

Parshat Bamidbar 2018-5778- Not appreciating what you have

The summer brings one repeating delight for me, and that is the study of *Pirchay Avot*, The Ethics of Our Fathers. This is a collection of easy-to-understand, practical and of course, highly ethical sayings, each of which fits on its own bumper sticker. One of the most famous quotes is about "Who is rich? One who takes happiness with his portion."

One of the main lessons of Mussar is gratitude, the ability to appreciate one's portion.

There is a story about the famous violinist Itzhak Perlman, which is likely urban legend, yet it conveys an important message on gratitude. As we all know, Itzhak suffered from polio as a child, and as a result, getting on stage for a concert is no small feat. Many of us have seen his performances at Kleinhans over the years, which involve him alighting from an electric scooter, mounting crutches, and moving unsteadily to his seat by the conductor. Yet as my eyes have witnessed, his demeanor is as normal as one of us opening the refrigerator.

On one night's performance, a short time into his concerto solo, one of the strings on his violin snapped, for all in the audience to see. The audience gasped, and the orchestra stopped playing. Although he could have had a technician offstage replace the string, he instead signaled the conductor to pick up just where they had left off. Perlman finished his solo by playing some notes using the remaining three strings, and when that wasn't possible, he rearranged the music on the fly to match the orchestra.

Of course, when he ended, the audience rose to their feet and cheered even more mightily than their normal level of appreciation.

After the applause died down, Perlman announced to the crowd, "You know, it is the artist's task to make beautiful music with what you have left." In his case, of course, this likely referred to playing the concerto with three strings. Yet, one cannot but ponder how he never let his crippled body prevent him from becoming one of the world's greatest violinists, how he learned the lesson of gratitude that allowed him to succeed in spite of his crippled body.

Chapt. 3:12-13.

יב וְאֲנִי הִנֵּה לִקְחֹתִי אֶת-הַלְוִיִּם,
מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, תַּחַת כָּל-בְּכוֹר
פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם, מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְהָיוּ לִי,
הַלְוִיִּם.

12 'And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every first-born that openeth the womb among the children of Israel; and the Levites shall be Mine;

יג כִּי לִי, כָּל-בְּכוֹר--בְּיוֹם הַכֹּתִי כָל-
בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הַקְּדָשְׁתִּי לִי כָל-
בְּכוֹר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, מֵאָדָם עַד-בְּהֵמָה:
לִי יִהְיוּ, אֲנִי יְהוָה. {פ}

13 for all the first-born are Mine: on the day that I smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt I hallowed unto Me all the first-born in Israel, both man and beast, Mine they shall be: I am the LORD.

Why are these two verses seemingly reversed in order? Should it not be that G-d cites the history of why the first-born are "His", based on the Exodus story? Namely, that he saved them specifically from the 10th plague by virtue of the lamb's blood from the *pesach* sacrifice that painted onto the lintels of the Jewish households? Why is not verse 13 stated first, followed by verse 12, which says that the *levi'im* are now G-d's as a replacement for the first-born?

Rashi has a simple but powerful explanation:

Because the sacred service was [originally performed] by the firstborn, but when they sinned with the golden calf, they were disqualified. The Levites, who did not indulge in idolatry, were chosen instead.