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# PARSHA ENCOUNTERS

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Parshas Bamidbar  Rabbi Ezra Adler

## Everyone Counts

**P**arshas Bamidbar is usually read the Shabbos before Shavuos. We know that nothing in this world is a coincidence and that Hashem plans everything. It follows that there must be some connection between Shavuos and Bamidbar. Let us therefore examine what the connection is and what lesson we can learn from it.

R' Moshe Feinstein zt"l makes an interesting observation regarding the feelings of many Jews. He notes that most Jews feel very overwhelmed when looking at a set of gemarachs, knowing that they may never know all of them and are very unlikely to ever master them to the point of being a leader and teacher for others. This can lead us to feel small and inadequate and sometimes even causes a sense of despair. Such feelings of despair can be very crippling and may sometimes convince people that they should not even try to start learning. The only way to combat such feelings is for a person to develop a strong sense of self esteem and recognize that his learning is important regardless of how much he knows or to what depths his understanding reaches. This is a lesson we can learn from Parshas Bamidbar. In this week's parsha we see that every Jew is counted no matter what his abilities are. This fact should give us strength and fortitude to recognize we are special and that each person's learning has value. This lesson of Parshas Bamidbar is also particularly appropriate as a preface to Kabbalas haTorah on Shavuos.

One thing we see from the comments made by Reb Moshe is that a lack of self esteem can cripple a person and cause him to have a hard time learning. It is essential that a person have a good feeling about himself. Now let us consider this point in view of the Mishna in Pirkie Avos that lists 48 traits a person needs to truly be able to learn Torah. One of the 48 items is anavah, modesty. Can a person have self esteem and still be humble?

Before we go any further, we must define these two terms. Self esteem means that a person knows what he is and what he is good at. Every person has many wonderful abilities and only a person suffering from a lack of self worth cannot see these strengths. This knowledge is not a contradiction to the notion of modesty. Modesty means that a person does not think that he is a better than anyone else. Every person must recognize his Hashem-given talent, but he shouldn't boast or try to raise himself over others. Instead, one must remember that these talents were given to him by Hashem to use, not to abuse. After understanding this, we can see that self esteem and modesty are not a contradiction to each other. Yes, every person needs to know himself and use his skills, as Reb Moshe notes, so that he does not feel that he or his learning are worthless. Even so, if he is very good at his learning he shouldn't take the credit and make himself feel superior to others. Rather, he should be humble and thank Hashem for these skills.

Baruch Hashem, we have had the merit of benefiting from many great leaders of Jewry that epitomizes both traits discussed above. Our leaders have tremendous modesty and never think much about themselves. Nevertheless, that didn't stop them from "stepping up to the plate" and leading Jewry. This is a lesson we should always strive to reach. We must always remember that we each have our own special abilities and even in our limited way, our learning is important. We should also always stay humble and be thankful for what we have rather than considering ourselves superior because of it.

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## Standing for the Aseres Hadibros

*Rabbi Hensch Plotnik*

The davening for every Yom Tov features a Torah reading corresponding to the particular holiday we are celebrating. Shavuot naturally highlights receiving the Torah on Har Sinai and reading the Aseres Hadibros (ten commandments). Due to the unique character of Shavuot as the anniversary of Matan Torah, a number of early authorities promote a special way of combining the pesukim and using a trop (cantillations) that differs from the printed version in the regular laining of parshios Yisro and Va'eschanon. This is known as ta'am elyon, as apposed to ta'am tachton, the standard version. (See *Biur Halacha #494* for an extensive discussion of the variations of the two styles of laining.) A common alternative custom is to use ta'am elyon whenever laining publicly (as apposed to when reviewing the parsha privately). The Kaf Hachaim notes another custom in some communities that the congregation recites the Aseres Hadibros first and the Ba'al Koreh then repeats them. These special customs were all established in the spirit of the words of the Pesikta: "Hakadosh Boruch Hu said to Yisroel, my children, read this parsha every year and I will consider it as if you are standing in front of me on Har Sinai and receiving the Torah."

Another minhag, which stirred up a bit of controversy in the writings of the early Poskim but is followed today in many congregations, is to stand during the laining of the Aseres Hadibros. The Rambam actually penned a teshuvah on this matter acknowledging that there were those who supported the custom and those who discouraged it. The detractors' reasoning was based on a Gemara (Brochos 12) that relates how the Aseres Hadibros were recited with the Krias Shema in the Bais Hamikdash, but not in outlying areas. This was because heretics would say that the only valid parts of Torah are the ones heard directly from Hashem (see Rashi there). Standing during Aseres Hadibros could encourage the same falsification regarding the validity of the entire Torah chas V'sholom. Some discouraged the practice of standing for this reason and encouraged the populace to do the same. A rejoinder was sent defending the custom, claiming that Klal Yisroel itself stood while receiving the Torah! The response given by those opposed to standing was that Klal Yisroel stood because they were in the presence of the Shechina and not in deference to the Aseres Hadibros themselves. They acknowledged that in Bavel and its environs the custom was to stand, but they maintained it was out of respect to the reader who was always a learned talmid chochom, and not because of the reading itself. Those who attended these readings misunderstood the true nature of who they were standing and so the "custom" was established mistakenly.

The Rambam sided with the detractors because he felt that standing would lead to a diminution of emunah by causing people to think some parts of Torah are more important than others and "all openings must be closed to this evil belief." The Rambam was not impressed with the Minhag Bavel. He commented that if we see a group of sick people, should we become sick as well so we can be all the same! We need to cure the sick and make everyone healthy. It is totally improper to favor one part of Torah over the others.

The Sefer Moadim B'halacha quotes a teshuva from Rav Shmuel Avrohom (Shu"t D'var Shmuel) who supported the custom of standing, since we are being m'kabel p'nei hashechinah when hearing the Aseres Hadibros, as we

did the very first time at Har Sinai (see Pesichta quoted in the beginning of this article). Just as we say regarding Kiddush Levana that it is fitting to stand during its recitation because it is "kabolos p'nei hashechinah," the same applies to hearing the Aseres Hadibros. The Chida doesn't concern himself with potential heretics since because we demonstrate that we obviously believe in the validity of the entire Torah by reading a portion each week. We specifically want to commemorate the experience of Har Sinai and the dread of hearing the voice of Hashem k'vivyochel and we therefore purposely stand. The Chida in fact concludes that once the custom has been established to stand, everyone is obligated to do so and should avoid the appearance of being m'zazel the minhag in the eyes of the public.

In *Igros Moshe* (O.C. 4#22), Rav Moshe zt"l takes issue with a number of the points raised above (although he doesn't acknowledge them as being rooted in the Rishonim and early Poskim). After first agreeing with the author of the shaila that our custom to stand for the shira in Parshas Beshalach and on Pesach mitigates the problem to a large degree (by avoiding the implication that we recognize only the Aseres Hadibros as Toras Emes) Rav Moshe proceeds to explain why he feels the basis for this problem is not entirely clear. As mentioned above, the Aseres Hadibros certainly are unique; as the Rambam writes in his *Peirish Hamishnayos*, "they are the ikar of our religion." (The Rambam in fact wrote an entire monograph devoted to showing how the entire taryag mitzvos, are included in the Aseres Hadibros.) This is why the earlier generation continued reciting them in the Bais Hamikdash.

One source that must be addressed in connection with the minhag of standing is the Gemara's discussion regarding saying Aseres Hadibros away from the Bais Hamikdash. The Gemara states that this practice was stopped because the heretics would take advantage of the general populace who did not enjoy the company of chachomim and tzaddikim. Later on, there were those who wanted to reintroduce this custom because their suspicious of heretics had subsided somewhat. Nevertheless, the leaders of the generation felt it unwise, lest the problem resurface. However, with regard to standing for the Aseres Hadibros, once we are accustomed to standing due to its unique character of being heard from Hashem Himself, it is understood why special behavior is in order. As long as we were never confronted by heretics on this point we have no basis to introduce new restrictions. Chazal had their reasons to forbid certain practices and there is no need for us to go beyond that. Therefore one should not change the custom of a place that stands. If one feels he does not want to lend credibility to that minhag, he certainly has the option of standing for the entire leining.

It is interesting to note that the Talmud Yerushalmi tells us that even in previous times when only the first and last olim to the Torah made a brocho, there were several exceptions. The aliyos of Aseres Hadibros, the shira, and the tochacha required the olah to make both brochos. Apparently, the Yerushalmi wasn't concerned for any derisive comments about one part of Torah appearing more prominent than the rest because of this. Although this Yerushalmi is not mentioned in the above seforim it would seem to alleviate the shaila somewhat.

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