

# Shabbat Shalom Fax

*Parshat Bamidbar*

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Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

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**The Fax of Life**

ת"סג

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**GOOD MORNING!** It wasn't that long ago when personal responsibility and hard work were considered the American way. If you wanted material success you understood that it began with either an education or a learned skill and a willingness to make sacrifices to achieve your dream. You were diligent, learned everything you could about your industry, and created the life you wanted.

**The same** applied in other areas of life. To lose weight, you knew it took a healthy diet, an exercise regimen, consistent hard work, and a certain stick-to-it attitude. There was an ingrained belief that we were responsible for taking care of ourselves and taking personal responsibility for the issues in our lives.

**Ron Haskins**, in a piece for the Brookings Institution, defined personal responsibility as the "willingness to both accept the importance of standards that society establishes for individual behavior and to make strenuous personal efforts to live by those standards." He adds that, when these standards are not met, responsible people do not play victim and "do not look around for some factor outside themselves to blame."

**Boy**, that seems like a very long time ago. Those days of taking personal responsibility are over. Rather than work and contribute to society, a vast number of Americans have become content to let society take care of them; in fact, they both expect and demand it. Short cuts reign supreme; tummy tucks, insulin shots, liposuction, and fad diets have seemingly become the preferred methods for weight loss.

**A few** years ago, psychologist Dr. Linda Sapadin coined a term that defines this malady: Responsibility Deficit Disorder (RDD). How exciting it is to be present to witness the birth of a new mental disorder!

**The real issue** is that those afflicted with RDD aren't the ones suffering from this disease – it's the rest of society that suffers. Society is no longer required to only make sure everyone has an equal opportunity; society is now expected to make everyone equal (equity) regardless of the efforts expended in one's personal growth.

**Moreover**, it has somehow become the norm for society to be responsible for adjusting for every issue with which individuals struggle. Society is expected to both redefine science (gender neutrality) and the English language to accommodate a whole new slew of mental disorders (gender dysphoria, etc.). In direct contrast to Haskins' philosophy of an individual adapting to society's mores and values, we now have society being challenged to change to fit the individual. It's quite terrible to say the least.

**Yes**, many – if not most – of these issues can be traced to terrible parenting. In 2013, Texas defense attorneys turned being a spoiled, entitled 16-year-old into a defense for vehicular manslaughter. An over-indulged childhood with few boundaries meant the defendant was unable to understand the concept of consequences as his parents never held him accountable. It was argued that this malady, called "affluenza," made him less culpable for his action of drunkenly plowing his car into four people, killing them and injuring and paralyzing two of his own friends.

**There are** a few ways parents corrupt the personal development of their children. The most obvious is giving their kids too many material goods or outrageous activities (e.g. spending tens of thousands of dollars on taking them to the Super Bowl) without requiring that their children to earn these rewards. This breeds entitlement rather than responsibility and achievement.

**Another way** is when parents do the things that their children ought to do for themselves (e.g. cleaning up after them, getting them into colleges, finding them jobs, etc.). Parents believe they are "helping," but in reality they are communicating that they don't think their children should or could do it on their own. Either way, the result is that their children never learn self-sufficiency. This leads to an incompetence in basic life skills, which creates harmfully low self-esteem.

**But** part of taking personal responsibility includes understanding where your parents may have failed you and owning up to your own contributions and failings. It reminds me of the person who visited their therapist.

**Therapist:** It seems like you place the burden of all your failures on others, refusing to take responsibility due to learned helplessness, despite most of your problems being solvable.

**Patient:** Yeah, I get that from my mother.

**Of course** taking responsibility is only the beginning of the process. A person also has to take affirmative steps to deal with the mistakes of the past and ensure that they don't repeat them. Taking responsibility without a pledge to oneself to commit to real change doesn't really accomplish much. This reminds me of another joke.

**It was** November 11, 1918 and the German representative was just about to sign the Treaty of Versailles ending the war. The most important part of the treaty was the Germans owning up to starting the war and the reparations that they would make for their crimes. The German representative was just about to sign the treaty when the representative of the Allies looked at him and said, "So you take full responsibility for starting the war?" He replied, "Yes, we take full responsibility for starting World War One."

**Allies** representative, "One?"

This week's Torah portion has a fascinating lesson related to this.

*"And God spoke to Moses in the desert of Sinai [...] saying: 'Take a census of all the congregation of the Children of Israel [...]' (Numbers 1:1-2).*

The fourth book of the Torah, known as *Sefer Bamidbar* (literally, "Book of Being in the Desert"), opens with God asking Moses to undertake a comprehensive counting of the Jewish people. Therefore, our sages refer to this fourth book of the Torah as *The Book of Counting* (see *Mishna Yoma* 68b and Rashi ad loc.). In fact, even in English we don't translate it literally (i.e. "In the Desert"), rather the fourth book of the Torah has come to be known as *Numbers*.

This is odd for a number of reasons, but what is so significant about the counting that this event has come to define the entire book? In other words, *Sefer Bamidbar* spans a period of forty years; how is it that an event that took place at the beginning of the forty years came to define the entire volume?

Rashi (1:1) explains that the Almighty counts the Jewish people as an expression of His deep love for us. By counting us, God is showing His desire to be connected to us. It is fascinating to note that the word that Rashi uses to describe this love is "*chiba*," which is derived from the Hebrew word "*chav* – responsibility."

This is because true love is taking responsibility for the object of your affection. A true love relationship requires you to be a giver. This means making sure to take good care of your beloved. Still, as discussed above, this process can be corrupted. How do we truly express love by taking responsibility without causing the object of our love to become irresponsible?

There is a very unusual custom that is observed when a boy turns *bar mitzvah*. Until the age of 13, in the heavenly court, a father is held responsible for his son's mistakes and indiscretions. From the age of 13 on, the boy is held responsible for his own acts. Thus, during the *bar mitzvah* ceremony a father recites in front of the entire congregation a prayer of appreciation that he is no longer responsible for his son's mistakes.

This seems to run counter to Jewish teachings. We find that the Almighty is compared to an eagle that places its young on its wings to protect them from hunters shooting arrows from below. The eagle is expressing the sentiment that "I'd prefer to have the arrow enter me than enter my child." So too the Almighty protected the Jewish people during the exodus from Egypt – coming between the Egyptians and the Jewish people and absorbing the arrows and catapults of the Egyptian army.

But which is it? Do we want to absorb the blows for our children or do we want to be absolved from their indiscretions and let them suffer on their own?

The answer is obvious. We must do whatever we can to protect our children from outside forces that wish to hurt them through no fault of their own – like the eagle protecting its young from hunters below. But we must also make sure to know when to step back; that, once they are old enough, they suffer the consequences of their own mistakes. It may be hard to watch, but it's the only way for them to grow, become responsible, and learn to achieve.

This is why our sages chose the name the *Book of Counting* for the desert experience. This fourth volume of the Torah begins with a statement of God's steadfast love and support for his people. Throughout the sometimes tumultuous experiences of forty years in the desert, the people were held accountable for their own actions – including the sins which precluded both the Jewish people and Moses himself from entering the Land of Israel. But God's love never wavered. God showed us how to properly raise our children: you help guide them until they can grow on their own – and then you watch your eagles fly.

#### TORAH PORTION: Bamidbar, Numbers 1:1 - 4:20

In the second year of travel in the desert, Moses and Aaron were commanded by the Almighty to count all male Israelites between 20 and 60. There were 603,550 available for military service. The tribe of Levi was exempt because of their special duties as religious leaders. (It is probably from here that countries give divinity deferments to clergy and divinity students.)

The twelve tribes were directed regarding the formation (three tribes were on each side of the Portable Sanctuary) in which they were to camp and travel.

The 22,300 Levites were commanded in the Sanctuary service. The family of Gershon was to transport the coverings of the Sanctuary. The family of Kehos carried the Ark, Table, Menorah, and Altars. The family of Merari transported the boards, pillars, bolts, and sockets.

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 6:56 Miami 7:43 Cape Town 5:33 Guatemala 6:05 Hong Kong 6:40 Honolulu 6:46

Jo'Burg 5:09 LA 7:32 London 8:36 Melbourne 4:58 Mexico 6:48 Moscow 8:23 New York 7:51 Singapore 6:48 Toronto 8:22

"QUOTE OF THE WEEK": We grow through what we go through.

Dedicated with Deep Appreciation to  
**Peter Russin**



Shabbat Shalom,

*Yitzchak Zweig*

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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