

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

BAMIDBAR

NASO

BEHAALOTECHA

SHELACH

KORACH

CHUKKAT

BALAK

PINCHAS

MATOT

MASSEI

BAMIDBAR FINDING COMFORT BEYOND OUR COMFORT ZONE

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Just like football teams and countries, each of the tribes of Israel has its own flag and symbols.¹ The Midrash explains that when the Jewish people receive the Torah at Mount Sinai, they see hundreds of thousands of angels encamped according to flags, and simply put, they want to be like the angels and do the same.² Surely one would assume that these flags, which were designed as a way of emulating angels during the historic moment of Revelation, would be waved and celebrated every time these tribes are re-counted throughout the Bible. Yet, strangely, beyond this *parasha*, the Torah never mentions these flags again. Why?

Life is a constant journey towards achieving our ultimate purpose, and 'Every person has his own personal approach, because no two people think exactly the same...and no two people have the same nature.'³ The challenge for us all is to

identify our own unique purpose in this world. Says Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, 'Where what we want to do meets what needs to be done, that is where God wants us to be'⁴ - this is our purpose. But this point is always moving and always changing, because as we grow and evolve, so does our context and frame of reference. **Our purpose today will not be the same as our purpose tomorrow, for tomorrow we will each be different from who we are today.** Over the years and decades, our skills develop, our environments morph, and our priorities mature. These ever-changing elements create a myriad of coordinates across the map of our lives, each of which presents our unique calling for that moment in time. On the basis of this dynamic personal landscape, **identifying our individual purpose at any given moment is one of the more exciting challenges of life, one that is intriguingly unique to humankind.**

Similar to humans, angels also each have a unique task. By definition, however, an angel is confined to that task alone, as 'One angel cannot perform two missions and two angels cannot perform one mission.'⁵ Therefore, while emulating angels in the sense of striving for perfection in one trait or another, is indeed a positive endeavour, it is important to recognise that for us as humans, achieving perfection in one distinct mission is but a single milestone on the path to achieving our ultimate life purpose.

A further distinction between angels and humans is that angels are consistent in their trajectory of growth. They are constantly in an upward drive, always moving forwards to perfection. Human beings, in contrast, are dynamic and complex. Our journey is not one-directional. **Along our path towards fulfilling our purpose we can grow, fall or fly at any one moment.**

“The Torah was not given to the angels”⁶ - it was given to flesh and blood. It was given to us, human beings, complete with our foibles and faults on the one hand and our strengths and successes on the other. Therefore, **intrinsic within each of us is the potential for soaring to great heights, and the possibility to fly even higher than the angels.**

If one excels in a certain area, one should indeed wave that flag high above one’s head in pride. But to confine ourselves to that flag alone would be to sell ourselves short in regards to our unique, multi-layered human purpose on earth. To carry that banner alone does not do justice to the many other moments of fulfilment and purpose lying just around the corner. Upon fulfilment of any particular task, mission or purpose, we should immediately begin to seek out the next area of life that requires our unique contribution, and work towards attaining and subsequently waving that flag.

So once the tribes have established their respective strengths and waved their flags at that moment in the desert, it is time for them to move on to the next mission required of them. Their flags are significant in that particular moment and in that particular place, but as the tribes move on, the flags lose their relevance, and the Torah does not mention them again.

Imagine someone who masters the skill of hitting a backhand in tennis. No matter where on the court the ball lands, if it requires a backhand, the player will hit it perfectly. But what about the skill

required for serving? What about a forehand, or a volley in the middle of the court? The backhand skill will only help to win the game if the other tennis skills are similarly improved. So too, in life it is not enough to hone in on one skill alone and sit back in satisfaction as soon as that particular skill has been mastered.

As we journey along our complex human path, collecting skills and experience, succeeding and failing along the way, it is essential for the ultimate fulfilment of our mission, that we constantly work on our weaknesses, acquire new skills, and push ourselves even to find comfort outside of our comfort zone. This means that not only are the goalposts of life eternally moving, but ideally we should be active in moving them, taking the reins of our lives as we continually pursue improvement, growth and fulfilment. Such an approach equips us to face each new challenge with the appropriate skills and attitude, leading us to higher and greater successes.



Parasha Fact:

Besides for trying to find out how many men there were of military age, the census was also used to find out the lineage of each person. It's important to know where we came from before we plan our future.

Next week in Naso :

In a strange sequence of seemingly unconnected verses, the Torah jumps from a national census to stealing, from an adulterous woman to a nazir who abstains from wine and cutting hair, and then to the priestly blessings. And yet we know that nothing in the Torah is random. How, then, do these seemingly disparate ideas weave together to form eternal lessons for preserving healthy relationships on all levels, and the key to a life of elevated sanctity?

Notes

¹ Numbers 1:52; 2:2. ² Numbers Rabba 2:3.

³ Vilna Gaon on Proverbs 16:1.

⁴ Rabbi Sacks, “The Call (Vayikra 5778),” *Covenant & Conversation* (2018).

⁵ Genesis Rabba 50:2.

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot 25b.

שבת שלום