

Bamidbar 2023

Flags and Formations

< 1 minute read | Straightforward

Wherever the Jewish People camped and traveled in the wilderness, the tribes were always positioned in a particular formation, which the Torah goes into lengthy detail about several times.

But we're one people! Why are there tribes, and why was there any kind of formation; and more importantly, what are we supposed to make of the specific logistics millennia after the fact?

R' Norman Lamm notes that we read about the formations before Shavuot when we celebrate receiving the Torah. We might think that we're doing pretty great – we're in the camp of Torah after all!

The Torah gently reminds us that that's never been enough. The twelve tribes all had different characteristics, and each contributed in its own particular way. For example, Yehuda, the largest and strongest, tapped for leadership and monarchy, was the first in the formation and the first into battle.

We all have particular skills and functions useful at a particular time and place. It's not enough to be Torah-oriented in general – what is your individual place and purpose in particular? What do you stand for?

We need only remind ourselves of Bilam, a man whose belief in God's existence was as genuine and absolute as it gets and yet, remained an awful human.

Believing is step one only. The formations matter because we need a reminder that we can't hide in the crowd.

It's what we do that matters.

Living with Newness

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the key skills children learn is how to read a clock; what time is it?

Beyond answering the basic question with hours and minutes, there is something deeper behind the question; knowing the time means knowing what to do. The time of day and time of year, the seasons, TorahRedux | Ancient Words, Timeless Wisdom Subscriptions and feedback: Neli@TorahRedux.com



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and the calendar establish the boundaries and time frames upon which our world is built, with specific routines for morning, afternoon, evening, and night, summer, fall, winter, and spring.

Different cultures have established various numeral systems and calendars to measure time. Today, most of the world uses the Gregorian calendar, a fixed calendar determined by how long the earth takes to make one complete orbit around the sun.

The Torah asks us to track time using the moon as a frame of reference; when people spot the new moon, they would report it to the highest court, which declares the beginning of a new month – Rosh Chodesh. It's not Rosh Chodesh because there's a new moon, but because the Jewish leaders say so. It's the very first commandment in the Torah, given to the Jewish People still enslaved in Egypt:

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רֵאשֹׁן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה – This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. (12:1)

There are lots of mitzvos, so one of them has to come first. But why is establishing the lunar calendar through Rosh Chodesh the first mitzvah as opposed to any other?

The story of the birth of the Jewish People begins at a time of stuckness, with the Jewish People systematically subjugated and oppressed, powerless objects with no choice or control over their circumstances.

Although slavery is illegal in most of the world, it persists. Moreover, slavery isn't just a legal status; it's a state of mind, body, and soul. If you have ever felt helpless or stuck, you have experienced an element of slavery.

When we internalize that forces of change exist and that we have the power to harness and steer them, the possibilities are limitless. This moment can be different to the moments that have come before; this newness is the beginning of all newness – הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁית חֳדָשִׁים רֵאשֹׁן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה.

The Shem miShmuel explains that the power of the Exodus story is that its story of freedom on a national level offers us the opportunity to become free of the tendencies and troubles that hound us on a personal level. With the power to change, hard times don't need to be so scary anymore, and the world isn't threatening; it can be full of exciting possibilities. It follows that the first mitzvah is the one that empowers us to change by giving us a symbol of change.

The sense of futility, powerlessness and stuckness that come from being burnt out or overwhelmed is poison. But as much as stuckness can come from attachment to the past, R' Nachman of Breslev teaches us to avoid dwelling too much on the future and focus on the present day and present moment.

The Torah often speaks to us in terms of here and now – הַיּוֹם / וְעַתָּה – which our sages take to mean as references to Teshuva, our capacity and power to change and repent – וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שֶׁאֵל מֵעַמֶּךָ כִּי וְנִבְּנִינוּ עִם מְרֵעֵיתוֹ וְצִאָן יָדוֹ הַיּוֹם אִם-בְּקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ. אִם-לִירָאָה.



The world tracks time using the sun; the Sfas Emes notes that the nations of world history rise and fall like the sun, lasting only when things are bright. The Jewish People track time using the moon, persisting in darkness, and even generating light among total blackness.

The very first mitzvah is the lunar calendar, the only calendar with a visual cue for changing times; and a powerful symbol of change, a natural metaphorical image of a spiritual reality. It's not just an instruction to count the time but a commandment to rule over time and even natural phenomena. It's a mitzvah to live by and with the power of change and renewal.

Every day, every week, and in truth, every moment, is brand new, brimming with freshness, vitality, and renewal.

Count Me In

4 minute read | Straightforward

A fair amount of times, the Torah reports that the Jewish People conducted a census, breaking down how many men were in each tribe, and then adds up the subtotals for a total count. It occupies a lot of space in the Torah.

The Ramban explains that taking a census is a basic government function to organize logistics, safety, and military planning.

While that is accurate, the Torah's lessons are timeless and eternal. Of what value to us is the level of detail in the raw statistical data from each census?

The Ramban explains that the information itself is more relevant to daily government, which is probably why it only covered military-age men. But the lesson isn't in the data; it's in the method of counting.

The way they counted was that every individual would have to appear before Moshe and Ahron, and God. The requirement to appear before the entire generation's leadership tells us that those people were not just numbers; they were valuable individuals.

There is a constant interplay between individualism and collectivism. Individualism stresses individual identity and goals; collectivism focuses on group identity and goals, what is best for the collective group. The notion of collectivism and unity – אֶקְדָּוֶת – is all too often propounded to squash individuality, and we mustn't tolerate that. You are not just a cog in a machine, with another human being at the ready to take your place. You are not the property of the state or any group or person.

And as the Lubavitcher Rebbe put it, people are not dollars. You are not fungible. You are not replaceable.

R' Jonathan Sacks highlights the Torah's choice of words for the count – *שָׂאוּ אֶת־רֵאשׁוֹת כָּל־עַדְת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל / כִּי* – literally, “lift the heads.” There are many ways to say “count” in Hebrew; this isn't one of the naturally obvious ones. Again, the Torah seems to be saying that even among the crowd, lift your head up high and proud. To this day, Jews do not count people directly, but instead, count heads.

There is a beautiful and uncommon blessing we say upon seeing a crowd of multitudes – *הַכֶּם הַרְזִים* – the knower of secrets, which the Gemara explains as acknowledging God's greatness in knowing each of us in our individual hearts, despite our different faces and minds. This is a subtle but vital point – God is great not because of the glory and sheer size of the crowd, but because God can see each of us as distinct within the sea of all too forgettable faces; God can see the individual within the collective.

It is a blessing in praise of the God who creates diversity in our world, rejoicing in our different minds, opinions, and thoughts. It is a blessing over Jewish pluralism. It is one thing to tolerate our differences; it is quite another to acknowledge them as a blessing. It is one thing to love Jews because we are all Jewish, that is, the same; it is quite another to love Jews because they are different from ourselves.

We cannot tolerate factionalism, where one subgroup splinters from the main group, but we cannot afford to exclude individuals. The Torah makes incredible demands of us, and we mostly fall well short, some a little more, some a little less. We must hold ourselves to the highest standards, but we can never look down at our fellow.

To argue the other side, while we must celebrate individuality, we must not condone individualism. Our duty is to find a balance between being individuals while remaining part of the group. We need to maintain a tension between the need for individual freedom and the demands of others.

The whole idea of loving others is that they are not just like you; if you had to love people like you, that would just be loving yourself and would demand nothing of you. We must reinforce the notion of tolerance of heterogeneity, people not just like us. Diversity is natural; homogeneity is artificial.

God creates all of us as separate individuals, born with a particular makeup and tendencies that mark us as a distinct and unique piece of fate. It is who you are to the core, but some people never become who they truly are; they conform to the tastes of others and end up wearing a mask that hides their true nature. R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that being the same as others is a sacrilege that profanes and squanders who we are put in this world to be.

Loving another is not that I care about someone in my circle who is just like me, and perhaps I have a duty to expand my conception of who is in the circle. That would be loving yourself and would demand nothing of you. Loving another means that someone else's problems bother me so deeply



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that I simply have to do something about it, and I will be lacking if I do not. The idea of loving another does not include circles – it has nothing to do with people’s similarities.

Evolutionary theory teaches that cooperation is as important for survival as competition. You’re irreplaceable and unique – but remember that we need you! The strength of the team is each individual. The strength of each individual is the team.

The idea that every Jew is worthy enough to be presented before God and the generation’s leadership, that every Jew must lift their head high, is timeless and eternal. Moreover, it teaches a broader lesson that is portable to all and covers women, children, and the elderly as well. The Jewish People are something massively monumental, yet we each have our own significant role to play. We must celebrate each other’s unique contributions while striving to do more ourselves.

This illuminates an interesting comment by Rashi, that the point of the census was to discern how many people had survived the plague that followed the Golden Calf debacle. The plague killed a small fraction of the total population figure given in the Torah, so it’s strange to talk in terms of “survivors” when only a few succumbed. But if we consider each individual as a core component of the Jewish People, then the Jewish People as a whole really are damaged by the loss of any single person, and the remainder truly are “survivors.”

The Baal Shem Tov taught that if the Jewish People are a Sefer Torah, then every Jew is a letter.

The Torah counts everyone. Because everyone counts.

Attitude Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

God gave various commands during the Jewish People’s time in the desert.

We expect God to give commands; it comes with the territory, that’s what God does, and it makes sense. They’d just left Egypt and stood at Sinai; there was a new religion with new procedures and protocols to implement. And after all, there’s no way to know what God wants unless God says so!

What God says, we expect the audience to do, which the Torah dutifully records – וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן.

But what we might not expect is that the Torah reports with meticulous regularity, every time, not just that people obey, but that people carry out their task as per God’s command – וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'. The Torah uses this phrase tens, if not hundreds, of times!



If you think about it, it's almost entirely redundant, apart from the repetitiveness. It's not obvious what doing something per God's command adds because, in nearly every example, there is no other conceivable way to do it.

When God says to light the Menora, there is only one way to light a Menora. When God says to take a census of how many people there are, the only way to fulfill the command is to count people. When God says to bring a Korban Pesach, or how to do the Yom Kippur service, or any of the Mishkan-related workflows, or to go to war with Midian, or to execute somebody, there isn't any other way to do any of those things! And yet each time, the Torah doesn't say people followed their instructions; it says that the people followed their instructions faithfully as per God's command – וַיַּעַשׂ ה' כִּן כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'.

When people follow instructions, why does the Torah add that they followed the instructions per God's command?

Perhaps the Torah isn't telling us that they did it; it's telling us how they did it.

R' Shlomo Farhi explains that even when there truly is only one way to do something, there is still a right and wrong way. When the Torah adds that people followed instructions faithfully – כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' – it's not saying that they did just like they were told; it means that people follow instructions just like when they were told, capturing the snapshot of sentiment or feeling of a particular moment.

When you do anything, even if there's no other way, you can still do it with energy, focus, and joy, or not – a right way and a wrong way, even when there's only one way.

Our sages were sensitive to this subtle but universal nuance.

Rashi quotes the Sifri that Ahron lit the Menora every day, precisely the way Moshe told him for the rest of his life, and never changed or deviated in any way – כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'; the Sifri suggests that our everyday approach to Torah should similarly be with freshness and excitement – וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר – אֲנִכִּי מִצְוָה הַיּוֹם עַל-לִבְבְּךָ.

R' Simcha Bunim of Peshischa notes that as much as the comment is about Ahron not changing how he performed his duties, it's equally a comment about how his duties didn't change him. Some people let privilege and honor get to their heads – but not Ahron.

The Sfas Emes notes that lighting the Menora wasn't a prestigious ceremony in that any Kohen could kindle the lights. Still, Ahron took it seriously enough that he insisted on doing it himself every day for the rest of his life – he did it like the moment he received the command.

The Izhbitzer notes that the highest praise for Ahron is that he retained that initial desire, that things never got stale or boring for him. He kept challenging himself to find something new and exciting, so he lit the Menora his last time with the same enthusiasm as the first.

The Shem miShmuel notes that the word for training, which means practice repetitions, is cognate to the word for inauguration, the first time you do something – חינוך / חנוכה. This suggests that training is not simply a repeat of past performance but the repetition of newness, with each repetition inviting an opportunity to introduce a fresh aspect or dimension.

Attitude and mentality are everything; the mental and emotional components heavily influence the substance of any interaction. Prayer and sacrifice require proper intent to have any substance; there is a vast difference between giving someone a hand because you care and giving someone a hand out of pity.

A Torah scroll is quite clearly a religious article, yet it has no inherent sanctity from perfect script or spelling. A Torah scroll is kosher and sacred exclusively when written with the express intent of imbuing the words and scroll with sanctity, which is to say that its utility and value as a holy object are solely determined by the mentality of the scribe.

The Mishkan had plenty of unique artifacts like the Menora, but it had some pretty ordinary implements that everyone owns; a shirt, a hat, a cup, and a spoon. What designated these as sacred and distinct is the intention with which they were crafted.

This is a universal truth in all walks of life, from Judaism to art to cooking. A great cook will say their secret ingredient is love; a great artist or sage will say their secret technique is heart and soul.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., if a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'

Mastery is typically dull. Finishing your fiftieth marathon is less notable than your first.

It's normal.

The more we experience something, our enthusiasm, and attention typically wane. Predictability and comfort put an end to fresh euphoria; when we know what to expect, our excitement wears off, and boredom sets in. That's why we need to keep things fresh if we're focused on a long-term project or goal; cruise control is a killer.

It's often seen with young athletes or scholars who lose their way – they think they've made it and stop putting in the work that would take them to the elite tier. The seasoned pros always comment on how essential it is for youngsters to maintain their concentration and focus on staying on track, being fully present in each moment, and devoting their full and undivided attention, so things don't get boring.

In all walks of life, the highest form of mastery is valuing each repetition and finding its novelty and excitement.



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It's not redundant for the Torah to say each time that people did the right thing in the right way for the right reason. It is ubiquitous because it reflects a truism of life, a constant reminder that is universally true.

The way you do things matters.

I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - Neli@TorahRedux.com.

If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?

Neli

PS - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have been blessed to operate a business that allows me to dedicate a substantial amount of time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I broker healthcare businesses for sale; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers, and introductions to anyone who might want to buy or sell a healthcare business!*

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.