

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...)

more explicitly: “Blessing cannot be found in what has been weighed or measured or numbered.” For this reason, farmers are advised to ask for Divine blessing on their crops before they formally assess their harvest. Any such request after evaluation is considered “*tefilat shav*,” a prayer so pointless that it offends our halakhic sensibilities.

Is the relationship between blessing and enumeration a way of massaging our expectations, providing a mechanism for gratitude to enter our lives? This cute explanation is simply not enough, as, in Masekhet Hagigah 105b, we read that anything that has not been weighed, measured, or numbered, is fair game for interference by entropic spirits (*shedim*). In other words, to be vague is to be filled to the brim with potential, whether for good or for bad. Precision is stasis.

The dangerous census is our parashah’s first iteration of a theme that hits home much more powerfully later. Rashi points out that numbers are also at the heart of the tragedy of the golden calf: Moshe said he would return after 40 days, rather than, say, “a little more than a month,” “a handful of weeks,” or even “as long as it takes.” This stiffened the people’s expectations so strongly that even one day’s deviation was enough to break them completely, causing them to turn to idolatry in their despair (Shemot 31:1 s.v. “*ki voshesh Moshe*”). The obvious contrast is with Moshe’s wise soft-pedal when it came to announcing the arrival of the Angel of Death during the exodus from Egypt: it would come, he said, at “*about* midnight” – even though God had told him it would arrive at midnight precisely (Shemot 11:4).

There is no need to fret about Moshe’s variable communication strategy. It is deeply human to indulge our cautious impulse to the hilt in one context only to ease up in another situation. Here, I do not use “deeply human” as a euphemism for “bad but normal.” I mean it is an inexorable result of the way we take in our environment and memories and both conscious and unconscious strata of information, and it is a way of being that leads as often to innovation as to catastrophe. In other words, humans at their fullest are the epitome of the unnumbered state, loaded with potential for motion and change, whether for blessing or curse.

It is not just to acknowledge this modality but to protect it that Jewish tradition channels our concerns about enumeration into law: we may not count our fellow Jews, at least not directly (Masekhet Yoma 22b). Such practices take on a new, urgent tone in our days when social momentum hurtles toward ever-increasing hoarding of data on human beings. The loudest message is that this data collection is to ward off our modern-day *shedim* of violence and chaos. But it is past time to consider the ways in which this also closes us off from blessing.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Ki Tissa

Shabbat Parah

March 14, 2020 | 18 Adar 5780

Annual | Exodus 30:11-34:35 (Etz Hayim p. 523-546; Hertz p. 352-368)

Triennial | Exodus 30:11-31:17 (Etz Hayim p. 523-529; Hertz p. 352-356)

Maftir | Numbers 19:1-22 (Etz Hayim p. 880-883; Hertz p. 652-655)

Haftarah | Ezekiel 36:16-38 (Etz Hayim p. 1286-1289; Hertz p. 999-1001)

D’var Torah: Lies, Damn Lies, & Statistics

Rabbi Yonah Lavery-Yisraeli, Conservative Yeshiva Alumna

Our parashah is so filled with excitement that it is easy to miss one of its most challenging ideas: that data is dangerous. Although God commands Bnei Yisrael to take a census, God does so in a way that makes it clear how perilous this activity is, requiring that the people build “atonement for their souls” (Shemot 30:15) into the counting process. This atonement prevents the disaster which otherwise goes hand-in-hand with collecting census information, and amounts to a twofold obfuscation of the actual population: 1) counting only one demographic (young men) and 2) even then counting only indirectly – a weight of silver mediates between the individual and the final tally. Later in Tanakh (Shmuel Bet, 24) we see that when David tries to take a census directly, God brings a plague to punish the people, resulting in the deaths of 70,000.

Does God hate censuses? That’s a new one for many of us. Examining it, we see it goes even further, perhaps to a Divine aversion to counting. When God promises Avraham descendants, over and over again it is emphasized that Avraham’s progeny will be “impossible to count.” Like the stars of the sky or the sand of the sea, the human eye will simply see “lots,” forced to relinquish the control of precise comprehension. This esteem of imprecision comes full force into Talmudic philosophy. As the rabbis taught in Masekhet Bava Metzia 52a, “Blessing only exists in what is hidden from the eye.” In Masekhet Ta’anit 8b, it is expressed even

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D'var Haftarah: To Purify the Impure

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Shabbat Parah is the third of the four special Shabbatot before Pesach. It was intended as a reminder that one had to be ritually pure in order to offer and eat the Korban Pesach – the Pesach sacrifice. This process, which was carried out by sprinkling water mixed with the ashes of the “*parah adumah* – the red heifer” on the impure subject, rendered a person ritually pure. The process of eliminating ritual impurity was accomplished through a “magical” process, or, in other words, a ritual action made a person pure. The accompanying haftarah from Ezekiel talks of Israel’s exile on account of spiritual impurity and the necessity of spiritual purification in order for the people to be redeemed. What was this spiritual impurity? While ritual impurity was brought about from coming into contact with the dead, spiritual impurity was brought about by immoral behavior and disloyalty to God.

The kind of impurity that Ezekiel is talking about should not be so easy to rectify since wrong behavior can seemingly only be righted through a change in how the person acts. And here lies the dilemma. What if people are incapable of making the necessary changes? This is where Ezekiel’s prophetic innovation comes. He came to the conclusion that since people do not, of themselves, have the capacity to make this change on their own without God’s help, God must make it happen. To express this idea, he uses the ritual of the “red heifer” symbolically to express how God will restore the spiritual health of his people: “And I will cast upon you clean water, and you will be cleansed of all your defilements, and of all your foul things I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put in you and I will take away the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh.” (26-7)

People may feel that they do not have the capacity to change, to make themselves over. Ezekiel’s prophetic conclusion is that if God can render the ritually impure pure, He most certainly can give those of us in need of the strength to make changes in our lives the power to do so. It is possible for a person to have a “new spirit” and that “heart of stone” can be transformed into a “heart of flesh”. The extraordinary is not beyond us with God’s help.

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Parashah Study: Do as God Wants, Not as God Says?

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

As Moshe failed to come down from the mountain after about 40 days, the people demanded of Aaron “*make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moshe...we do not know what has happened to him*” and the golden calf is created. Meanwhile up on the mountain:

Text: Shemot 32:7-10

*(7) And the LORD said to Moshe: Hurry go down for your people that you brought up from Egypt has acted ruinously. (8) They have swerved quickly from the way that I charged them... they made them a molten calf and bowed down to it...and said, ‘these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.’ (9) And the LORD said to Moshe, ‘I see this people and, look, it is a stiff-necked people. (10) And now **leave Me be** that My wrath may flare against them and destroy them, and I will make you a great nation.’*

- What’s the difference between God’s first (vv7-8) and second (vv9-10) speeches?
- Why do you think that we have two speeches by God to Moshe, with no recorded response from Moshe between them?
- In the second speech, God tells Moshe ‘leave Me be’. What does that seem to imply about Moshe? Is there support for that in the text (or between the lines)?

Commentary: Rashi Shemot 32:9

***Leave Me be:** We have not yet heard that Moses prayed for them, and yet He [God] said, “Leave Me alone”?! Rather, here He opened an opening for him and informed him that the matter depended upon him [Moshe], that if he [Moshe] would pray for them, He [God] would not destroy them.*

- What difficulty in the text does Rashi highlight in his question? How does he understand God’s intention in the instruction to ‘leave Me be’?
- According to this reading, whose well-being is God concerned about? What is Moshe’s role in this episode?
- What are the conflicting emotions and needs in this episode? When might we seek someone to intercede in this manner?

Commentary: Hizkuni Shemot 32:9

***Leave Me be:** For the sake of Moshe’s honor did the Holy One Blessed be He say so: ‘since they established for themselves a leader in your place, **leave Me be** – I will take revenge for you.’*

- According to Hizkuni’s reading, what are the emotions that drive God’s reaction?
- Something in v. 10 directed him to this reading. What was it?
- What would you have done in Moshe’s place?