

CHIZUK & IDUD

*Divrei Torah from the weekly sedra
with a focus on living in Eretz Yisrael
Chizuk for Olim & Idud for not-yet-Olim*

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Bamidbar / Yom Yerushalayim

A number of deceptively unassuming verses found in this week's parasha provide the backdrop to a controversy which has been simmering since the establishment of the State of Israel.

At the beginning of the parasha, Moshe is told to conduct a census of all males 20 years of age and older. The Torah does not tell us why the census is being conducted, and we are left wondering what purpose could there be for having an exact and detailed accounting of the members of each tribe.

Ramban lists several possible reasons:

- 1) The census is intended as a display of the greatness of G-d who enabled the Jewish nation to grow from 70 souls to over 600,000.
- 2) The census is a means allowing Moshe and Aharon to bestow a personal blessing upon each and every individual.
- 3) The census is the first step in the formation of the first Israeli army in preparation for entering the land.

Each one of these proposed explanations must surely make sense of the fact that the census did not include the tribe

of Levi. The far-reaching ramifications of this fact according to the last proposed explanation, are clearly felt today.

The Rambam informs us, at the conclusion of the laws of Shmita and Yovel, that the tribe of Levi was not included in the general census since they are set apart to serve G-d. The Leviyim are to dedicate themselves solely to the study and teaching of the Torah, and therefore are exempt from military service. The Rambam then proceeds to expand upon this definition writing that the exemption encompasses: "...not the tribe of Levi alone but each and every person throughout the world whose spirit has uplifted him and whose intelligence has given him the understanding to stand before God, to serve Him, to worship Him, to know God."

The present demand that Yeshiva students be exempt from military service is based on these seminal words in which the Rambam almost idolizes such individuals, claiming that "such a person has been sanctified as the holy of holies".

In 1948-1949, after several Rabbis wrote a letter stating that all Yeshiva students should be granted a military exemption, Rabbi Zevin famously wrote an anonymous monograph (translated and republished in Tradition, 1985) vehemently rejecting this contention. The divisive nature of this controversy is literally tearing the Jewish people apart.

In an article expounding the philosophy of the Hesder Yeshivot, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein questioned whether the modern Yeshiva student could truthfully "look himself in the mirror, and tell himself that he ought not go to the army because he is KODESH KODASHIM, sanctum sanctorum, in the Rambam's terms?"

This same test of religious self-evaluation could be applied to other areas of our religious life as well. Next time we hollowly repeat the time-worn mottos of old - we might want to take a good hard look in the mirror and ask ourselves, do we really mean it when we proclaim...

L'SHANA HABA'A BIRUSHALAYIM HABNUYA!



These weekly words of Torah wisdom can be found in my recently published book "Eretz Yisrael and Aliyah in the weekly Parsha". It can be ordered by calling 052-336-0553 or by ordering it on Amazon