



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Bamidbar

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Bamidbar

Heads and Hats



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

It's all coming to a head. Quite literally.

And on that head resides a hat.

What is the inner meaning of a hat? What is the inner meaning of a head? How do heads and hats relate? Your hat has a brim. Does your head brim with knowledge?

In this week's Torah reading, Moses counts heads. Moses also counts skulls. Is there a difference?

The answer lies in two Talmudic passages – one about heavy heads and prayer, the other about saying *Shalom* prior to praying. And, in the course of examining that answer, we discover that the goal is less about keeping the game in our heads than it is about keeping our heads in the game.

As this Shabbos leads us into the holiday of Shavuot, this sermon will inspire your listeners to hold their heads up high. And to hold the world up higher. This sermon will guarantee that they will never quit while they are ahead, and it will give them a head-start.

It is time to head inside.

HEADS AND HATS: THE KABBALAH OF HEADGEAR

1. Hat Trick (Joke)

A man was walking down the street when he met a young boy. The man asked the boy for his name.

The boy responded, "Six and seven-eighths."

The man asked the boy why his parents had given him such a strange name.

To which the boy replied: "I think they just picked it out of a hat."

2. The Inner Meaning of Hats

Hats are a fascinating study. They come in a multitude of varieties: from baseball caps to fedoras; from cloth turbans to steel helmets; from tweedy newsboys' caps to felted artists' berets; from soft yarmulkes worn on Jewish heads to shockproof hardhats worn on construction workers' heads.

Then there is the man with the yellow hat, the man who mistook his wife for a hat, and the cat in the hat. You can pull a rabbit out of a hat, and you can throw your hat into the ring.

Since we are fast sliding into cliché land, let's not forget: "I'll eat my hat," as in, "If you do this or that, I'll eat my hat." That one, incidentally, originated with Charles Dickens, who writes in his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*: "If I knew as little of life as that, I'd eat my hat and swallow the buckle whole."

So what's with hats? What do they represent? What may they teach us? And what is their inner meaning?

Don't you know, the answer to all those questions – as to all questions man can possibly pose – may be found in the Torah. As the Mishnah states, *Delve into it and delve into it, for all is in it*¹

Yes, even hats.

3. Sefer Bamidbar

This Shabbat we begin reading the fourth book of the Torah. This book is known in Hebrew as *Sefer Bamidbar* and in English as the Book of Numbers, because it begins with a census. (Indeed, the Talmud refers to it as the Book of Counting.²)

And G-d spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert in the Tent of the Meeting on the first [day] of the second month of the second year since their exodus from the land of Egypt, saying:

*“Take a headcount of the entire congregation of the children of Israel, according to their families, following the paternal line, counting the names of all the males, according to their heads.”*³

In ordering a census of the Jewish people, G-d used a specific language: “take a headcount ... according to their heads.” Heads apparently count. But why?

The clue is in the Hebrew of the verse. The first reference to head is *sa'au et rosh*, which is usually translated as “take a headcount” and the concluding reference is *l'gulglotam*, which is usually translated as “according to their heads” or “individually.”

While *rosh* literally does mean “head/top” as in *Rosh Hashanah* meaning “head of the year,” *gulgolet* literally means “skull” – referring to the round bony structure that surrounds the brain, which is why *gulgolet* is etymologically related to *galgal* or *agol* or *agalgalot* meaning “circle/round.”

¹ Avot 5:21.

² Sotah 36b.

³ Numbers 1:2.

Now, what do *rosh* and *gulgolet*, “head” and “skull” have to do with hats (our subject for today) and what do they have to do with our lives today?

4. Heads, Skulls, Hats and Prayer

I have found that when seeking an answer to a question, it never hurts to pray. Because when I pray, the answers often come. As they do in this case, for the answer to the relationship between heads, skulls and hats is found in prayer.

States the Talmud: “Do not stand to pray save with a heavy head (*koved rosh*)”⁴ And: “Whoever says *Shalom* to his friend prior to praying is considered as if he built an illegitimate altar (*bamah*), as it is written [in the Book of Isaiah]: *Withdraw yourselves from a man whose breath* (*neshama*) *is in his nostrils, for in what merit* (*bemah*) *is he to be esteemed?*”⁵ Do not read *bemah* (in what merit), rather read *bamah* (illegitimate elevated altar).⁶

Right. What does this cryptic passage mean?

Prior to prayer, your *neshama*, your breath, is still in your nostrils (so to speak) for your *neshama*, your soul, has not yet permeated your whole being. Prayer is the process of infusing your entire being with the breath of life, opening up to the soul gifted to you by G-d every morning.⁷

Therefore, do not greet your friend until you pray, to first ensure that your being is full of soul and that you are fully present when you greet your friend. Otherwise, it’s as if you are building a *bamah*, an illegitimate altar, an illegitimate/incomplete space, for the soul has not yet permeated your conscious being.

⁴ Berachot 30b.

⁵ Isaiah 2:22.

⁶ Berachot 14a.

⁷ See Ohr Hatorah, Bamidbar I, pp. 4-9.

Put another way:

Prayer is the connection between the highs of your soul and the lows of your body, infusing your soul into your body. If you haven't prayed, it's as if your soul does not yet permeate your body but is still in your nostrils.

Why the nostrils? Doesn't that seem a bit odd? Yet, consider that when G-d created the first man, *He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.*⁸ This is what we read in the Book of Genesis. And this is also what we read in the Book of Job: *Indeed, it is the soul in man and the breath of G-d that brings understanding.*⁹

From this we learn that the soul initially resides in the nostrils or head. But through the process of prayer, it begins to permeate the entire body.

Indeed, *neshomo* – soul – in Hebrew – can also be read as *neshimo* – breath. The human soul is the breath of G-d. Human breath is rooted in divine breath. This is the reason that so many spiritual exercises are related to breathing.

This also works on the cosmic level; prayer connects the breath of life, the soul of the world, with the entire cosmic body of the universe. As the Book of Genesis also states: *And he [Jacob] dreamed and saw a ladder set up on the earth and its head reaching to heaven.*¹⁰ Prayer is this ladder that reaches from the earth to heaven and connects the two.

The whole reason why the soul is meant to permeate the entire body is so that the body is moved to action, implementing Torah's commandments here on earth. To achieve this, the Talmud says we must pray with a heavy head – with humility. That is, a prerequisite for true prayer is a grave and humble awareness of how disconnected the soul is from the body, heaven from earth, and a serious commitment to bridging the two through prayer, bringing the divine breath lodged in the nostrils into the full body experience of life.

⁸ Genesis 2:7

⁹ Job 32:8.

¹⁰ Genesis 28:12.

The Talmud's reference to a heavy head, *koved rosh*, may be translated as "gravitas/reverence." We are not supposed to pray with a light head. Instead, we must be aware of the gravity of the act we are undertaking and proceed with reverence.

This heavy head, this awareness of the serious/heavy responsibility weighing upon us, is achieved by donning a hat – in the Jewish case, a yarmulke or a *kippa* – to remind us of what hovers about us.¹¹ And to remind us why we have a head in the first place!

5. Small Head (Story)

Chaim Bialik, one of Israel's great poets, once found himself walking through the very religious neighborhood of Meah Shearim, in Jerusalem, looking for a synagogue. Coming across a young child in the street, Bialik asked him, "Where's the synagogue?"

The child replied, "The synagogue is only for Jews, not for non-Jews." To which Bialik retorted (mind you, in pure Yiddish), "Why do you think I'm not Jewish? The child answered, "Because you are not wearing a kippah." Bialik, looking up to the heavens, said, "Kippah shamayim," literally, all of heaven is my kippah. The boy, looking up at him, said, "That's far too big a kippah for such a small head."

6. A Mystical Explanation: Heads and Hats

That brings us to hats.

To really understand the deeper meaning of hats and their spiritual relevance in our everyday lives, we have to re-examine our Torah lesson through the prism of Kabbalah.

¹¹ See Shabbat 156b: Cover your head in order that the fear of heaven may be upon you. Kiddushin 31a: Rabbi Hunah ben Joshua never walked 4 cubits with his head uncovered "because the Divine Presence is always over my head." See Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 2:6.

The following is what the Tzemech Tzedek in Ohr HaTorah, a collection of mystical magnitude, says about the concept of taking a headcount:¹²

The fact that G-d instructed Moses to take a headcount (*rosh*) and to count individually each skull (*gulgolet*) implies that Moses was meant to accomplish something more than just taking a census. Moses was meant to reveal to the Jewish people their very purpose here on earth. He was meant to count the heads so that the people will know that they should use their heads, their minds to inform every aspect and action of the body.

Moses concluded his task with a practical tool for implementation: *gulgolet* or skull that encases the head like a helmet or hat. It is an element that is above the head and which surrounds the head. In order to use your head, to make your head count, you must have *koved rosh*, a heavy head, which comes from the realization of what a serious/heavy burden you carry.

Embrace that idea and your head will follow.

The skull, helmet or hat covers the head and provides impetus for prayer. Then prayer infuses the body with the soul.

7. Personal Lesson

What does this all mean for us today?

Each of us has a head. Hopefully we even use our heads. The Torah teaches that your head counts. (Moses, as instructed by G-d, counted every individual head.) But this is not intended to be a mere cerebral exercise. You are meant to use your head to permeate every part of your body and indeed every part of your life – be it work, play, personal, business, pleasure, whatever – with your soul.

¹² Ohr Hatorah, Bamidbar I, pp. 4-9.

A mind is a powerful thing. But we must always remember and be cognizant that there is something above our minds and heads. And that there is something below as well. We cannot just live in our heads; our minds must inform and be expressed in our actions, permeating our entire beings.

As Maimonides writes:¹³ “Just as the wise man is recognized through his wisdom and his temperaments and in these, he stands apart from the rest of the people, so, too, he should be recognized through his actions - in his eating, drinking, intimate relations... in his speech, manner of walking and dress, in the management of his finances, and in his business dealings. All of these actions should be exceptionally becoming and befitting.”

This is done in many ways – from acting ethically toward others, to respecting your parents and loving your children, to eating what is kosher to eat. But it all begins with prayer. Start your day, even before saying Shalom to your friend, with prayer. For prayer releases the soul blown into your nostrils/head into the rest of your body. And it allows you then to engage with your friend properly.

Prayer requires a heavy head, remembering why you are here, the responsibility and burden you bear. Some think carrying a heavy burden is a negative; we Jews know otherwise, for our burden is like carrying diamonds – it’s about fusing head and body with G-d and what could be more positive. Indeed, it would be more a burden if we did not have this burden to carry.

Be not afraid of the heavy head, the awareness of momentous purpose. Rather, be afraid of the lightheadedness of empty baggage and vacant ambition.

¹³ Mishne Torah, Hilchos De’ot 5:1.

8. The Hatseller (Humor)

There was once a hat seller who passed by a forest on his way back from the market. The weather was very hot, so he decided to take a nap under one of the trees. When he did, he left his basket of hats by the side.

A few hours later, he was awakened by some sounds. He looked up and heard some monkeys squeaking up in the tree. To his chagrin, the monkeys were playing with his hats which were all up a tree.

The hat-seller sat down and thought of how he could recover his hats. As he thought he scratched his head, and he noticed that the monkeys were mimicking him, scratching their heads.

So he took off his own hat and saw the monkeys did exactly the same. That is when an idea came to him. He took his hat and threw it on the ground and the monkeys did that too.

That is how he managed to get all his hats back.

But this is not the end of the story.

Fifty years later, his grandson, Jack, also became a hat-seller. One day, just like his grandfather, he passed by the same forest. It was very hot, so he took a nap under the same tree and left the hats in a basket beside him. When he woke up, he realized that all his hats were gone. He looked up and saw that the monkeys had taken all the hats.

Of course, he had heard from his grandfather how he had bested the monkeys, so he did just what his grandfather did. He started scratching his head and the monkeys followed. Next, he took off his hat and fanned himself and again the monkeys followed.

Now, very convinced of his grandfather's solution, Jack threw his hat on the ground but to his surprise, the monkeys held onto all the hats.

Then one monkey spoke up: "What, you think only you have a grandfather?"

9. Conclusion

Tomorrow is Shavuot when each and every one of us recalls how we stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and received the Torah.

In addition to our grandfathers being at Sinai and telling us about it, we ourselves were there – not in body, but in soul – experiencing the giving of the Torah just the same. Afterwards, every name was numbered; every head was counted.

Today, we cover our heads with hats to remind us of that time, to remind us who we became then – the Nation of Israel.

Baseball players may don baseball caps; construction workers may don hardhats; soldiers may don helmets. We Jews don yarmulkes. It is a hat that says we are Jews. It is a hat that says we are mindful of who is always above us and what is our purpose in the salvation of the world.

The hat we wear ensures that we keep our head in the game, hold our head up high, and keep our head screwed on right.

It is not about keeping the game in our head, rather about keeping our head in the game.

Hats off to all who live like this.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Shavuot Samayach!