

Bamidbar – 5782

At our finance committee meeting the other week, our bookkeeper, Diana Richards pointed out how hard it had been to develop a program for the computer that could automatically generate letters to go to the membership to remind them about Yahrzeit observances. If the Jewish calendar year was more logical than the Gregorian calendar, we live our lives by, it would be a piece of cake because, after all, there is only one leap year every four years on the Gregorian Calendar, but there are 9 leap years every 17 years on the Jewish calendar. Can you imagine how hard it must have been for the Children of Israel to figure out when there was going to be a leap year so that all the holidays would fall in the appropriate period of time. After all, Ramadan can be any time of the year because it is set by a different calendar than that which we use to establish the three Harvest Festivals. Where would we be if Pesach came in the middle of the summer? Just imagine starting seders after sundown in the summer or frying latkes in the heat of the summer.

I begin this morning's devar Torah with a brief exploration of the differences in calendars because tonight at sundown, we begin the festival of Shavuot. By no small coincidence, we always begin the Book of Numbers, Bamidbar in Hebrew, the Shabbat before Shavuot. Just think about the calculations required in the Middle Ages to ensure that no matter what other considerations had to be made, Shavuot had to be exactly 50 days after the beginning of Pesach and we had to have reached the beginning of Bamidbar at exactly the same time, despite all those leap years. It is absolutely mind-blowing to think of how that was made to happen year after year after year. I can remember working on the rotary schedule for 7 or 8 classrooms for 8

periods a day, five days a week, and ensuring everyone was getting the right numbers of minutes of the various subjects and every teacher was only getting 80 minutes of prep time in the schedule. That was a piece of cake compared to figuring out when to double parshiot and ensure they were all read according to the right time of year.

Why, we need to ask, was it so important to read about the physical locations of each of the tribes in the camp of the Israelites around the tabernacle. After all, that is what we read about in this week's parsha. The sages begin to explain this by suggesting that while Genesis was about the life stories of the matriarch and the patriarchs, Exodus about the period of slavery in Egypt and leaving it behind, Leviticus about the laws and why we needed to adhere to them, Numbers repeatedly deals with the role HaShem played in the life of the newly freed Israelites. We read about how HaShem provided food, water, security, and protection for the wanderings in the desert but also how we came to understand the role HaShem was to play in our lives and what would happen to us if we took that for granted. Think about the number of times Moses lost his patience with the Children of Israel and with HaShem or the fear expressed by the slaves that Israel was nowhere near able to conquer the holy land even though HaShem had promised it to them and promised his support and backing.

The directions for where to make camp each time around the tabernacle was so that every exit from their tents brought the tribes face-to-face with the tabernacle and we have already read that it was to be the place where the children of Israel knew the spirit of HaShem resided. But there is yet another reason and this relates back to Shavuot and why we observe it. Shavuot is, of course, the third of the three pilgrimage festivals. We are commanded in the Torah in several places to observe Sukkot, Pesach, and

Shavuot by making sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem and each of them comes at a different season of agricultural plenty. Sukkot of course comes at the end of the fall growing season, Pesach after the harvesting of the winter crops especially wheat, and Shavuot after the harvesting of the second wheat crop of the year. The key to the success of each harvest is, of course, rain, and we read last week in Bechukotai, the last parsha of Vayikra, Leviticus that plentiful rain would be the blessing bestowed upon us if we lived up to the covenant, we had made with HaShem at Sinai and the terrible fate that would befall the land and its inhabitants if rain was denied as punishment for non-compliance with that same covenantal agreement. Rain comes from HaShem in other words, just like the manna and the water and the meat and the pillars of fire and smoke to show the way during the wandering.

We therefore find the reason we observe Shavuot and what we have to be thankful for because of the rain and the bountiful harvests. We rejoice in the spring harvest and observed Shavuot in temple times by bringing first fruits as offerings of thanksgiving in Hebrew referred to as Bikkurim. We knew when to observe Shavuot because we counted the days exactly to 50, or seven weeks, so Shavuot is also known as the Festival of Weeks. Finally, though, the sages believed all would not be possible without adherence to the covenant we accepted at Sinai and so we also call Zman Mattan Torateinu, and we celebrate the giving of the Torah, as encapsulated in the Ten Commandments.

We have to ask ourselves why a holiday with so much significance behind it plays such a small role in the lives of our people. Perhaps it is because it is the last holiday on the yearly calendar, and it always occurs when summer is approaching, and we are all running almost on empty.

Harvesting all that wheat had to be exhausting. Just think of the trials of Ruth, whose book we read on Shavuot, no strange coincidence because it begins with the harvesting of wheat fields. Maybe that is why dairy products have become a staple of meals during the chag. Cheesecake certainly helps to whet the appetite and makes us think lovely thoughts. But we should also pause to reflect on where we would have been and where we would be today without our traditions and our faith in HaShem. Chag Shavuot Sameach. Chag HaBikkurim Sameach, Chag Zman Mattan Torateinu Sameach.