



The Conservative Kehila in Zichron Ya'acov

Parashat Bamidbar: Seeds of Chessed

Dear Friends,

This week we begin Bamidbar, the third of the five books of the Torah. Bamidbar describes the 38 years of Bnei Yisrael's wandering from Har Sinai to Arvat Mo'av, on the threshold of the Promised Land.

This parasha and the two that follow deal with the preparations for the great journey. Parashat Bamidbar and part of Parashat Nasso describe the census taken of Bnei Yisrael: **“You and Aaron shall take a census of them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms...As the LORD had commanded Moses, so he took a census of them in the wilderness of Sinai.”** (Bamidbar 1: 3, 19)

Two groups are counted: the first represents the military might - all of the men who are of age to serve in the army, who will bear the burden of protecting the people. The second represents the spiritual might - the Levites who will bear the burden of the holy vessels and structures.

The Torah does not count the women of Israel, and this seems odd, but will perhaps be clarified a bit later.

A few years ago I wrote that the word “mifkad” (the Hebrew word for “census”) alludes to the idea that a person is counted - i.e. present in the world - based on his unique tasks or responsibilities (“tafkid”). This may explain why we spend so much energy on choosing the right career for ourselves and continuously developing our professional skills. The most significant role in our lives may actually not be in the professional realm, but rather in the personal: being parents, grandparents, siblings, sons and daughters, and friends. They all form our sense of identity and presence in the world.

This year I would like to suggest another meaning of the word “mifkad” (census), a meaning that may deepen our understanding of this parasha even further.

There are several places in the Torah where the word “Pakad” (the root of “mifkad”) appears as an act of remembering and fulfillment of a Divine promise. Here are a few examples:

“The LORD remembered (pakad) Sarah as He had promised, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken.” (Bereishit 21:1) God kept his promise to deliver her from her barrenness.

“Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am about to die. God will surely remember you (pakod yifkod) and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.’” (Bereishit 50:24)

And indeed, 400 years later, the promise is fulfilled, first at the Burning Bush, and later in Egypt itself: **“Go [Moshe] and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: the LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me and said, ‘I have remembered you and (I have seen) what is being done to you in Egypt’”** (Sh’mot 3:16)

In one week we will celebrate Shavu’ot, on which we read the Book of Ruth. There, too, the word “lifkod” appears in the sense of remembrance and fulfillment of a Divine promise: after years of severe drought which were the impetus for Naomi’s family to leave Bethlehem to Moav. **“She started out with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab; for in the country of Moab she had heard that the LORD had remembered His people and given them sustenance.”** (Ruth 1:6)

We are all familiar with the upsetting feeling of having been forgotten. It can take many shapes and forms: Children who are abandoned, parents whose children have moved away, retirees who feel that their great achievements have been forgotten. There are those who feel the world has forgotten them entirely; that they are of no interest to anyone. They live, but are not “counted”. It is as if they do not exist. This is a terrible feeling of non-being.

We are also very familiar with the rejuvenating feeling of being remembered. When someone calls and says “I was thinking about you,” when we receive credit for a task we once fulfilled, or when someone promises us something and seems to have forgotten, but then shows up and fulfills his promise - he remembered us! This is an uplifting experience because it reaffirms our sense of being in the world.

The census is the first step before embarking on the great journey in the wilderness, a journey which is a metaphor for all of our life’s journeys. Hence, there must be a connection between our life-journey and a promise that was once made, its memory, and its fulfillment.

Indeed, every journey contains a promise, whether conscious or unconscious. It is difficult to get out of bed in the morning if there is no reason - a deep seated, perhaps vague, promise. This promise accompanies us and carries us through the ups and downs of our lives. Most of us have not experienced it as a Divine revelation. It lays deep within us, whispering and stirring, sometimes erupting, and at other times remaining quiet. This promise pushes us onwards to fulfill our potential or destiny. One of its manifestations may be the desire to help others. Another is the unexplainable impulse to right the wrongs of the world, to bring comfort and healing. These seeds of promise are planted deep within our psyches and are awaiting the appropriate conditions in which to sprout. Some of these seeds will sprout in

adverse conditions, some will even thrive in extreme hardship, whereas others will require security and safety to develop.

The big question is how does remembering happen? How is the seed of promise deep within us awakened?

If the Torah is a guide for our lives (and I believe it is), then it teaches us that remembering is not in our hands! We are not the ones who remember; the Creator is. It was He who sowed the seeds to begin with, and he tends to them - even if they remain dormant for centuries. Awakening is a Divine chessed, as it says in Shir Hashirim (The Song of Songs): **“I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem: Do not awaken or rouse Love until It wishes (to awaken!”** (8:4)

We are not absolved of responsibility. We can, and should, do our best to give the seeds of promise optimal conditions (love, nutrition, sleep, education, etc.), but just as the seed itself is not ours, neither is its development. Furthermore, many times its sprouting takes us completely by surprise! Our success often takes a different twist than we had anticipated. Our fulfillment is not as we had imagined or even hoped for.

What does this say about us? It all sounds very passive!

We do our best. The Hebrew word for doing our best is “hishtadloot”. However, the main quality needed for the germination and fulfillment of a latent promise is faith. It starts with the faith that we contain the seed of promise, and then that we ourselves are the seed! That all of Creation, like a womb, carries within it The Seed of promise. This seed is a the driving force within creation - the force for realization and fulfillment. It is bigger than our own personal will, while at the same time, it is also the root of our personal will. It is also more powerful than our resistance to it, much like the seed that finds its way through tough, hardened earth that opposes it.

Seeds sprout when the time is right.

Am Yisrael spent hundreds of years in Egypt before the time was right. The seed of freedom could not have germinated a moment earlier. And after it sprouted it spent (or wasted?) an entire year at the foot of Mount Sinai. The time to journey onwards to Cana’an was not yet right. But that time has come. In our parasha Am Yisrael is reminded of its physical and spiritual powers, in preparation for continuing the journey.

This is the story of our lives. Seeds of promise sprout at the right Divine time, fulfilling the blessing encapsulated within them.

On the issue of gender (the fact that the Torah counts men and not women), notice that every place in which memory is mentioned, it is done through the women of the nation: God Pakad (remembered) Sarah and not Avraham. The seeds of redemption from Egyptian slavery began with the two midwives, Shifra and Pu’ah, who saw the wisdom of the seed germinating in the womb, and with the actions of Yocheved, Moshe’s persistent mother, and

Miriam, his daring sister; Tzipporah, who was the first woman ever to perform a circumcision, and of course, the daughter of Pharaoh, who gave our greatest prophet his name and his destiny, and rebirthed him out of the Nile.

And Ruth? Well, we will read about her a week from tomorrow. Suffice it to say, that the seed of Mashiach Ben David germinated within her.

Behind every great awakening, stands a great woman.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha