YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat BAMIDBAR**

**Sicha of HarAV BARUCH GIGI**

The Importance of the Process

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*Parashat Bamidbar*, introducing the *sefer* known as the “Book of Censuses,” is always read just prior to Shavuot. In his introduction to the *sefer*, Ramban writes:

And this book deals entirely with “*mitzvot sha’a*” [commandments pertinent to that time] that they were commanded when they were in the desert, and the miracles performed for them, to recount all of God’s acts which He had wondrously performed for them, and it recounts how He began putting their enemies to the sword before them, and commands how the land should be divided among them. This *sefer* contains no *mitzvot* for future generations, except for a few commandments pertaining to the sacrifices, which the Torah began discussing in *Sefer Vayikra* but without completing their discussion there; they are finished here instead.

According to Ramban, we can assert generally that the *mitzvot* written in *Sefer* *Bamidbar* were applicable at that time, to that generation only. This raises the obvious question: if they applied only then, a few thousand years ago, then what is their relevance to us today?

Revelation at Sinai – a landmark

In a way, we are accustomed to viewing the giving of the Torah at Sinai as the climax of God’s revelation in the world. After leaving Egypt and emerging from the “forty-nine gates of impurity,” *Am* *Yisrael* merit the greatest Divine revelation that ever was and ever will be. We tend to forget that at the beginning of Moshe’s career as leader of the nation, he was entrusted with two goals, not just one.

The first aim was indeed to lead the nation to Sinai, an occasion with tremendous importance and impact in the short term and long term. This command was given to Moshe at the burning bush:

When you bring the nation out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain. (*Shemot* 3:12)

However, this was not his only goal. Moshe’s other mission was to bring *Am Yisrael* to the promised land – a mission that would ultimately be carried out by his disciple, Yehoshua. God tells Moshe:

And I shall bring you to the land which I swore to give to Avraham, to Yitzhak, and to Yaakov, and I shall give it to you for a heritage; I am the Lord. (*Shemot* 6:8)

Thus, the revelation at Sinai is only one of two goals which Moshe was working to attain. While it certainly is a climactic moment, it is a climax that is part of a process.

Constant movement

Here it is worth recalling Ramban’s famous teaching concerning the role of the *Mishkan*. Ramban maintains that the *Mishkan* was actually meant to be a day-to-day extension of the revelation at Sinai, by giving God a place of Presence, as it were, in this world. From this nucleus, His sanctity extends, transcending the boundaries of place and time.

In fact, this process of giving God a place of Presence in the world is unending. The entry into the land is also not an end in itself; rather, it is part of the same process, which continues throughout the life of the individual and of the nation.

We can now suggest an answer to the question posed above. While it is true that the details contained in *Sefer Bamidbar* – both the narratives and the mitzvot – pertain to a particular point in time, there is much that we can learn from these lengthy descriptions even today. *Sefer Bamidbar* teaches us the immense importance of the process, its stages, and the efforts invested along the way.

A person who reaches the promised land after a forty-year stay in the desert is not like someone who arrives without this background. Someone who has personal experience of “your feet did not swell,” of “the kindness of your youth, your love as a bride” – someone who has walked in “an unsown land” and suffered the trials and tribulations of the journey, its highs and lows – is in an entirely different place from someone who has not lived through these experiences.

Our spiritual mission in life is to keep progressing, to be in perpetual motion, even though we see no tangible end point. Our focus is on the process itself. In the Pesach *haggada*, we say:

If He had brought us before Mount Sinai, but had not given us the Torah – it would have been sufficient for us.

This is a shocking declaration. What could be the value of standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, without then receiving the Torah? The answer is that there is enormous intrinsic value in the arrival at Sinai in and of itself – in the effort and the preparation. These efforts might, at times, lead to achievements that can be felt and defined – such as becoming “like a single person with a single heart” (as in Rashi, *Shemot* 19:2). At other times, the process has no tangible outcome. The Gemara teaches:

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: There are three worthy gifts that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Israel, and all are given only through suffering. They are Torah, and the land of Israel, and the World to Come. (*Berakhot* 5a)

Why are these gifts given through suffering? The Gemara seems to indicate that this reality was God’s intention from the outset, not a result of our own actions. This was His plan because it is specifically the experience of suffering, the toil of the way, that lead to a World to Come that has greater significance; to a land of Israel that is more valuable; to Torah that is more true.

After the Revelation at Sinai, the Torah records:

And they departed from the mountain of God, a three-day journey… (*Bamidbar* 10:33)

Ramban, citing a *midrash*, explains:

They departed from Mount Sinai joyfully, like a young child running away from school, saying, “Lest He pile on more *mitzvot* for us.” This is the meaning of the phrase, “And they departed from the mountain of God”: their intention was to take themselves away from there, because it was “the mountain of God.” (Ramban on *Bamidbar* 10:35)

Ramban’s focus here seems to be on the fact that *Bnei Yisrael* are journeying “*from* God’s mountain.” They are not journeying *toward* any goal; their goal is simply to depart from where they are. This is not a forward-oriented movement, and it obscures the significance of true advancement. *Chazal* criticize this perspective, comparing *Bnei Yisrael* to children running away from school.

In the same *parasha*, we find a different formulation proposed by Moshe:

And Moshe said to Chovav, son of Re’uel, the Midianite, father-in-law of Moshe: We are journeying to the place concerning which God said, “I shall give it to you.” Go with us, and we shall be good to you, for God has spoken good concerning Israel. (*Bamidbar* 10:29)

In contrast to the description of *Am Yisrael’s* journey, Moshe intends to journey “*to* the place…” Moshe has a destination and a goal. He intends to press on, moving forward.

One of the blessings recited at a circumcision concerns the commandment “to introduce him [the infant] into the covenant of Avraham, our patriarch.” Avudraham explains that “the covenant of Avraham” refers here not just to the actual circumcision, but to the broader covenant that God made with Avraham and his descendants – a covenant that envisions *Am Yisrael* following in Avraham’s footsteps:

For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring upon Avraham that which he has spoken of him. (*Bereishit* 18:19)

Introducing a Jewish child into the covenant of Avraham means introducing him into a process. This process includes specific *mitzvot* – such as following the path of righteousness and justice – which are goals in their own right and are not easily achieved. However, even ‘righteousness and justice’ fall under a broader, limitless heading: “the way of the Lord.”

Life as a process

The importance of process finds expression in every realm. A marital relationship, for example, must continue growing and developing throughout the years. The same applies to one’s prayer, to righteousness and justice, to a profession. Above all, it applies to Torah study.

The effort one invests in studying Torah is enormously important. Only someone who works at his study and immerses himself in it will eventually acquire Torah, making it part of himself.

In *Sefer* *Iyov*, we find:

Man is born to labor, as sparks fly upward. (*Iyov* 5:7)

Maharal (*Tiferet Yisrael*, chapter 3) explains that this verse teaches us that man’s aim is the toil itself. There is no ultimate goal to which one must aspire and which one should hope to attain – other than the work itself. “Man is born to labor” means that he is born and exists for the purpose of labor – meaning, for the ongoing work of actualizing his potential. A human being is potential which is brought to actualization, and to whatever degree he is actualized, there always remains more potential.

“And I will betroth you to Me forever”

At the end of the *haftara* of *Parashat Bamidbar*, we read:

And I will betroth you to Me forever; and I with betroth you to Me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in kindness, and in mercy. (*Hoshea* 2:21)

The verse seems to contradict itself. The period of betrothal – engagement – is inherently limited. In the times of the Mishna, it lasted a year; today, an engagement is usually much shorter. Either way, we must ask why the prophet depicts our relationship with God as a “betrothal” that is “forever.”

To answer this question, let us consider the Rambam’s introduction to the Torah’s rules of marriage:

Prior to the giving of the Torah, if a man met a woman in the marketplace and he and she decided to marry, he would bring her to his home and conduct relations in private, and thus make her his wife. Once the Torah was given, *Am Yisrael* were commanded that if a man wants to marry a woman, he must first acquire her [as his wife] before witnesses; [only] afterward does she become his wife, as it is written, “If a man takes a wife and engages in relations with her….” (Rambam, Laws of Marriage, 1:1)

Originally, marriage was a simple, direct process: if the man and the woman were both willing, they started living together, and from that point onward they were married. The Torah introduced an intermediate stage: betrothal. The significance of this additional stage was to turn marriage into a process. No longer would there be a simple transition from the status of “single” to the status of “married.” This extra stage cast the whole idea of marriage in a new light: the two parties would now view their relationship as a process, continuing and progressing forever.

With the words “I will betroth you to Me – forever,” the prophet emphasizes that the aspiration to grow and progress must always exist. We are not interested in a one-time climactic experience, nor in a final goal and destination. Rather, we desire to be continuously moving and developing, rising ever higher in our Torah, our Divine service, and our acts of kindness toward others. We want to be constantly improving in our righteousness and justice, kindness, and mercy, as described in the verse. We want to be constantly working on our character traits, which bring us back to God’s covenant with Avraham and the “path of the Lord” that he bequeathed to his descendants.

Only via this long road can we arrive at the true climax of our aspirations, as the prophet describes it:

And I shall betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord. (*Hoshea* 2:22)

(This sicha was delivered on Shabbat parashat Bamidbar 5773 [2013].)