsibility. Kobi, you focused on the role of the census in creating an army out of the Israelites, and saw in that moment the ongoing need of our people to be responsible for one another and to defend ourselves. You acknowledged that being strong as a people isn't just about might or muscle, but includes kindness, courage, integrity, and taking responsibility for one another. Zoe, you asked about the special role of the Levites in caring for the mishkan and saw that they were chosen because they were the tribe that demonstrated the greatest responsibility during the crisis of the golden calf. They remained loyal to G-d when the other tribes lost their way, and you concluded "Being counted isn't just about being part of a census. It's about being someone people can actually count *on*."

Rabbi Shai Held, when writing about this parasha in his book *The Heart of Torah*, agrees with you both about responsibility, but he gets there in a different way.

He notes that the opening of this parasha is kind of, in his words, "boring." It takes 46 verses to get to the count of 603,550 military age men. Why, he asks, is there so much seemingly repetitious detail? He argues that in all of this detail the Torah is communicating an essential theological and ethical truth of Judaism: every single human being matters.

In Numbers Rabba (4:2), the midrash tells us, "A man had a stock of fine pearls which he used to count before taking out and count again before putting away." In other words, like the man with fine pearls, G-d is saying to the children of Israel, "You are my children... and therefore I count you often."

It's not only that every single pearl and every single human being matters, it's that each one is precious and beloved to G-d. And it's not only that we each are precious and beloved to G-d, it's that G-d wants us to know that we are each precious and beloved. As Rabbi Akiva teaches in Pirkei Avot, "Beloved is the human being, for he was made in the image of G-d. Even more beloved is he, for it was made known to him that he was created in the image of G-d, as it says (in Genesis) "For in the image of G-d, G-d made the human being."

God wants us to know how beloved we are.

Isaac Arama asks why did G-d need to count the Israelites if of course G-d already knew how many Israelites there were? The answer, Arama suggests, is that G-d didn't need to count. The counting wasn't for G-d, it was for the Israelites, to teach them the worth of every individual, and the importance of their differences. Arama says, "They were all equal in stature, and yet the stature of each one was different." Nehama Leibowitz, speaking of next week's parasha, adds: "Perhaps the Torah wished to emphasize the importance and uniqueness of the individual, repudiating the ideology that regards the human being as a cog in a vast machine and as an indistinguishable member of a mass."

This individuality, this human uniqueness, is not about what you or I are owed. It's about responsibility. Like the role of the Levites, it's about service. To quote Rabbi Held, "We are, all of us, called upon to serve. Yet crucially, we are not asked to serve in nameless anonymity but rather in the fullness of our own individuality. As human beings faced with a world so utterly broken in so many ways, we are called upon to ask not just what can I *give*, but also, and crucially, what can *I* give? How can I, with my unique gifts, talents, and passions – and my unique combination of weaknesses and limitations – best serve G-d? G-d's love is a call to service, and we answer not as human beings in general but as human beings in all of our particularity."

And because we exist as individuals in company with other individuals, that means that when we come together, the challenge and responsibility that each of us has, is to honor the differences among us, the full diversity within the community. That is not easy, but it is essential if we, individually or collectively, are going to fully live our purpose, fully rise to our responsibility to serve.

Twice in the last month I have given a sermon that has been cheered by part of the community – who have responded with deep gratitude for the message – and that same sermon has been rejected by another part of the community – who have responded with anger and hurt. The people who were upset with the first sermon were thrilled by the second one and the people who were happy with the first sermon were alienated by the second one. All of those people are members here. They do not agree with each other. But they all belong here, fully as part of this community. When we disagree bitterly, we often feel that we wish the other people would magically change to be like us, or that they would just go away. But

we actually need each other in ways we often can't see or understand, but which are real.

As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught, “the individuals belonging to a community complement one another existentially. Each individual possesses something unique, rare, which is unknown to others; each individual has a unique message to contribute, a special color to add to the communal spectrum...[each person] contributes something which no one else could have contributed. [Each one] enriches the community existentially; [each one] is irreplaceable...[indeed] to recognize a person is to recognize that [they are] irreplaceable. To hurt a person is to tell [them] that [they are] expendable, that there is no need for [them].”

Rabbi Held concludes, “I would suggest that a Jewish community worthy of the name is thus charged to honor two facts simultaneously: As Jews and as human beings, we share deep connection and kinship, and at the same time we are irreducibly different from one another. To live together is to nurture what connects us even as we affirm and celebrate what renders us unique. In building a community, then, we have the opportunity to emulate G-d: just as G-d treasures each Jew and each human being, in all of [their] singularity, so too must we.”

We are six days away from the holiday of Shavuot. On Shavuot we re-live the experience of gathering at the foot of Mount Sinai to receive Torah. We do this by coming together as a people, in community, with all of our differences, to learn. To study. We have what's called a Tikkun Leyl Shavuot, and the idea is that we repair (tikkun) the mistake of our ancestors who slept at the foot of the mountain before receiving the Torah. Instead, we stay up during the night in a veritable festival of learning. On Thursday night next week hundreds of Jews from all across Brooklyn, from all kinds of diverse communities – religiously diverse, ideologically diverse, demographically diverse – will gather here starting at 6:30 pm and stretching late into the night. Just as the midrash teaches that when G-d spoke at Sinai the voice split into seventy different voices, 70 different languages, 70 different faces and interpretations of Torah so that it would be accessible to all of humanity, on erev Shavuot there will be 70 different classes, 70 different learning opportunities throughout the night, taught by diverse leaders and members of the Jewish community. Some will come for an hour, some will stay up all night until praying together at the hashkama minyan when they will greet the dawn.

This kind of communal learning helps us to remember that in our diversity there is a Oneness that is greater than any of us. A Oneness that dwelt at the center of the Israelites in that mishkan that the Levites served, Zoe. A Oneness that was the sustaining force upon which the Israelites were utterly dependent, regardless of their armor or their vigor, Kobi. A Oneness that dwells right here whenever ten of us are learning or praying together. A Oneness that is within and beyond all living things, connecting us even when we, in all of our differences and diversity, feel so disconnected from one another. That Oneness was the One who spoke from Mount Sinai. That Oneness is the One who continues to speak through Torah as it is interpreted and reinterpreted every week and every year. May we, as we approach this Shavuot, humble ourselves before that Oneness, seeking in Torah greater wisdom than we now have, praying with true and pure intent that we be merely vessels – utterly unique, precious, and beloved vessels – to serve that Oneness with our whole hearts and with our whole lives.

Shabbat Shalom.