

Parshas Bamidbar

Presented By Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky Shlita, Dean

1. The Significance of the Spiritual vs. the Physical

The Torah states, **“Hashem spoke with Moshe in the Desert of Sinai, in the Tent of the Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt...”** The Torah identifies the location in a general and broad manner namely, **“Desert of Sinai,”** and then states the specific location within that vast area, i.e. **“the Tent of the Meeting.”** On the other hand, regarding the time frame, it first states the specific moment namely, **“the first day of the second month”** and then states the more general period of time- **“the second year after their exodus.”**

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh points out that the Torah usually expresses itself in a consistent pattern. For example if a verse first presents a general concept and then is more specific, the information in the second half of the verse is presented in a similar manner. However, in this case it seems that the Torah is not consistent in its presentation. How do we understand this?

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that the verse is in fact consistent with the pattern of presenting first the particular and then the general. Despite the fact that one may think that the “Desert of Sinai” is a larger location vis-à-vis the “Tent of the Meeting,” he explains that this is not the case. In fact, the desert of Sinai is the specific and the Tent of the Meeting is the broader and more encompassing.

Chazal tell us that 600,000 Jews were able to fit between the two staves that protruded from the Holy Ark (which was contained within the Tent of the Meeting). Meaning the concept of limitation does not exist in the location of the *Shechina* (Divine Presence). Thus, as vast as the Desert of Sinai may be in a physical sense, it does not compare to the Tent of the Meeting, which contains the *Shechina*. The Desert of Sinai is a finite location and the Tent of the Meeting has unlimited capacity. Thus, the verse is going from the limited to the broader and more general.

The Chofetz Chaim zt”l lived in Radin and was revered as the Chasid and Gadol HaDor (Torah Sage of the Generation). The city of Radin was a mere village with unpaved roads and hovels. A Torah Sage once said regarding the city of Radin, that if one looked at a map of Europe he would see large black circles, which identified the cities of Paris, London and Berlin. However, one would not be able to locate on the map the city of Radin even with a magnifying glass. This Torah personality said that this might be true of the earthly map; however, in the heavenly map, the circle, which identifies the city of Radin, occupies most of the map while these prominent European cities do not even appear. This highlights the fact that the prominence and prestige of physical existence has no relevance to the innate true value of a location.

The Desert of Sinai in a quantitative sense is vast and relatively unending. Anything contained within it is seen as a speck. Whereas the Tent of the Meeting, physically speaking is limited. However, the Torah is revealing to us that this is not the case but only the perception of the human eye.

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of our Fathers) states, “The world stands on three principles: Torah (Torah study), *Avodah* (service of Hashem - tefillah/prayer), and *Gemilas Chasadim* (acts of loving kindness). Reb Chaim of Volozhin zt”l in his work *Ruach Chaim* asks that it would seem that to the same degree that one is able to excel in Torah and *Avodah* one is similarly able to excel in *Gemilas Chasadim* (acts of loving kindness). One’s engagement in Torah and *Avodah* is relevant to every Jew in a limitless manner. However how could one of meager means have a similar relevance to *Gemilas Chasadim* despite his financial limitation. The Mishna seems to be telling us that one can be engaged in all three principles at the same level.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin zt”l answers: the Gemara tells us that every day a Heavenly voice is emitted from Sinai stating, “The world in its entirety is sustained in the merit of my son Chanina.” Reb Chanina Ben Dosa was one of the poorest people to live and was sustained with a measure of carob (*kav*) from one *erev* Shabbos to the next. Reb Chaim asks, “Was there ever a greater philanthropist than Reb Chanina Ben Dosa in whose merit the entire world was sustained?” The wealthy man who was able to support many causes (and is a person of means) was only able to do so in the merit of Reb Chanina Ben Dosa who was the neediest individual. From this passage we see that our perspective of doing acts of loving kindness is not correct.

If a person, such as Reb Chanina Ben Dosa, lives his life dedicated to Torah and mitzvos at an exceptional level, the effect of that investment causes an unlimited level of *Beracha* (Blessing) to pervade all existence. Thus, our perception of physical reality is in truth not reality at all. The true value of existence is determined by its innate spiritual value and capacity. Every Jew, because of his spiritual essence, has relevance to the infinite because of his relationship with Hashem.

2. The Essential Prerequisite for Torah

The Torah tells us that Hashem Commanded Moshe to take a census of the Klal Yisroel in the desert saying, “**Hashem spoke to Moshe ..., saying ‘Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families...’**” The Torah states further, “**They gathered together the entire assembly on the first day of the second month, and they established their genealogy according to their families, according to their fathers’ household, by number of the names...**” Rashi explains, “**they established their genealogy**” to mean that each Jew brought his documents which established his paternal line and his particular tribe. Why was the establishment of pedigree a prerequisite in order to be counted as part of the census?

The Midrash tells us that after the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the nations of the world asked Hashem, “Why did You give the Torah to the Jewish people and not to us?” Hashem responded

“Can you establish your pedigree as My children have established theirs?” The nations of the world could not respond. When the nations of the world became aware of the purity of the Jewish people, they were astounded and began singing the praises of the Jewish people. As it is stated in *Mishlei* (Proverb), “*Kamu vaneha vayashruha* – her children have risen and praised her.”

The Torah tells us that at the end of the forty-year period in the desert, the Jews worshiped the deity of Baal Paor and cohabited with the Daughters of Moav. After this incident, the nations of the world approached G-d and said, “The Jews are no better than we are because they have violated their purity. Therefore we should be eligible to receive Your Torah.” Hashem responded that all those who engaged in the illicit behavior (Baal Paor) died in the plague and the Jews who remained were pure. Therefore, they are qualified to retain the Torah. Because the Jews initially proved their pedigree and were able to maintain it, they had relevance to the Torah. However, the nations of the world, who could not prove their legitimacy, were not eligible to receive the Torah. Why is pedigree a prerequisite to receiving of the Torah and thus becoming G-d’s people?

The Jew must maintain a spiritual posture in order to be qualified to have a relationship with Hashem. If one cannot establish his pedigree this means that he is not qualified for that relationship because his forbearers succumbed to temptation and had no control over their lives. Spirituality comes about only when one suppresses the physical for the sake of the spiritual/Hashem. Despite the fact that the Jewish people were slaves in Egypt for 210 years they maintained their legitimacy and were not corrupted by the influences of the Egyptian culture.

The Gemara in *Tractate Makkos* tells us that all individuals desire forbidden sexual relations and possessing what is not rightfully theirs. Despite the fact that the human being is consumed with an intense desire to engage in these forbidden activities, the Jewish people maintained their purity. The spiritual posture of the Jewish people who left Egypt was a testament that the Jews have relevance to G-d and His Torah.

The Torah tells us that a Jew must behave in a manner which demonstrates *kiddushah* (holiness) because Hashem is Holy. Chazal tell us that one should sanctify himself with things that are permitted to him. Meaning, one should refrain from indulging in the material when it is not a necessity of life. Ramban explains in his commentary that a person could live his life completely within the parameters of Torah law and still be classified as a hedonist because of his gluttonous and indulgent behavior. This person has no relevance to *kiddushah* (holiness). Thus, if one separates himself from that which is even permitted to him, he is separating himself from his inclination for physicality and definitely will separate from that which is forbidden.

G-d (in His Essence) has no relevance to anything that is earthy. The ability to choose (*Bechirah*) is opting to do the Will of G-d, which determines what is right and wrong. When one refrains from doing the wrong and goes against his natural inclination to transgress that is *kiddushah*. Whenever one goes against the grain and is not subject to negative influences, he is developing his own spirituality.

It is written in *Pirkei Avos*, “One mitzvah brings about another mitzvah.” The more mitzvos one performs the more one merits Divine Assistance to do more. The one who is no

subject to the all-encompassing inclination of forbidden sexual relations has relevance to Torah. Thus, the Torah is teaching us that it was only because the Jewish people were able to prove their pedigree through proof of their genealogy that they merited to receive the Torah at Sinai.

3. How Does One Gain Sensitivity to Spirituality

The Torah tells us that the Jewish people wandered the Sinai desert for forty years. During this period, they had complained numerous times to Moshe saying, “Did you take us out of Egypt to die in the desert?” The Midrash Tanchuma states, “Hashem said to the Jewish people, “Was the Sinai desert (experience) truly like a desert for you? Did you live for these forty years in a setting that was similar to that of a desert?” The Midrash continues to say that Hashem enumerated all of ways in which He had sustained the Jewish people in every possible manner in the desert. They were provided with the Manna, (which took on the characteristics and nutritional value of any imaginable food) and the wellspring of Miriam, which provided them with water.

The Jewish people were protected from the natural elements of the desert with the Clouds of Glory. Despite the fact that the Jewish people were provided for with every conceivable amenity of life through G-d’s intervention, they nevertheless complained. What was the basis for their lack of contentment? The question is even more difficult when we take into consideration that the generation of the desert (of Sinai) is referred to as the “generation of understanding” because of their spiritual experience at Sinai. How could they have been distracted with such mundane matters after being exposed to a level of truth that no other generation had experienced?

Seemingly, although the Jews were the beneficiaries of Hashem’s blessings on the most advanced level, they would have preferred a more earthy existence – despite G-d’s willingness to accommodate them. How do we understand this?

Rambam writes in *Hilchos Deos* (The laws Pertaining to Character & Behavior) that there are physical ailments that cause one to taste items that are sweet as bitter and visa versa. There are other ailments that cause one to crave inedible foods, such as earth and charcoal, while simultaneously rejecting edible foods, such as bread, as revolting. Rambam writes that similarly people experience spiritual illnesses. Meaning, they gravitate towards corrupt characteristics while rejecting and detesting purity and kindness. For example, one could be attracted to arrogant and predatory behavior while despising kindness and humility. The more one’s (soul) becomes spiritually ill, the more one is revolted by holiness and purity. Yeshayah, the Prophet, refers to the people of his time as those “who see “good” as “evil” and the “evil” as “good.” They see light as darkness and darkness as light.”

It is not that the one whose spirituality is impaired does not intellectually understand what is “good” or “bad.” It is that he cannot internalize and appreciate the value of what is truly good or evil. Rambam prescribes that the only way one is able to cure spiritual illnesses is to go to the Torah sage who are the “healers of the souls and they will cure their illness. They will teach them to return to the proper path.” If a person recognizes that he is failing spiritually and does not seek the Torah sage, then he is disgracing what they have to offer.

Despite the fact that the Jewish people experienced the Divine Presence in a unique manner and were exposed to truth at an unprecedented level, they had a spiritual blockage that prevented them from internalizing the spirituality to which they were exposed.

Every day we say in our prayers, “Open our hearts with Your Torah and place in our hearts Your love and fear...” One can only overcome spiritual impediments with Divine Assistance. The way one gains appreciation for holiness and purity is only with the help of G-d. If one is not moved by prayer or by Torah study, then it is an indication that he is experiencing a spiritual blockage and must pray to Hashem to give him an appreciation to experience the true value of the Torah. It is only G-d Himself who can open one’s heart to appreciate the Torah as a path of life rather than only as an intellectual pursuit.

4. The Subliminal Effects of Society

The Torah tells us that the Jewish people traveled in the desert in a specific formation. The center camp was the *Machne (Camp) Shechina (Divine Presence)* - the location of the Mishkan (the Temple). The tribe of Levi encircled the Camp of the Shechina (Machne Shechina). In turn, the tribe of Levi was surrounded by four other camps, each comprised of three tribes. The Torah tells us that the tribe of Yehudah was at the head of all of the camps and was the first to travel when the Jewish people moved through the desert. Included in the camp of Yehudah were the tribes of Yisasschar and Zevulun.

The Torah tells us that when there was a famine in Canaan, Yaakov’s Children were sent by their father to purchase grain in Egypt. The Viceroy of Egypt told Yaakov’s children that if they do not bring back their youngest brother Binyamin, they should not return. Yaakov would not permit Binyamin to return for fear that something might happen to him on the way. Yehudah assumed full responsibility for Binyamin by accepting a spiritual ban upon himself if Binyamin should not be returned. The consequence of this ban would be to forfeit his share in the world to come. The Gemara in Tractate *Makkos* tells us that if one accepts upon himself a conditional spiritual ban which initially cannot be guaranteed because it is beyond his control, that person will be subject to the effect of the ban regardless of the outcome of the events. Therefore, even though Yehudah was successful in returning Binyamin, he was nevertheless subject to the spiritual ban from the World to Come.

The Gemara in Tractate *Sotah* tells us that Yehudah’s *Nishama (Soul)* was not permitted to enter into the Heavenly Yeshivah because of the spiritual ban that he had accepted upon himself. Moshe prayed that Yehudah should be admitted and Hashem accepted his prayer; however, initially he was not able to engage in the heavenly Torah discussion. Moshe once again prayed that Yehudah should be able to engage in that discussion and his *tefillah* was accepted. Moshe prayed further that the Halachic ruling (the legal ruling) should be according to the position of Yehudah and this was also accepted.

The tribe of Yehudah represents Kingship and royalty. Dovid HaMelech (King David) was a descendent of Yehudah and was the King of Israel. He was not only kingly because he was the monarch but also because he was the supreme personality in the spiritual sense. The Gemara in *Tractate Sanhedrin* tells us that Dovid HaMelech was even greater in Torah than the chief justice of the Sanhedrin (The High Court). Every Torah ruling given by Dovid was accurate because of his own special spiritual dimension. This was the manifestation of the spirituality of Yehudah. This is the reason Moshe prayed to Hashem that the definitive Halacha should be according to Yehudah. From this, we see that the tribe of Yehudah, which represents kingship and royalty, is simultaneously synonymous with Torah.

The tribe of Yehudah was the first of the formation to travel and move through the desert. The tribe of Yehudah represents Torah. The accompanying tribes Yisasschar and Zevulun, which completed the camp, also represent Torah. We can see this clearly from Yaakov's blessings to his children Yisasschar and Zevulun. The fact that Yehudah, Yisasschar, and Zevulun led the Jewish people through the desert is an indication that the power of the Jewish people emanates from their Torah.

Yehudah's special spiritual dimension was a result of Yaakov's blessings. However, even if one is truly blessed there is no guarantee that the blessing will come to fruition. The Yalkut tells us that the dwelling of Moshe, Aaron and their children adjoined the camp of Yehudah, which was comprised of Yisasschar and Zevulun. Chazal tell us, "From this we see - Fortunate is the tzaddik (devoutly righteous) and fortunate are his neighbors." Since these three tribes were close to Moshe and Aaron, they developed into exceptional Torah sages. Although Yehudah, Zevulun, and Yisasschar may have had the potential to become exceptional Torah sages because of the blessing of their father Yaakov, they actualized this potential because they were associated with special tzaddikim (Moshe, Aaron, etc.)

On the other hand, the tribes of Reuven and Shimon adjoined the camp of Korach, who attempted to usurp Moshe's authority and thus undermined the authenticity of Torah. He was a rasha (evil person). Reuven and Shimon's spirituality was undermined because they were influenced by Korach, who was their neighbor. Chazal tell us that from here we learn, "Woe to the rasha and woe to his neighbor."

Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) tells us, "Keep your distance from a bad neighbor and do not become intimate with a *rasha* (evil person)." One would think that since the Mishna advises one to keep a distance from a bad neighbor that it would have advised one to stay even further from a *rasha*. Why does it only suggest, "do not become intimate with a rasha?"

The commentators explain that the position of the *rasha* is clear and evident. One cannot mistake him for a good person. Thus, one would not be influenced by this sort of person because of his evident nature. However, a bad neighbor, who is not the rasha, is a person with whom it is more difficult to contend because his negative influence is more subtle and thus not seen as spiritually detrimental. The influence of a bad neighbor will slowly and subtly erode one's spirituality without the person even realizing it.

We live in a society, which affects us continuously in the most subtle and subliminal manner. If society were obviously evil, one would not allow himself to be associated with it. However, under the guise of culture, ethics, and morals, unfortunately society negatively affects upon us. Although every Jew has tremendous spiritual potential because he descends from the tribes of Yehudah, Binyamin, and Levy; nevertheless, he must contend with these influences. How does one actualize his potential? One must create an insular environment within society that will be more spiritual and thus create a setting of “Fortunate is the tzaddik and fortunate is his neighbor.”

5. One’s Ability to Sense His Spirituality (Bechukosai)

The Torah tells us in the *tochachah* that if the Jewish people fail spiritually, multiple curses will come upon them. The Torah repeats a number of times the expression “If you behave casually (*keri*) with Me (Hashem).” To what is the Torah referring when it mentions “casualness”? Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the term *keri* is referring to the casual manner in which the Jewish people engage in mitzvos. The Jew’s involvement and performance of mitzvos is not continuous but rather by convenience. Thus, the Torah is telling us that if Jewish people’s commitment in mitzvos is only a matter of convenience, then the curses will come upon them (G-d forbid).

Other commentators explain the term *keri* to mean “incidental”- attributing one’s unusual difficulties to happenstance rather than recognizing their true cause. When a Jew falters spiritually, G-d brings upon him difficulties to cause him to realize that he has faltered. If one attributes his problems to the “peaks and valleys of life” then in essence he is rejecting G-d’s communication to him. The Torah tells us that if one assumes this perspective regarding his difficulties, Hashem will bring upon him even greater difficulties until he is forced to realize that there are issues that must be corrected.

When one becomes ill, one attempts to understand the cause of his illness. However when one experiences unusual difficulties in life, one does not approach the problem in a similar manner. Why would one attribute his situation to mere happenstance? When people fall on hard times, it is typical that they attribute their difficulties to “market conditions” or “the reality of life.” The reason a Jew does not put his difficulties in the proper perspective is because he lacks the sensitivity necessary to enable him to appreciate their cause. The cause of this insensitivity is due to “casual” involvement in the performance of mitzvos. It is only when one is committed and engages in Torah Judaism in a serious way (which causes a spiritual consciousness) that one is able to comprehend and realize where he had failed. If one lacks the necessary sensitivity due to his “casual” involvement in the performance of mitzvos, then G-d will intensify his problems to a point that he can no longer attribute them to happenstance.

Midrash *Eicha* tells us, “Hashem said, “Better that you (the Jewish people) would have abandoned Me for idolatry and kept the Torah- because its illumination would have brought you back to good (proper path).” If one engages in mitzvos and studies Torah (with a sincere commitment) the innate holiness of the Torah, will have a profound illuminating effect upon him. Just as when one bathes himself, regardless of intent, he will be cleansed (because he is fully immersed). Identically if one immerses himself in Torah study and observance, one will develop a spiritual sensitivity that will cause him to become enlightened.

Rabbeinu Yonah in his work *Shaare Teshuvah (Gates of Repentance)* explains that when Moshe Rabbeinu had said to the Jewish people, “Just as when a father punishes his son so too does G-d punish you...” he was conveying to the Jewish people an appreciation for G-d’s retribution. Just as a father when he punishes his child, does not mean to harm him (but rather it is only a way for him to correct his ways and put him “back on track”), so too does G-d punish the Jewish people. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh says that one may ask, “Why does G-d react to and punish the Jewish people more than the nations of the world despite their corrupt and rebellious behavior?” He explains that just as a father reacts strongly to the behavior of his own child because of his love for him, and does not react to the behavior of another’s child (despite his unacceptable behavior), so too does Hashem react to the inappropriate behavior of the Jewish people because of His love for them. The nations of the world may be considered “His handiwork and His creation” but the relationship of Father to child is only with the Jewish people. When Hashem focuses on the Jew and brings about great difficulty, it is only a confirmation of the special relationship that exists between Him and the Jewish people. The value of complications and difficulties in life is only to awaken the Jew from his trancelike state and put him back on track. When one attributes the difficulties in his life to happenstance, then it is the equivalent of a child who incorrectly interprets the reason that his father is punishing him.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin zt’l (the main disciple of the Vilna Gaon zt’l) spoke after a pogrom had taken place in his community. He explained the tragedy that had befallen his community with a parable: The king’s son had become deathly ill. After evaluating his medical condition the doctors informed the king that he could not allow his son to fall asleep because that would only expedite his death. Thus, it was important that the king keep his son awake at all cost. The king immediately gave the order that his son should be taken out of his comfortable bed and be put on the hard cold floor so that he should not be able to sleep. However, despite the discomfort of the stone floor, the prince began to doze off. The doctors again reiterated their concern for the prince’s welfare and said that the king must create a situation so that the prince should not sleep. The king thus gave the order that sharp spikes and stones be placed under his son – despite the fact that they would perforate his skin and cause wounds. The prince had to stay alive at all costs.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin zt’l explains in a similar vein that Hashem only brings difficulties upon the Jewish people to awaken them and cause them to realize that their spirituality is at stake. If they do not take heed of the more subtle message, G-d progressively sends a more overt message to alert the Jew that he is failing. This in essence is a chesed (kindness) of Hashem because just as the king went to every length to save his son from dying (despite the pain that he had to inflict upon his son) so too Hashem will go to any length to prevent the spiritual extinction of the Jewish people.

Everything that happens to us is for a reason. Only when the Jew engages in Torah and mitzvos will he develop a sense of spirituality to be able to gauge his successes and failures.

6. The Essence of the Jew (Bechukosai)

The Torah states in the portion of the curses (*Tochachah*), **“I (Hashem) will remember My covenant with Yaakov, My covenant with Yitzchak, and also My covenant with Avraham will I remember...”** The Dubna Maggid asks, “Why does the Torah mention the covenant between G-d and the Patriarchs in the midst of the curses?” It seems to be incongruous to the subject matter that is being discussed.

The Dubna Maggid explains the verse with a parable. The son of the Rabbi and the son of the tailor plotted and executed a robbery as partners in crime. After being caught, the two anxiously were brought before the judge. The son of the tailor was brought before the judge first and was given a relatively light sentence. Hearing the sentence that was meted out to the tailor’s son, the son of the Rabbi had a sense of relief. He believed that this judge was merciful and that he would also receive a light sentence. However when he appeared before the judge to be sentenced, he received 25 years of hard labor. The son of the Rabbi was taken aback. He pleaded with the judge, “We planned and executed the robbery together. Why am I more culpable than the son of the tailor? I did not influence him in any way to commit the crime?” The judge responded and explained, “Since his only role model and influence was his father who was an unlearned person, the son of a tailor does not have an appreciation and understanding of the gravity of stealing. You on the other hand are the son of the Rabbi who was taught by example and through teachings to understand the wrong of stealing and nevertheless you carried out this crime. This is why you are more culpable than your partner.”

The Dubna Maggid explains that similarly the Jewish people are held to a higher standard and thus more culpable for their behavior than the nations of the world. The Torah mentions the covenant with the Patriarchs in the midst of the curses in order to establish the standard to which the Jew is held because of his lineage. Hashem is willing to tolerate the corrupt behavior of the world such as idolatry and other acts of depravity because they do not have that special pedigree.

The Torah tells us that Hashem will remember the “covenant” of the Patriarchs. Why did G-d not enter into a covenant with the nations of the world? The Maharal of Prague explains that when G-d offered His Torah to the nations of the world and they rejected it, there was not even a consideration that they would accept it. If so then why did He offer it to them? He explains that as the Gemara tells us that G-d offered the Torah to the nations of the world so that they should not have a claim that they were not offered the Torah. The Jewish people on the other hand unequivocally accepted the Torah with “*Naaseh V’nishma* – we will do and we will listen.” Hashem only made a covenant with the Patriarchs because they had the spiritual capacity to have a relationship with Him – unlike the nations of the world. The covenant of the Patriarchs, which is forever binding to every Jew, indicates that every Jew has a relevance to a special level of spirituality.

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avos* tells us that one of the crowns that was given to the Jewish people by G-d was the crown of Torah – which is “lying there for every Jew to partake of.” Rambam explains in the laws of Talmud Torah that every Jew has relevance to the crown of Torah because it is a part of his heritage.

The Gemara asks, “Who are the kings? – and it answers that it is the rabbis because they wear the crown of Torah.” The Jewish people are referred to as “Princes.” Although one may not behave as the son of the king, nevertheless he is innately the prince regardless of his behavior.

The Jewish people were taken at Sinai to be the “Kingly, priestly, and holy nation.” This is why Hashem remembers the covenant - to inform the Jew as to whom he is. If a Jew appreciates who he is, and understands his relevance to spirituality he would behave accordingly- thus, warding off the curses and meriting only blessing.

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The Torah states, **“Hashem spoke with Moshe in the Desert of Sinai, in the Tent of the Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt...”** The Torah identifies the location in a general and broad manner namely, **“Desert of Sinai,”** and then states the specific location within that vast area, i.e. **“the Tent of the Meeting.”** On the other hand, regarding the time frame, it first states the specific moment namely, **“the first day of the second month”** and then states the more general period of time- **“the second year after their exodus.”**

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Chazal tell us that 600,000 Jews were able to fit between the two staves that protruded from the Holy Ark (which was contained within the Tent of the Meeting). Meaning the concept of limitation does not exist in the location of the *Shechina* (Divine Presence). Thus, as vast as the Desert of Sinai may be in a physical sense, it does not compare to the Tent of the Meeting, which contains the *Shechina*. The Desert of Sinai is a finite location and the Tent of the Meeting has unlimited capacity. Thus, the verse is going from the limited to the broader and more general.

The Chofetz Chaim zt”l lived in Radin and was revered as the Chasid and Gadol HaDor (Torah Sage of the Generation). The city of Radin was a mere village with unpaved roads and hovels. A Torah Sage once said regarding the city of Radin, that if one looked at a map of Europe he would see large black circles, which identified the cities of Paris, London and Berlin. However, one would not be able to locate on the map the city of Radin even with a magnifying glass. This Torah personality said that this might be true of the earthly map; however, in the heavenly map, the circle, which identifies the city of Radin, occupies most of the map while these prominent European cities do not even appear. This highlights the fact that the prominence and prestige of physical existence has no relevance to the innate true value of a location.

The Desert of Sinai in a quantitative sense is vast and relatively unending. Anything contained within it is seen as a speck. Whereas the Tent of the Meeting, physically speaking is limited. However, the Torah is revealing to us that this is not the case but only the perception of the human eye.

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of our Fathers) states, “The world stands on three principles: Torah (Torah study), *Avodah* (service of Hashem - tefillah/prayer), and *Gemilas Chasadim* (acts of loving kindness). Reb Chaim of Volozhin zt”l in his work *Ruach Chaim* asks that it would seem that to the same degree that one is able to excel in Torah and *Avodah* one is similarly able to excel in *Gemilas Chasadim* (acts of loving kindness). One’s engagement in Torah and *Avodah* is relevant to every Jew in a limitless manner. However how could one of meager means have a similar relevance to *Gemilas Chasadim* despite his financial limitation. The Mishna seems to be telling us that one can be engaged in all three principles at the same level.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin zt”l answers: the Gemara tells us that every day a Heavenly voice is emitted from Sinai stating, “The world in its entirety is sustained in the merit of my son Chanina.” Reb Chanina Ben Dosa was one of the poorest people to live and was sustained with a measure of carob (*kav*) from one *erev* Shabbos to the next. Reb Chaim asks, “Was there ever a greater philanthropist than Reb Chanina Ben Dosa in whose merit the entire world was sustained?” The wealthy man who was able to support many causes (and is a person of means) was only able to do so in the merit of Reb Chanina Ben Dosa who was the neediest individual. From this passage we see that our perspective of doing acts of loving kindness is not correct.

If a person, such as Reb Chanina Ben Dosa, lives his life dedicated to Torah and mitzvos at an exceptional level, the effect of that investment causes an unlimited level of *Beracha* (Blessing) to pervade all existence. Thus, our perception of physical reality is in truth not reality at all. The true value of existence is determined by its innate spiritual value and capacity. Every Jew, because of his spiritual essence, has relevance to the infinite because of his relationship with Hashem.

2. The Essential Prerequisite for Torah

The Torah tells us that Hashem Commanded Moshe to take a census of the Klal Yisroel in the desert saying, “**Hashem spoke to Moshe ..., saying ‘Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families...’**” The Torah states further, “**They gathered together the entire assembly on the first day of the second month, and they established their genealogy according to their families, according to their fathers’ household, by number of the names...**” Rashi explains, “**they established their genealogy**” to mean that each Jew brought his documents which established his paternal line and his particular tribe. Why was the establishment of pedigree a prerequisite in order to be counted as part of the census?

The Midrash tells us that after the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the nations of the world asked Hashem, “Why did You give the Torah to the Jewish people and not to us?” Hashem responded “Can you establish your pedigree as My children have established theirs?” The nations of the world could not respond. When the nations of the world became aware of the purity of the Jewish

people, they were astounded and began singing the praises of the Jewish people. As it is stated in *Mishlei* (Proverb), “*Kamu vaneha vayashruha* – her children have risen and praised her.”

The Torah tells us that at the end of the forty-year period in the desert, the Jews worshiped the deity of Baal Paor and cohabited with the Daughters of Moav. After this incident, the nations of the world approached G-d and said, “The Jews are no better than we are because they have violated their purity. Therefore we should be eligible to receive Your Torah.” Hashem responded that all those who engaged in the illicit behavior (Baal Paor) died in the plague and the Jews who remained were pure. Therefore, they are qualified to retain the Torah. Because the Jews initially proved their pedigree and were able to maintain it, they had relevance to the Torah. However, the nations of the world, who could not prove their legitimacy, were not eligible to receive the Torah. Why is pedigree a prerequisite to receiving of the Torah and thus becoming G-d’s people?

The Jew must maintain a spiritual posture in order to be qualified to have a relationship with Hashem. If one cannot establish his pedigree this means that he is not qualified for that relationship because his forbearers succumbed to temptation and had no control over their lives. Spirituality comes about only when one suppresses the physical for the sake of the spiritual/Hashem. Despite the fact that the Jewish people were slaves in Egypt for 210 years they maintained their legitimacy and were not corrupted by the influences of the Egyptian culture.

The Gemara in *Tractate Makkos* tells us that all individuals desire forbidden sexual relations and possessing what is not rightfully theirs. Despite the fact that the human being is consumed with an intense desire to engage in these forbidden activities, the Jewish people maintained their purity. The spiritual posture of the Jewish people who left Egypt was a testament that the Jews have relevance to G-d and His Torah.

The Torah tells us that a Jew must behave in a manner which demonstrates *kiddushah* (holiness) because Hashem is Holy. Chazal tell us that one should sanctify himself with things that are permitted to him. Meaning, one should refrain from indulging in the material when it is not a necessity of life. Ramban explains in his commentary that a person could live his life completely within the parameters of Torah law and still be classified as a hedonist because of his gluttonous and indulgent behavior. This person has no relevance to *kiddushah* (holiness). Thus, if one separates himself from that which is even permitted to him, he is separating himself from his inclination for physicality and definitely will separate from that which is forbidden.

G-d (in His Essence) has no relevance to anything that is earthy. The ability to choose (*Bechirah*) is opting to do the Will of G-d, which determines what is right and wrong. When one refrains from doing the wrong and goes against his natural inclination to transgress that is *kiddushah*. Whenever one goes against the grain and is not subject to negative influences, he is developing his own spirituality.

It is written in *Pirkei Avos*, “One mitzvah brings about another mitzvah.” The more mitzvos one performs the more one merits Divine Assistance to do more. The one who is not subject to the all-encompassing inclination of forbidden sexual relations has relevance to Torah. Thus, the Torah is teaching us that it was only because the Jewish people were able to prove their

pedigree through proof of their genealogy that they merited to receive the Torah at Sinai.

3. How Does One Gain Sensitivity to Spirituality

The Torah tells us that the Jewish people wandered the Sinai desert for forty years. During this period, they had complained numerous times to Moshe saying, “Did you take us out of Egypt to die in the desert?” The Midrash Tanchuma states, “Hashem said to the Jewish people, “Was the Sinai desert (experience) truly like a desert for you? Did you live for these forty years in a setting that was similar to that of a desert?” The Midrash continues to say that Hashem enumerated all of ways in which He had sustained the Jewish people in every possible manner in the desert. They were provided with the Manna, (which took on the characteristics and nutritional value of any imaginable food) and the wellspring of Miriam, which provided them with water.

The Jewish people were protected from the natural elements of the desert with the Clouds of Glory. Despite the fact that the Jewish people were provided for with every conceivable amenity of life through G-d’s intervention, they nevertheless complained. What was the basis for their lack of contentment? The question is even more difficult when we take into consideration that the generation of the desert (of Sinai) is referred to as the “generation of understanding” because of their spiritual experience at Sinai. How could they have been distracted with such mundane matters after being exposed to a level of truth that no other generation had experienced?

Seemingly, although the Jews were the beneficiaries of Hashem’s blessings on the most advanced level, they would have preferred a more earthy existence – despite G-d’s willingness to accommodate them. How do we understand this?

Rambam writes in *Hilchos Deos* (The laws Pertaining to Character & Behavior) that there are physical ailments that cause one to taste items that are sweet as bitter and visa versa. There are other ailments that cause one to crave inedible foods, such as earth and charcoal, while simultaneously rejecting edible foods, such as bread, as revolting. Rambam writes that similarly people experience spiritual illnesses. Meaning, they gravitate towards corrupt characteristics while rejecting and detesting purity and kindness. For example, one could be attracted to arrogant and predatory behavior while despising kindness and humility. The more one’s (soul) becomes spiritually ill, the more one is revolted by holiness and purity. Yeshayah, the Prophet, refers to the people of his time as those “who see “good” as “evil” and the “evil” as “good.” They see light as darkness and darkness as light.”

It is not that the one whose spirituality is impaired does not intellectually understand what is “good” or “bad.” It is that he cannot internalize and appreciate the value of what is truly good or evil. Rambam prescribes that the only way one is able to cure spiritual illnesses is to go to the Torah sage who are the “healers of the souls and they will cure their illness. They will teach them to return to the proper path.” If a person recognizes that he is failing spiritually and does not seek the Torah sage, then he is disgracing what they have to offer.

Despite the fact that the Jewish people experienced the Divine Presence in a unique manner and were exposed to truth at an unprecedented level, they had a spiritual blockage that prevented them from internalizing the spirituality to which they were exposed.

Every day we say in our prayers, “Open our hearts with Your Torah and place in our hearts Your love and fear...” One can only overcome spiritual impediments with Divine Assistance. The way one gains appreciation for holiness and purity is only with the help of G-d. If one is not moved by prayer or by Torah study, then it is an indication that he is experiencing a spiritual blockage and must pray to Hashem to give him an appreciation to experience the true value of the Torah. It is only G-d Himself who can open one’s heart to appreciate the Torah as a path of life rather than only as an intellectual pursuit.

4. The Subliminal Effects of Society

The Torah tells us that the Jewish people traveled in the desert in a specific formation. The center camp was the *Machne (Camp) Shechina (Divine Presence)* - the location of the Mishkan (the Temple). The tribe of Levi encircled the Camp of the Shechina (Machne Shechina). In turn, the tribe of Levi was surrounded by four other camps, each comprised of three tribes. The Torah tells us that the tribe of Yehudah was at the head of all of the camps and was the first to travel when the Jewish people moved through the desert. Included in the camp of Yehudah were the tribes of Yisasschar and Zevulun.

The Torah tells us that when there was a famine in Canaan, Yaakov’s Children were sent by their father to purchase grain in Egypt. The Viceroy of Egypt told Yaakov’s children that if they do not bring back their youngest brother Binyamin, they should not return. Yaakov would not permit Binyamin to return for fear that something might happen to him on the way. Yehudah assumed full responsibility for Binyamin by accepting a spiritual ban upon himself if Binyamin should not be returned. The consequence of this ban would be to forfeit his share in the world to come. The Gemara in Tractate *Makkos* tells us that if one accepts upon himself a conditional spiritual ban which initially cannot be guaranteed because it is beyond his control, that person will be subject to the effect of the ban regardless of the outcome of the events. Therefore, even though Yehudah was successful in returning Binyamin, he was nevertheless subject to the spiritual ban from the World to Come.

The Gemara in Tractate *Sotah* tells us that Yehudah’s *Nishama (Soul)* was not permitted to enter into the Heavenly Yeshivah because of the spiritual ban that he had accepted upon himself. Moshe prayed that Yehudah should be admitted and Hashem accepted his prayer; however, initially he was not able to engage in the heavenly Torah discussion. Moshe once again prayed that Yehudah should be able to engage in that discussion and his *tefillah* was accepted. Moshe prayed further that the Halachic ruling (the legal ruling) should be according to the position of Yehudah and this was also accepted.

The tribe of Yehudah represents Kingship and royalty. Dovid HaMelech (King David) was a descendent of Yehudah and was the King of Israel. He was not only kingly because he was the

monarch but also because he was the supreme personality in the spiritual sense. The Gemara in *Tractate Sanhedrin* tells us that Dovid HaMelech was even greater in Torah than the chief justice of the Sanhedrin (The High Court). Every Torah ruling given by Dovid was accurate because of his own special spiritual dimension. This was the manifestation of the spirituality of Yehudah. This is the reason Moshe prayed to Hashem that the definitive Halacha should be according to Yehudah. From this, we see that the tribe of Yehudah, which represents kingship and royalty, is simultaneously synonymous with Torah.

The tribe of Yehudah was the first of the formation to travel and move through the desert. The tribe of Yehudah represents Torah. The accompanying tribes Yisasschar and Zevulun, which completed the camp, also represent Torah. We can see this clearly from Yaakov's blessings to his children Yisasschar and Zevulun. The fact that Yehudah, Yisasschar, and Zevulun led the Jewish people through the desert is an indication that the power of the Jewish people emanates from their Torah.

Yehudah's special spiritual dimension was a result of Yaakov's blessings. However, even if one is truly blessed there is no guarantee that the blessing will come to fruition. The Yalkut tells us that the dwelling of Moshe, Aaron and their children adjoined the camp of Yehudah, which was comprised of Yisasschar and Zevulun. Chazal tell us, "From this we see - Fortunate is the tzaddik (devoutly righteous) and fortunate are his neighbors." Since these three tribes were close to Moshe and Aaron, they developed into exceptional Torah sages. Although Yehudah, Zevulun, and Yisasschar may have had the potential to become exceptional Torah sages because of the blessing of their father Yaakov, they actualized this potential because they were associated with special tzaddikim (Moshe, Aaron, etc.)

On the other hand, the tribes of Reuven and Shimon adjoined the camp of Korach, who attempted to usurp Moshe's authority and thus undermined the authenticity of Torah. He was a rasha (evil person). Reuven and Shimon's spirituality was undermined because they were influenced by Korach, who was their neighbor. Chazal tell us that from here we learn, "Woe to the rasha and woe to his neighbor."

Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) tells us, "Keep your distance from a bad neighbor and do not become intimate with a *rasha* (evil person)." One would think that since the Mishna advises one to keep a distance from a bad neighbor that it would have advised one to stay even further from a *rasha*. Why does it only suggest, "do not become intimate with a rasha?"

The commentators explain that the position of the *rasha* is clear and evident. One cannot mistake him for a good person. Thus, one would not be influenced by this sort of person because of his evident nature. However, a bad neighbor, who is not the rasha, is a person with whom it is more difficult to contend because his negative influence is more subtle and thus not seen as spiritually detrimental. The influence of a bad neighbor will slowly and subtly erode one's spirituality without the person even realizing it.

We live in a society, which affects us continuously in the most subtle and subliminal manner. If society were obviously evil, one would not allow himself to be associated with it. However, under

the guise of culture, ethics, and morals, unfortunately society negatively affects upon us. Although every Jew has tremendous spiritual potential because he descends from the tribes of Yehudah, Binyamin, and Levy; nevertheless, he must contend with these influences. How does one actualize his potential? One must create an insular environment within society that will be more spiritual and thus create a setting of “Fortunate is the tzaddik and fortunate is his neighbor.”

5. One’s Ability to Sense His Spirituality (Bechukosai)

The Torah tells us in the *tochachah* that if the Jewish people fail spiritually, multiple curses will come upon them. The Torah repeats a number of times the expression “If you behave casually (*keri*) with Me (Hashem).” To what is the Torah referring when it mentions “casualness”? Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the term *keri* is referring to the casual manner in which the Jewish people engage in mitzvos. The Jew’s involvement and performance of mitzvos is not continuous but rather by convenience. Thus, the Torah is telling us that if Jewish people’s commitment in mitzvos is only a matter of convenience, then the curses will come upon them (G-d forbid).

Other commentators explain the term *keri* to mean “incidental”- attributing one’s unusual difficulties to happenstance rather than recognizing their true cause. When a Jew falters spiritually, G-d brings upon him difficulties to cause him to realize that he has faltered. If one attributes his problems to the “peaks and valleys of life” then in essence he is rejecting G-d’s communication to him. The Torah tells us that if one assumes this perspective regarding his difficulties, Hashem will bring upon him even greater difficulties until he is forced to realize that there are issues that must be corrected.

When one becomes ill, one attempts to understand the cause of his illness. However when one experiences unusual difficulties in life, one does not approach the problem in a similar manner. Why would one attribute his situation to mere happenstance? When people fall on hard times, it is typical that they attribute their difficulties to “market conditions” or “the reality of life.” The reason a Jew does not put his difficulties in the proper perspective is because he lacks the sensitivity necessary to enable him to appreciate their cause. The cause of this insensitivity is due to “casual” involvement in the performance of mitzvos. It is only when one is committed and engages in Torah Judaism in a serious way (which causes a spiritual consciousness) that one is able to comprehend and realize where he had failed. If one lacks the necessary sensitivity due to his “casual” involvement in the performance of mitzvos, then G-d will intensify his problems to a point that he can no longer attribute them to happenstance.

Midrash *Eicha* tells us, “Hashem said, “Better that you (the Jewish people) would have abandoned Me for idolatry and kept the Torah- because its illumination would have brought you back to good (proper path).” If one engages in mitzvos and studies Torah (with a sincere commitment) the innate holiness of the Torah, will have a profound illuminating effect upon him. Just as when one bathes himself, regardless of intent, he will be cleansed (because he is fully immersed). Identically if one immerses himself in Torah study and observance, one will develop a spiritual sensitivity that will cause him to become enlightened.

Rabbeinu Yonah in his work *Shaare Teshuvah (Gates of Repentance)* explains that when Moshe Rabbeinu had said to the Jewish people, “Just as when a father punishes his son so too does G-d punish you...” he was conveying to the Jewish people an appreciation for G-d’s retribution. Just as a father when he punishes his child, does not mean to harm him (but rather it is only a way for him to correct his ways and put him “back on track”), so too does G-d punish the Jewish people. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh says that one may ask, “Why does G-d react to and punish the Jewish people more than the nations of the world despite their corrupt and rebellious behavior?” He explains that just as a father reacts strongly to the behavior of his own child because of his love for him, and does not react to the behavior of another’s child (despite his unacceptable behavior), so too does Hashem react to the inappropriate behavior of the Jewish people because of His love for them. The nations of the world may be considered “His handiwork and His creation” but the relationship of Father to child is only with the Jewish people. When Hashem focuses on the Jew and brings about great difficulty, it is only a confirmation of the special relationship that exists between Him and the Jewish people. The value of complications and difficulties in life is only to awaken the Jew from his trancelike state and put him back on track. When one attributes the difficulties in his life to happenstance, then it is the equivalent of a child who incorrectly interprets the reason that his father is punishing him.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin zt’l (the main disciple of the Vilna Gaon zt’l) spoke after a pogrom had taken place in his community. He explained the tragedy that had befallen his community with a parable: The king’s son had become deathly ill. After evaluating his medical condition the doctors informed the king that he could not allow his son to fall asleep because that would only expedite his death. Thus, it was important that the king keep his son awake at all cost. The king immediately gave the order that his son should be taken out of his comfortable bed and be put on the hard cold floor so that he should not be able to sleep. However, despite the discomfort of the stone floor, the prince began to doze off. The doctors again reiterated their concern for the prince’s welfare and said that the king must create a situation so that the prince should not sleep. The king thus gave the order that sharp spikes and stones be placed under his son – despite the fact that they would perforate his skin and cause wounds. The prince had to stay alive at all costs.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin zt’l explains in a similar vein that Hashem only brings difficulties upon the Jewish people to awaken them and cause them to realize that their spirituality is at stake. If they do not take heed of the more subtle message, G-d progressively sends a more overt message to alert the Jew that he is failing. This in essence is a chesed (kindness) of Hashem because just as the king went to every length to save his son from dying (despite the pain that he had to inflict upon his son) so too Hashem will go to any length to prevent the spiritual extinction of the Jewish people.

Everything that happens to us is for a reason. Only when the Jew engages in Torah and mitzvos will he develop a sense of spirituality to be able to gauge his successes and failures.

6. The Essence of the Jew (Bechukosai)

The Torah states in the portion of the curses (*Tochachah*), **“I (Hashem) will remember My covenant with Yaakov, My covenant with Yitzchak, and also My covenant with**

Avraham will I remember...” The Dubna Maggid asks, “Why does the Torah mention the covenant between G-d and the Patriarchs in the midst of the curses?” It seems to be incongruous to the subject matter that is being discussed.

The Dubna Maggid explains the verse with a parable. The son of the Rabbi and the son of the tailor plotted and executed a robbery as partners in crime. After being caught, the two anxiously were brought before the judge. The son of the tailor was brought before the judge first and was given a relatively light sentence. Hearing the sentence that was meted out to the tailor’s son, the son of the Rabbi had a sense of relief. He believed that this judge was merciful and that he would also receive a light sentence. However when he appeared before the judge to be sentenced, he received 25 years of hard labor. The son of the Rabbi was taken aback. He pleaded with the judge, “We planned and executed the robbery together. Why am I more culpable than the son of the tailor? I did not influence him in any way to commit the crime?” The judge responded and explained, “Since his only role model and influence was his father who was an unlearned person, the son of a tailor does not have an appreciation and understanding of the gravity of stealing. You on the other hand are the son of the Rabbi who was taught by example and through teachings to understand the wrong of stealing and nevertheless you carried out this crime. This is why you are more culpable than your partner.”

The Dubna Maggid explains that similarly the Jewish people are held to a higher standard and thus more culpable for their behavior than the nations of the world. The Torah mentions the covenant with the Patriarchs in the midst of the curses in order to establish the standard to which the Jew is held because of his lineage. Hashem is willing to tolerate the corrupt behavior of the world such as idolatry and other acts of depravity because they do not have that special pedigree.

The Torah tells us that Hashem will remember the “covenant” of the Patriarchs. Why did G-d not enter into a covenant with the nations of the world? The Maharal of Prague explains that when G-d offered His Torah to the nations of the world and they rejected it, there was not even a consideration that they would accept it. If so then why did He offer it to them? He explains that as the Gemara tells us that G-d offered the Torah to the nations of the world so that they should not have a claim that they were not offered the Torah. The Jewish people on the other hand unequivocally accepted the Torah with “*Naaseh V’nishma* – we will do and we will listen.” Hashem only made a covenant with the Patriarchs because they had the spiritual capacity to have a relationship with Him – unlike the nations of the world. The covenant of the Patriarchs, which is forever binding to every Jew, indicates that every Jew has a relevance to a special level of spirituality.

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avos* tells us that one of the crowns that was given to the Jewish people by G-d was the crown of Torah – which is “lying there for every Jew to partake of.” Rambam explains in the laws of Talmud Torah that every Jew has relevance to the crown of Torah because it is a part of his heritage.

The Gemara asks, “Who are the kings? – and it answers that it is the rabbis because they wear the crown of Torah.” The Jewish people are referred to as “Princes.” Although one may not behave as the son of the king, nevertheless he is innately the prince regardless of his behavior. The Jewish people were taken at Sinai to be the “Kingly, priestly, and holy nation.” This is why Hashem remembers the covenant - to inform the Jew as to whom he is. If a Jew appreciates who

he is, and understands his relevance to spirituality he would behave accordingly- thus, warding off the curses and meriting only blessing.