

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת במדבר

**וידבר ה' אל משה במדבר סיני באהל מועד באחד לחדש השני בשנה השנית
לצאתם מארץ מצרים לאמר**

“Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt, saying” (1:1)

Rashi writes that Hashem constantly counted the Jews in the wilderness out of His great love for them. Just as a jewel merchant counts his precious wares over and over again to make sure that he has not lost any of them, so does Hashem value and love each individual of His chosen people.

Rabbi Yechiel London points out that the first Rashi of every sefer in the Torah discusses Hashem's love for the Jewish people. The beginning of a sefer generally serves as an introduction to what is contained in it. Hashem's love for the Bnei Yisrael is an important theme throughout Chumash and serves as the introduction for each of its five books.

**ויהיו כל פקודי בני ישראל לבית אבתם מן עשרים שנה ומעלה כל יצא צבא
בישראל**

“These were all the counted ones of the Children of Israel, according to their fathers' house, from twenty years of age and up, everyone who goes out to the army in Israel” (1:45)

Ramban asks: Why was it so important to know the exact population of the Jewish people? If the purpose of the counting was to separate the people into separate encampments by tribe, it would have been enough for them to present their lineage without keeping a tally of how many members there were in each tribe.

The first answer that the Ramban offers is that perhaps it was important to publicize the kindness of Hashem that he multiplied them from seventy people to a large nation of 600,000. In this way, the counting is a praise of Hashem and a proclamation of the kindness that He performed for us.

Another answer is that the counting required each person to pass before Moshe and Aharon and personally introduce himself to them. Moshe and Aharon would bless each person whom they counted. This teaches us the concept of greeting tzadikim and obtaining their blessings. The blessing of a righteous person has great strength and should not be taken lightly. The same holds true of the blessing from the Kohanim that we receive each Yom Tov. The Gemara writes: "The blessing of an ordinary individual should not be light in your eyes." Certainly we should not underestimate the value of Birchas Kohanim or a blessing from a righteous person. Therefore, it is important for one to go to a tzadik for a blessing and bring his children along.

A third explanation for the necessity of a counting is that every individual was counted. They did not merely ask each head of household how many family members were in his house. Rather, each individual over the age of twenty had to personally appear before Moshe and Aharon. This taught every Jew the importance of the individual. The Shelah writes that the counting uplifted each person because every individual realized his importance in his own right. The power of the individual is not to be downplayed. The Rambam writes that a person has to view himself as having exactly half mitzvos and half aveiros and the entire world also as exactly half and half. As a result of the equilibrium, every act that a person does, for good or bad, can tip his own personal scale and that of the whole world accordingly. Every person has a tremendous capability and responsibility. We are living in a world where people fail to recognize that they can make a difference on their own. When a person realizes his capabilities, he will act in a more serious and responsible manner.

מטה זבולן ונשיא לבני זבולן אליאב בן חלון

“The tribe of Zevulun - and the prince of the tribe of Zevulun is Eliav son of Chelon” (2:7)

Why does the Torah not write "and the tribe of Zevulun" as it does for all the other tribes? The Baal HaTurim, quoting the Midrash Tanchuma, writes that by removing the word "and," the posuk indicates a connection between Zevulun and Yissachar, the previous tribe, as if they were one combined tribe. This is because Zevulun was engaged in business and would support the Torah study of Yissachar with their earnings. By combining the two tribes, the Torah indicates that the reward of Zevulun was equal to that of Yissachar. This is alluded to in the posuk that states, "It is a tree of life for those who support it." The Torah is not necessarily a source of life for those who study it, but for those who support and uphold it as well. However, support of Torah is not a substitute for Torah learning itself. Even those who receive merit for Torah study through those whom they support are not exempted from their personal obligation to study themselves.

אלה שמות בני אהרן הכהנים המשחים אשר מלא ידם לכהן

“These were the names of the sons of Aharon, the anointed priests, whom he inaugurated to minister” (3:3)

Why does the posuk repeat that these are the names of the sons of Aharon, a fact already mentioned in the previous posuk? The Iglei Tal writes that in gentile society, priests are considered to be above everyone else and are treated as if they are infallible. When high-ranking clergy are appointed to new posts, they are given new names, as if to symbolize that they are new people, higher than all others. Our kohanim are not like that. Our priests are still considered human beings. They can make mistakes and are subject to human nature just like the rest of us. Even though we are obligated to give honor to Kohanim and talmidei chachamim, the honor is being accorded to the Torah

that they learn and is contained within them. The honor that they receive is not because they are higher than others but because their Torah gives them that honor. Therefore, the posuk repeats that these are the sons of Aharon, the anointed priests. Even after their anointment, they remained the same as they had been beforehand. As great as a person can become, he still acknowledges that he is human like everyone else and could still potentially fall. This honesty prevents the greatness from going to his head and helps the great person maintain a sense of humility.

וימת נדב ואביהוא לפני ה' בהקרבתם אש זרה לפני ה' במדבר סיני ובנים לא היו להם ויכהן אלעזר ואיתמר על פני אהרן אביהם
“Nadav and Avihu died before Hashem when they offered an alien fire before Hashem in the Wilderness of Sinai, and they had no children; but Elazar and Isamar ministered during the lifetime of Aharon, their father” (3:4)

R' Dovid Feinstein says that the fact that they did not have children is not just mentioned here as a side point but is in fact one of the causes for their deaths. What does this mean? He explains that the dependants that a person has stand as a protection for him against punishment. There are times when a person will be deserving of retribution but will not be punished right away because his children or other dependents do not deserve to suffer because of him. However, Nadav and Avihu did not marry. Thus, when they brought ketores into the Kodosh Kodashim, they were immediately punished. Had they married and started a family, perhaps they would not have been killed on the spot.

This idea does not only apply to immediate family but also manifests itself in other ways. When a person is active in his community and is needed or if he has an impact on the lives of other people, he will be protected because others are reliant on him.

כי לי כל בכור ביום הכתי כל בכור בארץ מצרים הקדשתי לי כל בכור בישראל מאדם עד בהמה לי יהיו אני ה'
“For every firstborn is Mine: On the day that I struck down every firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified for Myself every firstborn in Israel, from man to beast; they shall be mine - I am Hashem” (3:13)

The Meshech Chochma points out the emphasis of the posuk on the idea that "every firstborn is Mine." The privilege of the firstborn to perform the service was clearly given with a stipulation that they would remain faithful to Hashem. When they strayed from the proper path and worshipped the golden calf, they were no longer faithful to Hashem and lost that special privilege to the Leviyim. If we dedicate ourselves to Hashem in all aspects of our lives and remain faithful, we will merit to be blessed by Hashem, whose blessings are dependent on our faithfulness to Him. When we stray from the correct path, we may lose these blessings. We see this in the story of Chanukah. When the people became lackadaisical in their service of Hashem, the Greek persecution began and they lost the freedom to be able to do the mitzvos in

peace.

ולקחת חמשת חמשת שקלים לגלגלת בשקל הקדש תקח עשרים גרה השקל
“You shall take five shekels each according to the head count, in the sacred shekel shall you take; the shekel is twenty geirah” (3:47)

Rashi explains that the five shekalim that the firstborn had to pay represented the twenty dinarim for which Yosef was sold to Mitzrayim (4 dinarim = 1 shekel). What is the connection between the sale of Yosef and the payment of the firstborn? Rabbi Friedman suggests the following answer. Yosef was sold as a result of the jealousy that Yaakov caused by favoring him. From this we learn that a father should never express favoritism to any of his sons, even if he feels that nothing will happen because of it. Many years later, when the firstborn redeemed themselves, their payment was set at five shekalim. This was in order to remind one never to favor his firstborn son over his other children and never to repeat this mistake. We can learn from past experiences and grow from them. Similarly, the amount given to a Kohen for a Pidyon Haben is five sela'im (1 sela = 1 shekel) to remind the father never to favor his firstborn son over his other children.

Shavuos

R' Michel Berenbaum zt"l asks: Why is the Yom Tov referred to as Shavuos, “weeks,” something that is not a part of the holiday itself but the lead up to it? He answers that one cannot accept the Torah without truly desiring it. Thus, the seven weeks of preparation for the acceptance of the Torah and working up a desire for it is indeed an integral part of the Yom Tov. We must enter the Yom Tov with a true desire to accept the Torah. Therefore, the Yom Tov is aptly named “Shavuos.”

Megillas Rus

Why does the posuk (1:2) say that Elimelech and his family went to Moav “and they were there,” a seeming redundancy? The Malbim answers that the posuk means to say that they became absorbed into the culture of Moav. Although they originally intended to remain strangers and separate from the society, they ended up becoming permanent residents. When someone is in a situation that is not optimal, he convinces himself that he will only stay a short while. However, more often than not, the person ends up staying longer and becoming a part of his surroundings. We must be careful not to put ourselves in such situations in the first place.

Today we see that people are becoming part of the secular culture to a greater extent and losing their Jewish identity. It is easy to become drawn into this trap by thinking that one is just a stranger in the society, but things can change quickly. The story of Elimelech and his family in Moav is a lesson to us and teaches us how to approach the prevailing culture that is all around us.

Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur
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