

# INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Chana bas Avraham, Jeanna Gornstein Bolislavsky. Sponsored by the Yeshiva. "May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

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Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS KI SISA

## Making it Easy to Return

*And Hashem passed by before him, and proclaimed [...] (34:6).*

In this week's *parsha* we find the "thirteen attributes of mercy" that Hashem taught to Moshe as a guaranteed pathway to forgiveness. In fact, the Gemara (*Rosh Hashana* 17b) states that "there is a covenant that a prayer that contains the thirteen attributes of mercy will never go completely unanswered."

By way of introduction to this concept, and to give us the full weight of the impact of the thirteen attributes of mercy, the Gemara makes a remarkable statement; "R' Yochanan said, had it not been an explicit verse in the Torah it would have been impossible to even utter – (Hashem passed before him...) comes to teach us that Hashem wrapped himself up in a *tallis* like a *shliach tzibbur* and demonstrated to Moshe the order of the prayer, and said: Any time that the Jewish people sin they should recite this order and I will forgive them."

Clearly, the Gemara is telling us that it is difficult to conceive of Hashem dressing up and giving a demonstration of what to do. But even more troubling is trying to understand the reason why it was necessary for Hashem to do so. There are a few times when Hashem showed Moshe something that he didn't understand. An example of this is the Menorah which, seemingly, Moshe needed help understanding how it should be formed. But the Menorah was a physical creation and seeing a

picture of it would be helpful. Teaching Moshe the order of the thirteen attributes is really just a transmission of information like the rest of the Torah. Why would Moshe need a visual demonstration of such a lesson?

Generally, asking forgiveness from someone is very difficult. It requires an admission of wrongdoing or, at the very least, communicating that the intention wasn't to harm. But the most daunting part, and the usual reason that people procrastinate in asking for forgiveness, is because of the uncertainty of how the injured party is going to react. Will that person yell and scream? Or worse, try to use my admission of guilt as a way to take advantage of me in some way?

Hashem took extraordinary steps in demonstrating the path to forgiveness. The purpose of the "Show and Tell" demonstration is so that Moshe would understand that Hashem himself is leading the path to His forgiveness. In other words, Hashem himself is willing to lead the congregation in prayer because more than anything he wants his children, the Jewish people, to return to him. Hashem is communicating to Moshe that there should be no barriers to asking for forgiveness because Hashem himself wants to fix the relationship. It is for this reason that a proper prayer of forgiveness, in this manner, will always be answered.



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# Making Sense of the Census

**When you take the census of the people of Israel according to their number [...] from twenty years old and above [...] (31:12-14).**

Here the Torah describes the process of tallying those in the Jewish nation. Remarkably, the way we conduct our census is far different from a typical nation's census. Generally, a nation's interest in censuses is only natural as a census is a pretty good measure of a nation's strength and overall wellbeing. Over three thousand years ago, the Babylonians conducted an exhaustive census of their population, livestock, and food staples. The records of a Chinese population study, done during the Han Dynasty in the first century, are still extant. The United States conducted its first census a few short years after the War of Independence.

Yet, the Jewish method for conducting a census is very different. Rashi (ad loc) explains that the only ones who were counted were those that were eligible for service in the army: specifically, men over the age of twenty. In other words, the word "census" in this context is really a misnomer, as we aren't really doing a population study. Rather, the Torah is asking us to count the number of men eligible for service in the army. Obviously, a leader would want to know the number of men in the army as this is a good indication of their military strength, yet,

this is the only type of census that the Jewish people ever undertook. Why?

The answer to this question defines the essence of the Jewish people and perhaps even reveals the secret to its longevity. Most nations are made up of a collection of individuals living in a certain geographic location with similar ideals and goals with, perhaps, some kind of common ancestry. Jewish people, on the other hand, perceive themselves as a unified whole. In other words, the Jewish nation is a living corporeal body that just changes cells over time. Meaning, we are a community of people not a collection of individual people choosing to live the same way. In such a community, there is very little value in knowing how many individuals there are.

Ramban (*Bamidbar* 1:2) seems to indicate that it is from the age of twenty and on that one becomes involved in community activities. The entire strength of the Jewish people and the responsibility to fulfill her mission depends on the strength of her community. Because of this, the only real measure of the strength of the Jewish people is the amount of people who are community minded and even willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake

of the community. That can only be measured by those who are of the age of communal responsibility and able to serve in the army.

This may also explain the strange insertion in this week's *parsha* of the spices and "recipe" for making the *ketores*. The *ketores* was well known as a remarkably pleasing fragrance that permeated the Mishkan and later, the Beis Hamikdash. Yet, out of the eleven spices that made up the formula of the *ketores*, one (*chelbona*) had a putrid smell. Rashi (30:34) explains its inclusion: "This comes to teach us that we should not take lightly the law of including in our gatherings even those with severe transgressions, as part of our communal prayers." On the face of it this seems very difficult to understand; wouldn't we want to *daven* to Hashem with only those of a pure heart and righteous deeds? Chazal are teaching us that we must never look at ourselves as individuals; our entire strength lies in the strength of our community. Just as the *ketores* is invalid without the *chelbona*, we aren't a complete community without including everyone. It is only when we present ourselves as a community that Hashem will truly respond to our prayers.

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