

Studying What Isn't There

Parshas Bamidbar usually presents a challenge to pulpit Rabbis. Coming as it does just before Shavuos, one would hope to have a Parsha which inspires with the breadth and depth of Torah and/or which gives deep meaningful insight into life as an example of what can be gained through learning Torah.

Conventional wisdom would suggest that it is nearly impossible to find inspiration and wisdom in a Parsha which seems to have slightly more plot than the Manhattan phone book (if anyone still remembers what a phone book is).

“Conventional wisdom” is not at all in the same league as the Wisdom of Torah. Not only is every word of Torah, even the listing of names and numbers of our Parsha, divine and a manifestation of Hashem Himself, but even the words seemingly missing from the Parsha, are filled with meaning and tell us of the nature of Torah itself, not to mention lessons in how to view our current situation. So, let's jump in and learn some of the words that are missing from the Parsha.

The fourth Aliya (Ch. 3 1-2) begins: “And these are the progeny of Aharon and Moshe on the day that Hashem spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai. And these are the names of the sons of Aharon...” You can take out your Chumash and look at the following Pesukim and nowhere do the names of Moshe's sons appear in the Parsha. Rashi explains that Aharon's sons are referred to here as progeny of Moshe as well because he taught them Torah. Which teaches us several powerful lessons about Torah. One is the significance of teaching people Torah; it is tantamount to giving birth to them. Another lesson is that Torah is not an inheritance which follows family lines but is available to anyone who applies himself. Thus, Moshe's sons do not inherit Moshe's greatness or Torah scholarship; rather it is transmitted to Aharon's sons and to Yehoshua who becomes Moshe's successor in the transmission of Torah as we say in the first Mishna of Pirkei Avos.

The absence of Moshe's sons here shows that there is room for others to achieve heights in Torah regardless of family connections. But, why are they not here at least as contenders, as runners-up, or also rans? Why totally absent?



One way of understanding this is by going back to earlier Parshios. In Parshas Shemos, when Moshe heads back to Mitzrayim, Aharon comes out to meet him. As Rashi there explains, Aharon asked who are the people with Moshe. Moshe replied that they are his wife and children. Aharon says, “We are anguished over the people who are already in Mitzrayim and you want to bring more people into that situation?” So, Moshe sent them back to Yisro and he continued into Mitzrayim. They later rejoined him about year later in the desert, as we read at the beginning of Parshas Yisro.

Let us move forward to Parshas Ki Sisa, and the Golden Calf. Hashem says to Moshe (32:9-11) that the people have sinned and Hashem wants to destroy them and create His nation from Moshe. Moshe argues to Hashem, “Why should You be so angry at the people whom you took out of Mitzrayim.”

The Or Hachaim explains that Moshe is making two distinct arguments to respond to the two parts of Hashem’s statement. The first thing Hashem said he wants to do is to destroy the people, and to this Moshe says “Why should You be angry to such a degree?” It is not as if they all had sinned themselves – the actual worshippers actually were killed upon Moshe’s return, and the discussion here is about everyone else, who, at most, only bear culpability for not having prevented it. Moshe says that while they bear some guilt, that doesn’t warrant total destruction of the entire nation.

The second part of Hashem’s alternate plan, to build His nation from Moshe, is addressed by “whom you took out of Mitzrayim.” Moshe’s argument here is that experiencing Mitzrayim and the Exodus from Mitzrayim are absolute prerequisites for being Hashem’s chosen people, and Moshe’s sons had not been in Mitzrayim, as we saw in Parshas Shemos. Therefore, says Moshe, Hashem has no choice, as it were, and can’t destroy the people.

How did Moshe know that being in Mitzrayim is a critical requirement? Actually, there are several ways to see this. One is logical: The whole plan was laid out in Parshas Lech Lcha to Avraham. His descendants would be strangers in a strange land, enslaved and afflicted, and then Hashem would take them out, give them the Torah and bring them back to Eretz Yisrael. If Mitzrayim was not necessary why was it part of the plan in the first place? Secondly, the Ten Commandments begin with “I am Hashem your G-d Who took you out of Mitzrayim.” This serves as the basis for all that follows. If Mitzrayim was not a necessary precursor to receiving the Torah, why does it feature so prominently here? In fact, we see Mitzrayim mentioned repeatedly in the Torah, in connection with



many Mitzvos, and we are required to mention it at least twice a day. Based on this, Moshe now argues to Hashem, destroying the Jewish people and replacing them with Moshe's children is not an option.

In an unintended way, as a result of the compassion of Moshe and Aharon for Moshe's sons which led to the decision to not bring them to Mitzrayim, they missed out on an essential formative experience.

Why is experiencing enslavement a crucial element of preparing to receive the Torah?

The Talmud relates that R. Zeira, one of the Sages of the Gemara who resided in Bavel (Babylon) decided to go learn Torah in Eretz Yisrael. When he arrived and entered into the Yeshiva he discovered that he could not absorb the teachings. The approach, the perspective, the way they learned Torah in Eretz Yisrael was do different from what he was accustomed to, that his previous studies interfered with his ability to grasp the Torah of Eretz Yisrael. He thereupon fasted 100 fasts that the Babylonian Talmud be forgotten by him so he would have a clean slate to learn the Talmud of Eretz Yisrael.

When Hashem gave us the Torah, we became His. We came something totally new and different from what we were before and different from all other people and peoples in the world. We are not people who happen to have gained a dataset, insight, philosophy, a toolbox to live a better life. Torah is not an added feature, like an optional accessory on a car. Torah defines us. We are an embodiment of the fulfilment of Hashem's plan in this world, which happens to be in human form.

In order to become something new, we have to "erase" our previous being. For this reason, it was necessary to endure the suffering of Mitzrayim, to erase any sense of self and identity, any sense of entitlement or ego. Only then can we assimilate the fact that we are Hashem's, that is our being, and that is all that we are.

(This is why Hashem held the mountain over us to "coerce" us to accept the Torah. We had already declared "Naaseh v'Nishma," that we will do and heed everything that Hashem will tell us. But, as long it is us declaring that we chose this, we also retain the option of changing our decision. We decided, and we can decide again and decide differently. If this is so, then, even if we don't retract our original decision, it is never fully 100% decided. It always requires re-verification. There is an "us" here which needs to keep saying, "We haven't changed our mind (yet)." Therefore, Hashem moves our



acceptance out of our choice, up to a higher level where it becomes an absolute, not dependent on whether we think we still want it.)

Getting past human to the Divine, requires that eliminating the former state in order to become the latter. There is only one way to do that, and that is what happened to us and for us in Mitzrayim. And, Moshe's children did not have the benefit of this experience.

This is not to say Moshe was not a good father or educator. I am sure that he did what all good fathers do, and taught them to say Shema before going to sleep at night along with a goodnight story from Midrash or Chassidic tales, he made sure they made brachos before eating, and he taught them how to ride a bicycle. He also protected them from harm and did not bring them into dangerous places. But life is complex, and doing a seemingly good thing for them prevented them from acquiring another good, the ability to fully assimilate Hashem's Torah.

And, therefore, when the Torah lists the enduring progeny of Moshe, in terms of the application of Torah to this world, Moshe's sons are not listed. They are mentioned by name in the beginning of Parshas Yisro, before the Torah was given, but never mentioned again after the Giving of the Torah, because their experience of it is not what is intended for all Jewish people for all of eternity.

And, this is a third lesson about Shavuos and receiving the Torah, from those two words missing from the Torah, "Gershom" and "Eliezer."

This is a timely idea. We are now going on three months of being trapped in our homes, our lives on pause. It isn't anywhere near as bad as enslavement in Egypt, but is an "erasure" of sorts of who we thought we were. All the important activities which filled our days contributed to forming our identity. We were butchers, bakers or candlestick makers ... until we weren't. We shed that identity so that, as we prepare for Shavuos, our true, eternal identity can assert itself within us. We are Yidden, Divinely empowered to carry out Hashem's mission of preparing ourselves and the world around us for the coming of Moshiach NOW!

