

BAMIDBAR

THE SECRET OF  
THE SPIRITUAL BATTLEFIELD

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A

**Soldiers in Spiritual Battles**

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The bulk of this *parsha* deals with the count of the Jewish People in the desert. On a simple level, the people were counted for the army. On a deeper level, rather than understanding this count as referring to soldiers battling on a physical front with weapons of war, the Zohar understands that the Torah is talking about a battle on a spiritual front, about warriors fighting the battle of the Torah and Mishkan. What are these two fronts? What does the Zohar mean that the *tzivos Hashem* fight the battles of the Torah and the Mishkan?

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B

**Counting Names**

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The Shem Mishmuel starts his explanation with a point that the Seforno also notes. The Torah mentions two major censuses of the Jewish People, one in Parshas Bamidbar and one in Parshas Pinchas. Both counts are according to the tribes, the princes of

which are each mentioned specifically as well. In Bamidbar, at the beginning of the forty years in the desert, Hashem commanded an additional aspect to the counting. The *pasuk* there says to count the number of names, “*b’mispar sheimos...lgulgelosam*” (Bamidbar 1:2).

In Pinchas however, the Torah does not include the phrase “*b’mispar sheimos lgulgelosam*” in the commandment to count. There, the people are counted but names are not. The Ramban explains this difference as follows. In the count in Parshas Bamidbar, each Jew brought a half-*shekel* coin and put it into a box. Afterwards, all of the coins were counted. When they brought their *shekalim*, each Jew would announce his name to Moshe and to the prince of his tribe, as the Torah commands, “*b’mispar sheimos*.” In Pinchas, the people simply gave a half-*shekel* coin but did not announce their names.

Why the change? The Seforno says that the count in Bamidbar was of the Jews who left Egypt, accepted the Torah, and built the Mishkan. Every Jew was so precious because he participated in these momentous, fundamental experiences. The next generation, which was counted in Parshas Pinchas, had not experienced these events, so their individual names weren’t as important.

The Shem Mishmuel suggests another approach.

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## C

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### Collective Name and Individual Names

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In his Chassidic explanation, the Shem Mishmuel cites a Midrash that he refers to often. There are two verses that relate to God’s relationship to the stars in the sky. One is, “*Lchulam b’sheim yikra*. God calls [all the stars] by name” (Yeshaya 40:26). The word *sheim*—name—is in singular form in this verse. The second *pasuk* is, “*Lchulam sheimos yikra*. God calls [each star] by its own name” (Tehillim 147:4). When God wants to address all the stars

together, He uses their single collective name. When He wants to talk to a specific star, He calls that star by its individual name.

This is symbolic of the Jewish People. We each have a dual role. We are part of the collective of Am Yisrael and, in that sense, we have one shared name: Bnei Yisrael, the Children of Israel. Within this shared identity, we also have personal roles. Each person has his own individuality and unique experiences. Each person has his own individual name. According to Chassidus, the name a person receives is really God-given. Even though children are normally named by their parents, the parents receive a sort of prophecy, as the name they give defines the character of the child.

Every Jew functions both as an individual on the level of *prat*, and as part of the collective on the level of *klal*. We have many *mitzvos* that we perform on our own. We put on *tefillin*, eat *matza*, and light Shabbos candles. There are also *mitzvos* that we do as a nation. In the Beis Hamikdash, the sacrifices were national *mitzvos*. These included the *korbanos tamid* and the *musaf* offerings. Settling the Land of Israel and appointing a Jewish king are also national *mitzvos*.

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## D

### Three Pillars

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The Mishna says, “*Al shlosha d’varim ha’olam omeid: al haTorah, al ha’avoda, v’al gemilus chasadim*. The world rests on three things: on the Torah, on the service of Hashem, and on doing kindness” (Avos 1:2). Torah study is primarily an individual *mitzva*. I sit and study the Torah. Even if we are learning together as a group, in a *shiur*, each person still has his own Torah experience, understanding it with his mind in his own way.

This is one of the surprising things for me as a teacher. Sometimes, when I hear my students repeat things I have taught, they don’t say exactly what I intended. The students add or subtract

things, and sometimes they say something else entirely! Learning Torah is an individual experience. Each person learns in his own way and grasps Torah in his own way, and this is the way it should be. Chazal say, “*k’sheim she’partzufei hem shonim, kach dei’osei hem shonos*. Just as no two people look exactly the same, so too are people’s minds different” (Yerushalmi Brachos 9:1). No two people think exactly the same way. Even identical twins are not completely identical. The human personality is remarkable in that each personality is truly different. When we use our minds to study the Torah, we certainly have an individual experience.

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### Prayer, the *Mitzva* of the Congregation

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The second pillar of the world, *avoda*, is primarily a public, collective *mitzva*. For hundreds of years, we had a Mishkan or one of the two Batei Mikdash. Each one lasted for approximately 400 years. The main *mitzva* there was the *korbanos tzibur*, which consisted of the *temidim*, the daily offerings, and the *musafim*—additional offerings on special days. The nation as a whole was the prime body that performed the *avoda*—the sacrificial service to Hashem.

This also applies to *tefila*, prayer. *Davening* with ten Jews is much more powerful and important than an individual *davening* alone. The Gemara says, “*Ein tefilaso shel adam nishma’as ela b’tzibur*. A person’s prayers are heard only as part of the congregation” (Brachos 6a). The Gemara also says, “*Ein Hakadosh Baruch Hu mo’eis b’tefilasan shel rabim*. Hashem does not reject the prayers of the many” (Brachos 8a). The prayer of the group of Am Yisrael is the main prayer. I once heard an interesting thought about this from my Rebbe, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik *zt”l*. Every Jew turns towards Yerushalayim to recite the Shemoneh Esrei. When Shlomo dedicated the Beis Hamikdash, he said that everyone will pray

in the direction of this holy house. What is the idea of everyone facing towards the same place when they pray?

The idea is that all the prayers from around the world gather in Yerushalayim as a national prayer. When I am praying alone in New York, and someone else in Australia also prays towards Yerushalayim, all of our prayers unite in Yerushalayim. The power of that national prayer is the real power of prayer. Therefore, we see that *tefila* is mainly expressed at the national, collective level, at the level of the *tzibur*.

The Shem Mishmuel says that, in Parshas Bamidbar, Moshe counted the people who left Mitzrayim, received the Torah, and then built the Mishkan. In this count, the names of the people and their families are mentioned. Their personal names emphasize their importance as individuals. On the other hand, their family and tribe represent them as a group. Thus, the count was dual in nature.

This duality was emphasized because that generation received the Torah as individuals and also built the Mishkan together as a community. The count in Pinchas, however, was of the next generation. Their main accomplishment was when they entered Eretz Yisrael as a nation. Therefore, in that count, only their collective nature is emphasized.

The third pillar, *gemilus chasadim*, is a combination of the individual and the group. Individuals do *chesed*, and so does the community as a whole. There are acts of kindness that exceed the abilities and means of any one person. At the same time, *chesed* requires the personal touch of an individual, which organizations are incapable of providing.

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## Hashem's Unique Connection to Each Jew

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Let us further analyze the first count. The Jewish People were originally counted on a dual level. Each individual person was so precious that he deserved to be counted with his own name. Then there was the communal count of tribal groups and families.

As individuals, they heard the Ten Commandments at Sinai, which were directed to each person individually. Each person was told by God Himself, "*Anochi Hashem Elokecha*. I am Hashem, your God." "*Anochi*," said Rav Soloveitchik, is different than "*ani*," the regular word for "I." *Ani* is an impersonal "I." If you wanted to say, "I went to the store" or "I went to work," then you would use the word *ani*. *Anochi*, though, refers to me, the individual, as opposed to anyone else. "I, *Anochi*, am calling you on the phone, and I, *Anochi*, am talking to you." Hashem said to each Jew, "*Anochi*, I, and no other, am your God. You and I have our own private, personal relationship."

After Matan Torah, Am Yisrael took up the national project of the Mishkan. This was a *mitzva* of the *tzibur*. This count, then, was actually the culminating count following the Exodus. Rashi says this was the third count since they left Egypt. When Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, the Torah tells us how many Jews left, even though it doesn't mention the process of counting. When the Jews donated half-*shekalim* to build the Mishkan, the Torah mentions their number again and then relates this count, which is celebrated in great detail as the final and ultimate count of the Jews who left Egypt. This count was the culmination of their experience and helped them to look back on their achievements as a generation. This count was a celebration of their achievements as individuals, primarily at Matan Torah, and then what they achieved as a group in building the Mishkan.

The Zohar mentions two groups, soldiers of Torah and soldiers of the Mishkan. There are strong Jews who struggle with the

Torah and conquer it; they know the Torah as individuals. Then there are soldiers of the Mishkan, who together as the collective of Am Yisrael, build a holy place for Hashem to dwell in.

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### Individual Shabbos and Communal Shabbos

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The Shem Mishmuel relates the concept of *tzibur* and *yachid* to Shabbos. Shabbos has two commandments, as we read in the two versions of the Ten Commandments. In Parshas Yisro, the Torah uses the word *zachor*, and in Parshas Va'eschanan, the Torah commands us using the word *shamor*. Chazal say that Hashem used both words simultaneously when He spoke at Har Sinai.

The night of Shabbos relates to *shamor*, and the day of Shabbos relates to *zachor*. *Shamor* is a passive concept—don't desecrate the Shabbos. Keep the Shabbos and stop the work of the week. A "Shomer Shabbos" is someone who doesn't desecrate the Shabbos. *Zachor*, then, means keep the Shabbos in a positive way. Celebrate the Shabbos, honor the Shabbos, enjoy the Shabbos.

The Shem Mishmuel says that refraining from desecrating the Shabbos during the night is an expression of the group concept of Am Yisrael. None of us would do a *melacha* on Shabbos, God forbid. The Shulchan Aruch teaches us the things that we cannot do. No cooking, no lighting fires, no driving a car, no turning on lights, etc. We are all the same in our observance of the baseline *halacha* of Shabbos. This begins on the night of Shabbos, as we refrain from regular weekday activities.

In fulfilling *zachor*, however, each Jew experiences Shabbos in his own individual way. In this experience, no two Jews are the same. My Shabbos experience and yours may be similar, but they are not the same. We each celebrate it differently. You sing your songs and I sing mine, and we say different kinds of *divrei Torah*. We go to our own *shuls* and we do different activities on Shabbos.

Some people take walks, some people spend time with their children, some go to the *beis midrash*. Shabbos observance can take different personal forms. This is *zachor*.

Shabbos has an Am Yisrael aspect, *shamor*, and the complementary *zachor* aspect, the celebration of Shabbos by the individual.

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### Transition from Pesach to Shavuos

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This is the transition between Pesach and Shavuos. Pesach is the Yom Tov of the *klal*. The Jewish People marched out of Mitzrayim as a group. They suffered together, and they were redeemed together. The Korban Pesach is a group *mitzva*, “*seh l’veis avos*” (Shemos 12:3). It has status of a *korban tzibur* (see Yoma 51a and Tosfos Yoma 6b s.v. *Amar*). It can be brought on Shabbos and when people are *tamei*. The Jewish nation became a people on Pesach. This is the holiday of Am Yisrael as a whole.

During the Omer, we count days and weeks towards Shavuos. We prepare for Shavuos by improving our character, particularly in the area of *ahavas Yisrael*. We each work to improve ourselves in order to prepare for *matan Torah*. Am Yisrael in the desert also prepared themselves to receive the Torah. This was an individual preparation. Ma’amad Har Sinai was also an individual experience. Each person had his or her own special place to stand depending on their spiritual level. Moshe stood alone at the top of the mountain. Aharon had his own spot, as did Yehoshua, Nadav, and Avihu. It was a personal experience. Every Jew had to be there because of his preciousness as an individual.

Chassidim like to say that the word Yisrael is *roshei teivos* for “*Yeish shishim ribo osiyos laTorah*. There are 600,000 letters in the Torah.” The number 600,000 is the mystical number of the Jewish People, their approximate number in all of the censuses in the



desert. Incidentally, when the State of Israel was founded in 1948, there were also about 600,000 Jews there.

Six hundred thousand is not the exact number of letters in the Torah, but that is the Torah's mystical number. In a *sefer Torah*, if a single letter is missing, the entire *sefer* is invalid for use. Similarly, each Jewish person has a unique and necessary individuality. If one is missing, the entire collective will miss his contribution. Every Jew counts. Every Jew brings something unique to the study, observance, and spread of Torah. If we understand how precious each Jew is, we can have true *ahavas Yisrael*. This means that we can love the group, the nation of Israel, as well as each individual Jew.

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### **Bravery on the Battlefield of Our Personal Lives**

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Let us further discuss the special place of each individual. The Shem Mishmuel explains that each individual person is tested by the challenges of life. Avraham had ten major challenges. Life is a series of challenges. You should look at life as a spiritual battlefield on which we must wage war against the evil side that is trying to defeat us. In this battle, we know that courage and bravery are critically important. Before a battle, a special *kohen* would speak to the Jewish soldiers. He would tell them, "Don't let your hearts become weak" (Devarim 20:3). In battle, you must be strong in your mind and convinced of your might, right, and ability to win. Someone who is fainthearted and afraid will be easily defeated, as Chazal say, "*techilas nisa nefila*, once you start running away, you have already lost the war" (Sota 44b).

This holds true regarding the spiritual battle that we all fight. We must be confident that we will defeat our spiritual enemy, the *yeitzer hara*. In order for a person to have this level of bravery

and courage, he has to feel that he is important and strong. If he feels he is weak, then he won't be able to do it. Chazal say a person should feel that the whole world hangs in the balance between condemnation and salvation (Kiddushin 40b). I am also in balance. If I do one good deed, I will save the world and myself from condemnation and bring salvation to the whole world. This is both a huge responsibility and a great opportunity. It is very important for every person to think of himself in this way, to believe that he has the strength to affect the whole world in such a dramatic fashion.

“*Se'u es rosh Bnei Yisrael*. Raise up the heads of the Jewish People” (Bamidbar 1:2). This is the phrase the Torah uses to express the counting. The intended meaning is to conduct a head count. However, the literal meaning of the words is also true—to lift them up, to give them a sense of pride. The Midrash says that there is a hidden and paradoxical message hinted to in this phrase. “*Se'u es rosh*” means to lift up their heads, to give each person a good feeling and recognize him. But this very phrase can also mean to hang someone, to kill him. What does that mean?

The Midrash says that pride hides a great danger. A person should lift up his head to do good things, but he should not get hanged from his head and executed. Jewish pride is precious and important. We are doing the right things and should continue to do so. We have the strength to do it. But pride can make a person haughty, vain, and spoiled. This is a sensitive point. The Torah has tremendous respect and value for each individual, each of whom is supposed to feel that pride and use the ensuing sense of self-worth for good things. You are supposed to say, “*Bishvili nivra ha'olam*, The world was created for me” (Sanhedrin 37a), to take the whole world and use it. But we shouldn't let this go to our heads. Each of us needs this sense of self-worth to win the battle against evil. But the danger is that it can lead to the false pride of *ga'ava*—vanity and egoism. There are terrible consequences of the

sin of vanity. When people pursue honor, they may destroy others in order to attain that honor.

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## J

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### The Secret of the Spiritual Battlefield

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What is the solution to achieving the proper balance between self-worth and vanity? The Shem Mishmuel explains that I should recognize that I am God's messenger. I am important because God made me important. When I think of Hashem and of myself, then I will have a sense of *bitul hayeish*, the annulment of self, which will create the proper balance.

When I face the daily challenges of the world, I need to know that I am something, that I am a *yeish*. I can fight the *yeitzer hara*; I am powerful enough to fight and defeat him. In relation to Hashem, though, I am insignificant.

This combination is the secret to winning the spiritual battles. This is how everyone can become a soldier in *tzivos Hashem* in the battle to bring the light of Torah and *mitzvos* into the world.

This brings to mind the famous statement of the Maggid of Mezritch. When describing the experience of *matan Torah*, Moshe said, "*Anochi omeid bein Hashem u'veiniechem*. I stood between you and Hashem at Sinai" (Devarim 5:5). The Maggid said that the concept of "*anochi*"—too much pride—stands between us and Hashem.

We must be confident and brave in our battle against evil. We must be stubborn and steadfast to defeat evil all the way to the very end, and simultaneously be cognizant of our total insignificance in relation to Hashem. When we keep both of these in mind, we can be victorious in this great battlefield called life.

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. Why were individual names mentioned in the first count of the Jews but not in the second?
2. How do the individual and the group function in Torah and *tefila*?
3. In what ways does Shabbos have both collective and individual aspects?
4. How do Pesach and Shavuos reflect both the group and the individual?
5. What is the proper attitude to have as an individual facing the challenges of life?

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## EXERCISES

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1. For a week, chart your daily activities as an individual Jew and as part of the Jewish nation.
2. If you need improvement in one or both of these areas, create a program for strengthening yourself.
3. Think about your Hebrew name and try to see how that name expresses your personal life.
4. Do you have the courage and humility necessary to face life's challenges? Explain.
5. Create a program to improve the balance of your own pride and humility.



