YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT DELIVERED BY THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

PARASHAT BAMIDBAR

SICHA OF HARAV AMITAL SHLIT"A

"In His Own Camp and at his Own Flag"

Summarized by Dov Karoll

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Dedicated by Shari and Jay Gold and Family

in memory of Rabbi Bennett Gold (Rav Dov ben Dovid Meir)

whose Yahrtzeit is 3 Sivan.

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The first part of this week's parasha deals with the setup of the camp of Israel in the desert. We read: "And the Israelites camped with every man in his own camp and at his own flag" (Bamidbar 1:52). These two elements, "in his own camp" and "at his own flag," are central to a person's growth.

"Every man in his own camp" refers to the concept of feeling at home. Regardless of how successful a person may be, he always prefers to be in a supportive environment. The discomfort of an unfamiliar place makes it very difficult for a person to succeed there. In this week's haftara, God promises: "I will make a covenant on that day with the wild beasts and birds of the sky and animals which crawl upon the ground; and I will rend the bow, sword and war from the earth, and lay them down for all eternity" (Hoshe'a 2:20). In this view of the end of days, the ideal state of society, even the animals are able to exist harmoniously with man. What a person needs is the ability to feel comfortable in his environment, and even at ease with the natural world. If a person feels out of place, he cannot realize his full potential.

There are numerous examples of this principle. One example is a visitor who comes to the Yeshiva. He is always looking for someone whom he knows. He wants someone with whom he can associate. It is important to help this person out, and not to cause him to struggle with the uncomfortable environment. Once, when I was asked to speak at one of the religious kibbutzim, I spoke to them about hakhnasat orchim, welcoming guests. They were all offended, telling me that they allow anyone who comes into their dining hall to partake of their meals. I told them that this attitude also has its disadvantages. If a person comes in and eats without anyone asking who he is and from whence he came, he can go through the whole meal without anyone greeting him. Even with an open-door policy, it is important to make the extra effort to help a person feel comfortable. In the Yeshiva, we have a similar problem, due to that same policy. Anyone who comes to our meals is welcome, but sometimes goes unnoticed.

Another application of this principle is within Israeli society, where there are always people coming on aliya. It is important to help these people feel at home. Everyone who comes here has undergone some difficulty along the way, but the most difficult part of moving is becoming comfortable in your new home. I feel that when God commanded Avraham to leave his homeland (Bereishit 12:1), the real challenge was not leaving. Rather, it was rooting himself in the land of his destiny.

Another example of the sensitivity which we need to have for other people's comfort is found in the gemara (Bava Batra 9b): "Rabbi Yitzchak states: He who gives a peruta (a small coin) to a poor person receives six blessings ... and he who appeases the poor person receives eleven blessings.” While helping a person financially is essential, raising his spirits and allowing him to feel comfortable is even more praiseworthy.

The second important element in the verse is "every man at his own flag.” Each tribe had its own flag, symbolizing the unique nature of that particular tribe. The Midrash Rabba (Bamidbar, parasha 2:3) recounts that when God revealed Himself to the Jewish people at Sinai, 220,000 angels descended with Him. When the Jewish people saw that the angels appeared "degalim degalim," assembled by "flags," they also desired flags, and God consented. What does it mean for an angel to have a flag? The flag represents the goals and ideals which one sets for oneself. For an angel, the mission upon which it is sent is precisely what it fulfills. There is no gap between its Divinely-ordained mission and its actions. The Jewish people were striving to reach this level, and also wanted to realize their individual missions.

The continuation of the Midrash (2:4) recounts that the Jews presented a great and holy spectacle when assembled by their flags. The nations asked them in wonderment: "Who is she [Israel] that looks out like the dawn, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and intimidating, like an army with banners?" (Shir Ha-shirim 6:10). They told the Jewish people, "Come with us, and we will appoint you as rulers.” The Jewish people respond, "How can this greatness which you offer us compare to the greatness which God did for us in the desert with the flags?! Can you offer that to us?!"

The Jewish people, according to this Midrash, appreciate the lesson of the flags. They do not want positions of authority which are not appropriate for them. Rather, they want to be able to fulfill their own goals, as symbolized by the flags of the desert. It is important to realize that positions of authority are meaningless if they are not right for the person. I know many people with very "high level" positions who nevertheless are miserable and depressed with their jobs.

Every person has a mission in life. For some people it is teaching Torah, for some it is adding an element of humor and joy to other people's lives, for others it is saving people's lives, and the list goes on endlessly. However, people usually do not know what that mission is, or how to go about fulfilling it. The Vilna Gaon (Commentary on Mishlei 16:1) relays the following principle: "Every person has his own personal approach, because no two people think exactly the same ... and no two people have the same nature. In the time when there were prophets, people used to go to them to seek out God's will. The prophet would tell the person, based upon prophecy, what path he should follow, according to the root of his soul and the nature of his body ... Now a person has his internal 'ruach ha-kodesh,' an internal Divinely-inspired spirit. Happy is the man for whom God knows of no sin or trickery [and merits to know this] ....” Certain Chasidic Rabbeim were said to have been able to determine for people what their mission is, but otherwise we are left to determine this on our own. A person has to do his best to realize his individual goal, and follow his own path. Oftentimes people follow familial or societal pressures in choosing a direction in life instead of going along the path which they themselves wish to follow. It is proper for a person to follow his own path toward his mission, create his own flag, rather than allow himself to be dragged along with these pressures.

To summarize, the verse teaches us two lessons. The first is that in order for a person to thrive he has to be able to feel at home. In order for this to occur, you must make sure to welcome visitors and foreigners to your midst. The second lesson is that every person must strive to realize and bring to fruition his own special contribution, following the path which is appropriate for him.

(Originally delivered at Seuda Shelishit, Shabbat Parashat Bamidbar 5757.)