

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)

What is the significance of the Sinai Desert as the place where the Jewish people were counted? Why does the Torah need to tell us where the counting took place? The Midrash Rabbah says that one must make himself "ownerless like the desert" in order to acquire Torah and wisdom. This means that one should act humbly toward all people and try to learn something from everyone around him. One should never feel that another person is too far beneath him to teach him anything. The only way to acquire Torah and to become wise is to seek knowledge everywhere and from everyone and this is accomplished by having a realistic and humble self-image.

How does the midrash see a connection to Torah and wisdom in this posuk. The Baal HaTurim explains that Sefer Vayikra concluded with the statement that "these are the mitzvos" that Hashem taught Moshe. The opening posuk of Sefer Bamidbar mentions the Sinai Desert. Thus, the midrash draws a comparison between the two and derives the lesson that if one does not make himself "ownerless like the desert," he will not be able to know Torah and mitzvos.

The Midrash Tanchuma provides another reason why the location of the counting is significant. Any time that the Torah mentions something that is especially cherished by Hashem, the Torah mentions the time and place of the event. The details regarding the exact month in which the people were counted and where it happened is an indication that the counting was beloved to Hashem. Rashi elaborates on this point as well and notes that even though the people had been counted a few months earlier, Hashem commanded to count them again. This is because, in His great love for His nation, Hashem constantly wanted to know how many people there were. This is similar to a jeweler who constantly counts his precious stones to make sure there are all there because they are extremely valuable.

R' Nissan Alpert draws an important practical lesson from this midrash. The Torah shows us that it is important to impress the significance of what is being taught to students. A teacher also has to make sure that students readily see that the Torah that he teaches is beloved to him. R' Alpert writes: "Our Torah is also an educating Torah to teach us rules of education. It shows us to do certain things to indicate the beauty of what is being taught." When the students see the beauty of Torah and how important it is to their teacher, they are driven to learn more. Just as Hashem indicates what is important, students must see enthusiasm from their teacher so that they understand how important it is.

אלה קריאי העדה נשיאי מטות אבותם ראשי אלפי ישראל הם
“These were the summoned ones of the assembly, the princes of their fathers' tribes,

they are the heads of Israel's thousands” (1:16)

Rashi explains that the appellation "summoned ones of the assembly" means that they were called upon to deal with all matters of importance on behalf of the people. R' Nissan Alpert says that based on Rashi's explanation, we can understand why the word is pronounced "קרואי" ("called ones") but written "קריאי" ("callers"). The Torah teaches how a person can rise to a level of responsibility in his community. They became leaders, called ones, because they were the ones who originally took the initiative to call upon the people and spur them to action. When a person becomes active and tries to help out the people around him, he eventually becomes the person to whom everyone else looks for guidance and leadership. He grows into a position of responsibility as a result of his earlier activism. In order to become a leader, one should start by galvanizing others to action and in this way he will merit to help many people through his work.

כאשר צוה ה' את משה ויפקדם במדבר סיני

“As Hashem had commanded Moshe, he counted them in the Wilderness of Sinai” (1:19)

Why is it necessary for the Torah to write that Moshe counted the people as Hashem commanded him? Just before, the Torah detailed how Hashem told him to perform the census?! The answer is that all kings count their armies in order to assess their strength so that they can protect their countries. This could have been Moshe's intention as well. However, Moshe counted the people specifically because Hashem commanded him to do so and not for any other reason. We are not like the other nations who believe that they can only succeed if they have great physical strength. We know that Hashem controls our fate regardless of how many people there are. Our strength is not in numbers but in our faith in Hashem. This idea was stated outright by Yehonasan son of Shaul when he said (Shmuel I 14:6): "For nothing prevents Hashem from saving, whether through many or through few."

ויפקד אתם משה על פי ה' כאשר צוה

“Moshe counted them according to the word of Hashem as he had been commanded” (3:16)

Rashi, quoting the Midrash Tanchuma, comments on this posuk: "Moshe said before Hashem: How can I enter into their tents to ascertain the number of their nursing infants? Hashem said to him: You do that which is yours and I will do that which is Mine. Moshe would go and stand at the entrance of the tent and the Divine Presence would precede him and a Heavenly Voice would come from the tent and say: There is such and such number of babies in this tent. This is why it says: According to the word of Hashem."

Hashem never asks more of us than we can handle. We just have to focus on doing what we can to overcome the challenges that we face and Hashem will help everything fall into place. We might not have the Divine Presence calling out to us to help us but we have Divine assistance with us.

Why did Moshe not want to enter the tents? One answer is that Moshe was afraid of

what people might say if he were entering private homes. People could begin rumors that Moshe was entering houses alone with women. Another possible reason is for modesty. It would not have been proper for Moshe to just enter the homes of the Leviyim in order to find all the members of the household in order to count them. We too should emphasize privacy and respect the private domains of others and not mix into their business. It is also important for a person to maintain his own privacy and keep matters to himself which are improper to share with others.

R' Moshe Feinstein asks: Why did Moshe insist on doing it himself? He could have asked the adult Leviyim how many sons they had in order to obtain the number of babies in each family?! He answers that Moshe felt the responsibility to do it himself because Hashem had given him the command to count the Leviyim. He felt that he could not delegate Hashem's missives to anybody. R' Feinstein suggests a second answer. The ultimate purpose of counting the Leviyim was in order to know how many would be serving in the Mishkan. As part of counting them, Moshe was also to impart some of his holiness to them in order to prepare them for their service. Therefore, Moshe had to see each Levi face to face when he counted them.

Kesharim Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur

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