

## Parshat Bemidbar

**Drasha from Rabbi Shai Finkelstein, Senior Rabbi  
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The name of this week's parsha is Bemidbar (in the desert) but the English name of the book is Numbers. This name was given to this book because of its nature; in this book we can find when Hashem tells Moshe to count the Jewish people according to their tribes and their families. In this parsha, the entire Jewish camp is counted except for one tribe which is excluded from this count - the tribe of Levi. The tribe of Levi had a different count, with a different starting age and they were singled out from the Jewish camp. The question that we need to ask is what was the reason for this exclusion?

The Midrash tells us that the reason for the uniqueness of the tribe of Levi and for their separate count is a result of their courageous deeds during the Golden Calf. When Moshe came down from Mount Sinai and saw the Golden Calf and the dancing around it, he stood at the gate of the camp and proclaimed "Whoever wants to defend Hashem and His Torah come to me." The entire tribe of Levi came to Moshe and helped him stop the disgrace and the shame of the Golden Calf. At first glance this reason does not fully answer our question, as we know the end result of the Golden Calf was the death of three thousand people who were fully engaged and participated in the sin itself but many Jews did not participate in this sin. The Midrash tells us that the women did not give their jewelry for the Golden Calf and did not participate in this shameful act. Based on this everyone who did not take part in the event should have been awarded the same way the Levites were. What is their uniqueness?

I would like suggest the following idea: In Judaism we have two concepts, the first is 'sor merha' meaning 'remove yourself from evil'. The second concept is 'ase tov' meaning 'perform good'. The first concept requires us to distance ourselves from negative things and negative influences. This can come from fear of punishment or even a lack of willingness to be part of something negative. The second concept requires us not only not to be part of something evil but rather to take the lead to correct it and to fix the sin and the evil reality that we face. With this distinction we can understand the uniqueness of the Levites. It is true that not all of the Jewish people were involved with the Golden Calf, nevertheless they did not take the lead and did not respond to Moshe's request to stop it. The Jews were in the level of 'sor merha' of removing themselves and distancing themselves from evil, but they did not reach the level of the Levites. When the Levites joined Moshe they helped him to do good works and to lead a transformation within the Jewish people. Taking leadership, leading and not being led, taking responsibility, not only for you but for others, these were the reasons the Levites were chosen as a unique tribe who has special responsibilities.

As I returned from the AIPAC Policy Conference with our group of more than fifty members of this congregation, this idea of taking an action to stop evil became clearer. The time for us as a Jewish community to just passively support the State of Israel is over. The level of participation that Israel, our homeland, is requesting from us is "ase tov" meaning perform and be active and not be passive. We all know and have heard again and again the existential threats that Israel is facing. Israel must know that all Jews support its right to exist, its right to defend itself and its right for an undivided capital, our beloved Jerusalem, which we celebrate this week, its freedom and its unity. We all need to spread the word that yes, Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East. This is the only place where Muslims are flourishing; this is the only place where women have equal rights and equal opportunities. This is the only place where there are gay rights, human rights, freedom of press and justice. We all must get involved in Israel advocacy, which means that we cannot just talk with friends but rather we must act and ask others to take part in this holy mission of defending our state. Getting involved starts right here every Shabbat when we recite the prayer for the welfare for the state of Israel. We should all have our hearts and minds turned to the content of this prayer. Getting involved means being attached to our Torah, which gives us the right to our land; getting involved means being part of AIPAC, attending the yearly Policy Conference; getting involved means that the love for Israel, the concern for its safety and security is part of our lives, in our DNA and the nature of our conversations. If we want the State of Israel to be there for years to come we cannot wait for tomorrow. We need to act and we act now.