

Parshat Devarim
O Nivonim! My Nivonim!
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Class of 2017

In the movie *Dead Poets Society*, John Keating (Robin Williams) is hired to teach poetry in an all boys preparatory school. The school is known for its high standards, rigid approach to education, and blind emphasis on conformity. Keating uses innovative methods to reach his students, in order to expand their thinking. For example, he stands on his desk and has each student take turns standing on his desk to gain a different perspective. Keating exclaims: “*I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way. You see the world looks very different up here ... Just when you think you know something, you have to look at it in another way*”.

Keating marches a group of boys around the courtyard pointing out how quickly the boys begin to march in step with each other. He believes this to be illustrative of “the difficulty of maintaining beliefs in the face of others” and then encourages each of them to find their own way of walking. In another class, he tells the boys “in my class you will learn to think for yourselves...no matter what anyone tells you, words and ideas can change the world. His unconventional methods inspire his students to come out of their shells, think creatively and thus more deeply about their lives and the world in general. In essence, Keating urges his students to develop into *nivonim*, men of understanding. Or as the Gemara in Chagigah describes:

An individual who arrives at a new idea through a previous learning. המבין דבר מתוך דבר¹

Moshe too, in retelling the story of Bene Israel’s 40 year journey, also emphasized the need for men of understanding, *nivonim* as candidates for the judges he chose to assist him.

Deuteronomy 1

(9) Thereupon I said to you, “I cannot bear the burden of you by myself. (10) The LORD your God has multiplied you until you are today as numerous as the stars in the sky....

(13) Pick from each of your tribes men who are wise, discerning, and experienced, and I will appoint them as your heads.” (14) You answered me and said, “What you propose to do is good.” (15) So I took your tribal leaders, wise and experienced men, and appointed them heads over you: captains of thousands, captains of hundreds, captains of fifties, and captains of tens, and officials for your tribes.

דברים א
 (ט) ואמר אלכם בעת ההוא לא-אוכל
 לבדי שאַת אתכם: (י) ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הִרְבָּה אֶתְכֶם
 וְהִנְכֶם הַיּוֹם כְּכֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם לְרֹב...
 (יג) הִבּוּ לָכֶם אֲנָשִׁים חֲכָמִים וְנִבְיִים וַיִּדְעוּ
 לְשִׁבְטֵיכֶם וְאֲשִׁימָם בְּרָאשֵׁיכֶם: (יד) וַתַּעֲנוּ אֵתִי
 וַתֹּאמְרוּ טוֹב-הַדְּבַר אֲשֶׁר-דִּבַּרְתָּ לַעֲשׂוֹת: (טו)
 וָאֶקַּח אֶת-רֹאשֵׁי שְׁבֻטֵיכֶם אֲנָשִׁים חֲכָמִים
 וַיִּדְעוּ וְאֶתְּן אֹתָם רֹאשִׁים עֲלֵיכֶם שְׂרֵי אֲלֵפִים
 וְשְׂרֵי מֵאוֹת וְשְׂרֵי חֲמִשִּׁים וְשְׂרֵי עֶשְׂרֵת וְשֹׁטְרִים
 לְשִׁבְטֵיכֶם:

He exhorts the people to choose **אֲנָשִׁים חֲכָמִים וְנִבְיִים וַיִּדְעוּ**, men who are **wise, discerning and known** in their tribes².

¹ Chagiga 14a
² Devarim 1:13

And yet, Moshe is only able to find judges that are **חֲכָמִים וְיָדְעִים** - wise and known³, and those that are ***nivonim*, men of understanding, are distinctly missing**. Rashi writes that Moshe simply could not find any *nivonim* in the group⁴ and other commentaries agree⁵.

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (the Netziv) writes that *nivonim* were in fact present amongst the judges that Moshe chose, but were harder to identify. His view is based on his understanding as to who the *nivonim* actually were. The Netziv writes:

They were those that found newer ways of interpreting halacha based on their own knowledge. **הן המה מחדשים בהלכה מדעת עצמם**.⁶

In fact, Moshe readily recognized who the wise men were, but *nivonim* were harder to identify, because none of them would offer a new interpretation of halacha in front of Moshe. Instead it only became clear who of the judges were *nivonim* once they went to work in their own backyards, when they were amongst their own tribes rendering judgements⁷.

From the Netziv's perspective, there were certainly *nivonim* acting as leaders among the people. But they were not initially recognized for their abilities.

Why does he believe so strongly that Moshe must have had judges who were *nivonim* as well?

The answer may possibly lie in a prior verse:

וְאָמַר אֵלֵיכֶם בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר לֹא־אוּכַל לְבַדִּי שִׂאת אֶתְכֶם: ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הִרְבָּה אֶתְכֶם וְהִנֵּנִי הַיּוֹם כְּכֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם לְרֹב:

In this verse, Moshe states that he can no longer carry the burden of the people on his own because God has multiplied Bene Israel, who are numerous as the the stars of the heaven⁸.

Rabbi Shimshon Refael Hirsch writes: **“the people's multitudes are like the stars of the heaven: although they are countless, there is an independent significance to each individual; each one is a “world unto himself” has his own value and is under G-d's Providence”**⁹.

Perhaps the Netziv believed that the judges could only have been comprised of *Chachmim*, *Yeduum* **and *Nivonim***, together possessing a diverse set of intellectual attributes to expertly adjudicate and teach Jewish law to each individual Jew. The Netziv sees the *nivonim* rendering new *chidushim*, new understandings of Torah, to arrive at the appropriate judgement. This type of judge is uniquely poised to discern more sensitively a particular law, and take into consideration the individual

³ Devarim 1:15

⁴ Rashi Devarim 1:15:2, Nedarim 20b

⁵ Chizkuni Devarim 1:15:1

⁶ Haamek Davar Devarim 1:13:3

⁷ Haamek Davar 1:15:2

⁸ Devarim 1:9-10

⁹ Hirsch Devarim 1:10



perspectives of the people before him, believing in a dynamic halachic process that can respond to the changing needs of the nation.

John Keating is eventually forced to leave his school, as he is scapegoated for an unfortunate outcome. The school leadership is not ready for his unconventional ideas and finds an excuse to have him removed. In the movie's final and most emotionally powerful scene, a number of his students pay homage to Keating as he leaves his classroom for the last time. One by one, his students stand on their desks, facing Keating hailing him "O Captain! My Captain!" and expressing their deep gratitude for his sensitive approach to them. Keating may be gone, but his words and ideas have forever touched and changed each of them. His innovative ideas, as all other brave new and bold ideas that are put forward in the world, will assuredly live on beyond him and ultimately find expression in his students.

In honor of the many *Nivonim* and *Nivonot* in our community and across the pond who work against so many odds... your sacred work will one day be praised and innovative Torah insights lauded.

"O Captain! My Captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting"¹⁰



Rabba Dr. Carmella Abraham feels blessed to have the privilege of living her two callings as both a doctor and a member of the Orthodox clergy. Rabba Carmella has interned at the Hillels of Westchester, Columbia Presbyterian Hospital Chaplaincy Program and served as a Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Created Equal Seminar Fellowship. Rabba Carmella earned her bachelor's degree from Barnard College and her medical degree from Mount Sinai School of Medicine. She practiced at the Women's Health Program, where she held a dual appointment in Internal Medicine and Obstetrics and Gynecology. She currently works in Oncology Medical Affairs for pharma. Rabba Carmella is married to physician Dr. Steven Kubersky and has three children.

¹⁰ Walt Whitman, Oh Captain! My Captain! Leaves of Grass, 1867