

MAY 14, 2007

Parashat B'midbar

Making Cense

Vayi'h'yu kol p'kudei V'nei Yisrael “*These were all the numbers of B'nei Yisrael*” (Numbers 1:45)

In his commentary, Ramban enumerates the benefits that *B'nei Yisrael* received from undertaking the census. The third benefit he lists is that our ancestors were preparing for war and needed to know how many troops they could put into combat. Why, after having seen God's miracles against the Egyptians, did the Israelites not simply rely on yet another divine intervention?

The Torah commands us not to live our lives relying on miracles – trusting God doesn't mean failing to adequately prepare. When entering battle, our ancestors needed to know how many soldiers they could muster.

Thankfully the state of Israel has never solely relied on faith to ensure her survival. Since the Six-Day War in 1967 – the 40th anniversary of which is coming up in June – the Israel Defense Forces has maintained a qualitative military edge over her enemies. This advantage has allowed Israel to present a deterrent threat to those who might want to attack her as well as the power to defend herself when necessary.

Israel's qualitative military edge has been maintained due, in large part, to American foreign aid – which offers U.S. taxpayers a cost-effective way of serving America's foreign policy interests in the Middle East. As Israeli and American officials begin negotiating a new, 10-year aid package, we should let our elected representatives know how important this assistance is to Israeli security and U.S. goals.

Today, Israel relies on smarts and toughness – not on miracles – when defending the Jewish state. She also relies on the support and friendship of the United States. ■

A Good Sign

Kein chanu l'digleihem “*Thus they encamped by their flags*” (Numbers 2:34)

In this chapter of our *parashah*, God commands that the tribes be positioned in encampments around the *ohel mo'eid*. Obviously, the choicest real-estate in the camp was that closest to the *Mishkan*. Just as obvious is that only one tribe could be closest while other tribes would be on the outskirts of the camp. While we could understand if there was anger or jealousy that some tribes got “better” spots than others, the Torah tells us *v'ya'asu B'nei Yisrael*. Rather than fighting or bickering, *B'nei Yisrael* did as God commanded them.

Those tribes placed farthest away from the *Mishkan* knew that theirs was a place of honor even though others might have seen it as a slight. Realizing the good in a potentially bad situation is often dismissed as “looking through rose-colored glasses” or being overly-optimistic. But Talmud teaches us (BT Ta'anit 21b), “It is not the man's place that

honors him, rather a man confers honor on his place.” If we are honorable, then whatever place we are put in becomes a place of honor.

In the past few weeks, we have watched as our brothers and sisters in Israel deal with the fallout from the interim report of the Winograd Committee’s investigation of last summer’s war in Lebanon. While the decisions of individual Israeli leaders were criticized in the report, we should rejoice in the health of Israeli democracy. It is rare that a country can seriously consider its shortcomings and formally criticize its most powerful leaders.

Regardless of its other major findings, the real revelation of the Winograd report is the well-being of Israeli democracy. It bodes well for future Israeli success and it confers honor on the Jewish state. ■

Let’s Role

V’shamru et mishmarto “And they will safeguard his charge” (Numbers 3:7)

As the Levites are brought forward to serve in the *Mishkan*, their job responsibility is presented as helping Aharon carry out his duties. Rashi points out the use of the word *mishmarto*. Why use this word instead of *avodato*? According to Rashi, *mishmeret* connotes a charge to which a particular person is assigned. The Talmud even teaches us (BT Megillah 13b) *vahalo ein mishmarti umishmart’chah shavah*.

Why, if this task is assigned specifically to Aharon – and if Talmud tells us that “my charge and your charge are not the same” – do the Levites have a role? Rashi’s lesson is that, while our tasks may be separate, our overall goal can be the same. Each of the Levite families has a different role to play in the overall functioning of the Mishkan. They must work together or, without each other, none can fulfill their responsibilities – not even Aharon.

The international community must continue to use every diplomatic, economic and political tool to pressure Iran to halt its nuclear program. While the United States and U.N. Security Council have imposed increasingly tough sanctions on Iran, state-level campaigns to divest public pension plans from companies investing in Iran’s oil and natural gas sector provide another means to pressure the regime. Divesting from these companies would reduce the risk to American shareholders while sending a strong signal to Iran that American states will not provide funds to help Iran advance its nuclear weapons pursuit and support terrorism.

Our state legislatures have a role to play in preventing Iran from threatening the world with nuclear weapons. We should contact our state legislators about divesting state funds from Iran’s energy sector. ■