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Parshat Bamidbar: It's On Us: Living the Jewish Calling at Har Sinai, in the Desert, and in Davening

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In Sefer Bamidbar we transition from being freed slaves who accept God's Torah to a responsible nation that has to live God's Torah. At times, we struggle greatly with this holy charge-- the call to uphold God's mitzvot and improve the world through them. This effort, which we continue to pursue today, is set into motion when we are counted in the census in Parshat Bamidbar-- when we take the first proactive step in moving away from Har Sinai and toward Eretz Yisrael. It is then that we begin to carry the yoke of what it is to be a Jewish people following God.

I would like to take this opportunity when we are in the midst of counting-- in Sefirat HaOmer and in Parshat Bamidbar-- to focus on a familiar tefillah that holds us accountable. It is a tefillah that reminds us multiple times a day what God took us out of Egypt to do, and into the desert to become. This is the prayer Aleinu.

Aleinu? But that's when the best of us talk to our neighbors, put away our tefillin, or begin to head to kiddush! Is it really that important?

We see the message epitomized in the very first word: Aleinu - 'it's on **us**'. Aleinu is **our** charge when we walk out of shul, and then with God, to be aspirational in how we live. As the Bayit Chadash teaches, Aleinu ends our davening because it strengthens our faith as we go out into the world. Just as Parshat Bamidbar moves us from Har Sinai and out into the desert with a vision for our land and peoplehood, Aleinu carries us out of the cocoon of prayer and into a life of purpose, action, and connection. Or as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it, through Aleinu "we hope to spread our message by leading exemplary lives...[and] we remind ourselves that our goal is not simply to pray, but to live a prayerful life".

Aleinu tells us to live with humility and gratitude, ואנחנו כורעים ומשתחיים ומודים, to continually give thanks to God for who we are and what we have. It shows us that the only way to perfect the world, לתקן עולם, is במלכות ש-די, through God's kingship, through practicing His Torah and mitzvot. And it obligates us to hope, על כן נקווה לך ה' אלקינו, to believe in something better, to envision a more Godly world. And so, when we face our enemies, whether spiritual enemies--like doubt, fear, and the yetzer hara-- or physical enemies-- like those who want to destroy Jews and Israel-- Aleinu reminds us that we are God's people, we walk with Him, and there is something greater and better to aspire toward. In our parsha, we can imagine Aleinu as the grand muster for the legions of B'nai Yisrael who line up to prepare and be counted on to fight for our future. It is the mission of Aleinu that has historically given us the strength to maintain our values and withstand internal and external threats.

But while we may agree that Aleinu is a powerful tefillah, how do we make it matter to us?

Let me provide three ideas to meditate on in our personal prayer lives the next time we say Aleinu:

1. Jews chose to sanctify God's name with this prayer on their lips. Famously, the Jews in 12th century France said the words of Aleinu and became martyrs rather than accept Christianity. Hauntingly, they sang Aleinu as they were being burned at the stake. They did this because it was the ultimate response to

their enemies, as the prayer declared unyielding faith in God and hope for His kingship even after their deaths. Today we recite/sing it with them in mind.

2. God is listening for it. The Mishnah Berurah explains that when we say Aleinu, כל צבא השמים שומעים, "All of the hosts of heaven listen and God stands with His entourage from above". When we say Aleinu, God and His court stand with us, giving us joy in our lot and chizuk in our mission. God needs us to show up for Him, and we need Him to have our backs as we face the ups and downs of life. Aleinu is the time when we stand with God in our commitment to each other.

3. It has a mic-drop ending that you may not know about. The final words of Aleinu (originating from Zechariah 14:9) are ביום ההוא יהיה ה' אחד ושמו אחד, "On that day the Lord will be One, and His name one". The Gemara in Pesachim 50a asks on this, "What does 'one' mean? Isn't God's name already one?" Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak answers that the difference between this world and the world to come is that in this world God's name is not read as it is written. And so, God's name is not truly one. When we recite the last line of Aleinu we are acknowledging that the world is imperfect. Our loved ones die and we miss them terribly. Many are homeless or go without food. And we hurt each other, intentionally and unintentionally, with words and actions. And yet, we still have to step outside of shul and lead prayerful lives-- we still have to enter into the midbar. For if we don't, who *will* make God's name one? Aleinu challenges us to see what the world is right now and then imagine what it could be. Like making a bikkur cholim visit when it is uncomfortable or inconvenient, giving above and beyond of our time to those in need, or sacrificing our own desires to give a loved one, or even a stranger, opportunities. In the words of Aleinu we are not just asking God to bring about achdut and tikkun; we are challenging ourselves to do so. Aleinu-- it's on us! This last line is our epic end to every prayer service.

The next time we say Aleinu, I encourage us to think of what the world is now and what it could be. Right now in our own lives, we may feel the anxiety of battles that blaze around us, against Israel, and even less overtly in our own communities. Whatever *midbar* we stand on the brink of, we need to hear the call and guidance of Aleinu. As a responsible and free people, we are called to live God's Torah not just at the foot of Har Sinai, but also in the desert-- and God willing on our way to Eretz Yisrael. And so, as we enter into Sefer Bamidbar and celebrate Matan Torah, let's choose to renew our identity as the people God took us out of Egypt to be. A humble and hopeful people. A people that acknowledges pain and suffering and strives to make this world a little more like the world to come. A people that says Aleinu-- it's on us to make God's name one-- whether at Har Sinai, in the desert, or in our davening.



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