



Sermon Tidbits

JUNE 6, 2016

Parashat Bamidbar

Finish Strong

On the first day of the second month (Numbers 1:1)

בַּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי (בַּמִּדְבָּר א:א)

“Finish Strong!” To many, this conveys an important message—whether we’re talking about a sports game, political contest or even a personal achievement. Take the Oklahoma City Thunder: Up 3-1 in a best of seven series, most pundits felt that they had somehow found the formula to vanquish the feared Golden State Warriors. But you have to win four games, and they’d only won three. The Thunder let up, didn’t finish strong, and ultimately lost the last three games and the series. Now they’re watching the finals, along with the rest of us, from home.

We normally associate alacrity (*zerizut*) with the beginning of a project. The Sages stressed the need for alacrity in religious life, noting that *zerizim makdimin l'mitzvot*—“People with alacrity perform a mitzvah at the earliest possible time.” Passionate people don’t delay the fulfillment of a mitzvah. They view a mitzvah as an opportunity to be cherished rather than a burden to delay, so they fulfill that mitzvah as quickly as possible. Yet, in his classic work *Mesillat Yesharim*, (Chapter 7) Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzatto explains that acting with alacrity isn’t just about “starting” quickly and passionately. He notes that the notion of “finishing strong” is deeply rooted in Jewish thought. Luzzatto notes that the element of alacrity applies to two different elements of the mitzvah: before we act, and once we have already begun the mitzvah. He writes, “...once a person has begun a mitzvah, he should rush to complete it and not treat it lightly...and about this the Sages wrote that a mitzvah is attributed to the individual who completes it.” In other words, while it’s great to begin a mitzvah or start a project, all too often we then let that passion evaporate and leave the project for the next new idea. Successful people—in all areas of life—don’t just start strong. People that act with *zerizut* finish strong as well.

The notion of acting with alacrity appears in this week’s Parashah. In order for the Jewish nation to leave the desert encampment at Sinai and enter the Promised Land, they must first conduct a census and properly organize the camp. Moses is instructed to count the nation and divide them accordingly in camps “on the first day of the second month of the second year...” (Numbers 1:1) We later read that they “assembled all the congregation together on the first day of the second month...” (1:18) and began taking the census on the very same day that they were commanded. Writes Ramban, (on verse 18) “The [verse] notes the alacrity of Moses [in fulfilling] God’s commandment, for on the day of the commandments he took the princes and began the count.” Ramban notes that the next verse, “As Adonai commanded Moses, so did he number them in the wilderness of Sinai” (1:19) teaches us that “that the count took place in that place, but not [only] on that day.” Such a monumental project could not be completed in a single day; yet Moses and the nation remained encamped in the wilderness until they finished the job. It was not enough to start strong, for Moses understood that he must act with alacrity until he completed the count, so he finished strong as well.

U.S. security assistance to Israel in the annual foreign aid bill is the most tangible manifestation of American support, especially during a time of tremendous turmoil in the Middle East. The 10-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by the Bush Administration in 2007 will expire in September of 2018. While the Obama Administration started strong, expressing a commitment to a robust aid package for the Jewish state, negotiations on a new MOU continue, as the U.S. and Israel have not yet reached a final agreement. In March, 83 senators sent a [bipartisan letter to the president](#) supporting a new MOU with Israel. Last month, Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Ted Deutch (D-FL), Kay Granger (R-TX) and Nita Lowey (D-NY) introduced House Resolution 729, a bipartisan

resolution “expressing support for the expeditious consideration and finalization of a new, robust, and long-term Memorandum of Understanding on military assistance to Israel between the United States Government and the Government of Israel.” Over 75 members of the House have already cosponsored the resolution, calling on the Obama Administration to “finish strong” and quickly reach a final agreement. We must make our voices heard as well, and [encourage our elected representative to cosponsor this important resolution](#). As people with a passion for a strong Jewish state, we must make our voices heard with *zerizut*—without delay. ■

Identification without Documentation

And they declared their pedigrees (Numbers 1:18)

ויתילו על משפחתם (במדבר א:יח)

Last November, nine terrorists perpetrated a gruesome terrorist attack against innocent civilians enjoying a Friday evening in Paris, killing 130 people including 89 at the Bataclan Theater, in the deadliest attacks in France since World War II. Investigators later learned that only three of the 11 terrorists linked to the “Black Friday” terror attacks in Paris had criminal records. This fact leaves security officials in a quandary: How do you stop a terrorist with no criminal record? How do you identify a terrorist if there is no paper trail?

When Moses was commanded to organize the Jewish camp into distinct tribes and families, the task proved more difficult and complicated than it might seem. How do you determine to which tribe each family and individual belongs? According to Rashi, they relied on a paper trail. According to the text Moses and Aaron, “assembled all of the congregations together on the first day of the second month, and they declared their pedigrees after their families...” (Numbers 1:18) How did the people “declare their pedigrees?” How could Moses and Aaron be sure that each family actually belonged to the tribe they claimed? Ramban (on verse 18) suggests that everyone knew who belonged to which family, and who did not. Rashi disagrees and explains that, “They brought the books of their lineage and witnesses to their family birth—each and every one—to associate their lineage to the tribe.” Each individual was required to prove his family lineage either through documentation or direct testimony.

Ironically, little has changed in the thousands of years that have passed since that time. While technology has advanced dramatically, we still all carry documentation—passports, drivers’ licenses, birth certificates—to prove our identity and nationality. The system works for law abiding citizens; but identity today offers little assistance to security professionals looking to thwart terrorists carrying legal identification. Moreover, as global communication companies like Facebook and Whatsapp move to encrypted technologies which hide all communications from security personnel, it is growing increasingly difficult to track possible terrorist activities and prevent an attack before it happens.

To address this challenge, an Israeli company has created software to analyze faces in real time and detect terrorists based on personality traits and facial expressions. The [Washington Post reported](#) that Israel-based Faception signed a contract with an unnamed “leading homeland security agency” to help identify terrorists through its technology, which analyzes faces shown in photos and videos and classifies them according to 15 parameters predictive of personality traits and types. “We understand the human much better than other humans understand each other,” said Faception chief executive Shai Gilboa. “Our personality is determined by our DNA and reflected in our face. It’s a kind of signal.” According to the [website Israel21c](#), “Unlike face-recognition technology, which relies on matching faces to those already in a database, facial profiling relies on scientific studies suggesting that personality is determined by DNA and reflected in the face. Therefore, it can pinpoint potentially problematic people not previously known to authorities.”

Gilboa explained that when Faception technology analyzed the faces of the Paris attackers, the system “classified nine of them as potential terrorists with no prior knowledge.” Hopefully, this incredible Israeli technology represents another important tool which can help security officials identify potential terrorist threats before they can attack, making the world safer for us all. ■