YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN**

"Their *Shekalim* Preceded His"

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This week, we read the first of four special readings, *Parashat Shekalim*. It begins:

When you take a head-count of *Bnei Yisrael* by their number, then each man shall give a ransom for his soul to God when you count them, so that there will be no plague (*negef*) among them when you count them. (*Shemot* 30:12)

What is the meaning of the warning, "so that there will no plague among them"? What plague is being referred to here, and why would it befall *Am Yisrael* if they are not counted in the manner that God commands here?

Civilian Census or Military Head-Count?

The above question directs us to an instance where *Bnei* *Yisrael* did indeed suffer a plague upon being counted, during the period of King David. In II *Shmuel* chapter 24, we read:

And God's anger yet burned against Israel, and He incited David against them saying: "Go, number Yisrael and Yehuda." So the king said to Yoav, the captain of the host, who was with him: "Go, I pray you, through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beer Sheva, and count the people, that I may know the number of the people…" And Yoav presented the sum of the census of the people to the king, and Israel numbered eight hundred thousand mighty men who drew the sword, and five hundred thousand men of Yehuda.

And David's heart struck him after he had counted the people, and David said to God: "I have sinned greatly in what I have done; and now, Lord, I pray You – take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have acted most foolishly…" So God sent a pestilence among Israel from the morning until the appointed time, and there died of the people from Dan to Beer Sheva seventy thousand people.

In order to understand what sort of plague the Torah is warning against in *parashat Ki Tisa*, we must first understand why David was deserving of such a plague in his time. Seemingly, the text gives no explanation for the great sin involved in counting the nation – such a grave sin that it brought about 70,000 deaths (more than the deaths in most of the wars for the conquest of the land!).

A closer look at the verses shows that David's count was not an ordinary census, but rather a military head-count conducted by the "captain of the host." Quite simply, this count was intended for military purposes.

Indeed, a review of David's political situation at the time reveals that he had just emerged victorious from what could almost be called a "world war": the king of Assyria had allied itself with all the surrounding kings – approximately eleven kingdoms – with a view to defeating the kingdom of Israel. David had succeeded in defeating them, instead, in a heroic battle in the north, close to the Hermon mountains (see II *Shmuel* 21:15-22, and *Tehillim* 68). This victory had brought about a significant expansion of the borders of the Israelite kingdom. More importantly, though, after this battle the rest of the world was more or less "open" to conquest by David's army. David was now faced with the temptation of trying – like the kings of Greece, Persia and Rome who came after him – to seize control of the entire known world. With this in mind, we may well imagine that David asks the chief of staff of his armed forces to carry out a military head-count with a view to launching a war of conquest.

"Let Them Build Me a Temple"

Once we perceive that David's census was actually conducted in the context of preparations for war, we are able to go through *Tanakh* and discover that a count of this sort is *always* somehow connected with war. The census at the beginning of *Sefer Shemot* precedes the war against Amalek, while the census at the end of *Bamidbar* is taken in preparation for the entry into the land and the war of conquest against the Canaanite nations. However, we have not yet answered the question: what is so bad about this?

If we continue reading the account in II *Shemuel*, we find that immediately after David's punishment for the census, there are several chapters devoted to the gathering and preparation of materials for the building of the Temple. Included in this process is the purchase of the threshing-floor from Aravna the Jebusite. The important point here is that David needs to buy this all-important, most-holy site from a Jebusite. In other words, while David is counting his soldiers with a view to setting out to conquer the entire world, there is a part of Jerusalem that belongs – at least in narrow, legal terms – to the Jebusites: the very site of the future Temple!

Perhaps this is the very reason for David's punishment. At a time when *Eretz* *Yisrael* is not yet firmly and completely conquered, organized and established, there is no room for entertaining thoughts of conquest for conquest's sake. The path taken by most of the great historical world leaders included attempts at world-wide conquest while their own countries were falling apart. Their conquests were intended to bring glory to the rulers, whose might and glory were measured by the number of territories that they could claim. This is not the way of Israel. God punishes David because while he is planning his conquest, to bring glory to himself, God still has no dwelling place, and His city is not yet conquered. It is therefore clear why, following the punishment, David repents and spends the rest of his life involved in preparations for the building of the Temple.

A similar process can be traced in *Megillat* *Esther*. According to *Chazal*, Achashverosh ruled between Koresh (Cyrus) and Daryavesh (Darius). This view of the chronology of the period hints to us that the story of Esther took place in between Koresh's declaration, permitting the return of the Jews to *Eretz Yisrael* and the rebuilding of the Temple, and the reign of Daryavesh, during which the returnees from Babylon actually rebuilt the Temple.

This delay explains *Chazal's* criticism of the Jews' participation in Achashverosh's banquet. Although the Jews who were there were under no pressure to relinquish their faith, they nevertheless permitted themselves to partake of decadent feasts while the Temple lay in ruins. For the same reason, *Chazal* criticize Mordechai, whom - on the basis of certain proofs – they identify as a senior officer in Achashverosh's army. How, they ask, could Mordechai aid Achashverosh in his conquest of the world, while the King of the universe remained "homeless" and His people exiled?

All of this serves to explain the reason for the terrible decree that Haman passed against the Jews. At a time when they should have been making their way back to *Eretz* *Yisrael* and rebuilding the Temple, they continued to enjoy the luxuries of living in exile.

"So That They Will not be Stricken before their Enemies"

Despite all of this criticism, *Am Yisrael* were saved – because they had an important merit that stood in their favor. *Chazal* teach us that when Haman cast the lot to choose a date for the annihilation of the Jews, he believed that the bribe he had given to Achashverosh would be sufficient to guarantee his success ("I will weigh out ten thousand talents of silver … to bring into the king's treasuries," *Esther* 3:9). However, they continue, the antidote to this had already been prepared: "God knew that Haman would weigh out *shekalim* against Israel; therefore, He made [Israel's] *shekalim* precede [Haman's]" (*Megilla* 13b).

In light of the above discussion, we can now understand the deeper meaning of this *aggada*. While it is true that *Am Yisrael* had not yet gone back to *Eretz Yisrael* and rebuilt the Temple, they had contributed their *shekalim* for the purposes of the building, and the first stages of the building (the first row of stones – see *Ezra* 4:1-6) were in fact undertaken during the reign of Koresh. While they were guilty of foot-dragging, the fact that real contributions had been made and that this minimal building effort had been undertaken was enough to save them from complete annihilation.

Let us now return to *parashat Ki Tisa*. Here, too, the *shekalim* that were to be collected from *Bnei Yisrael* were meant for the "base sockets of the *Mishkan*" – the very foundation of the structure, paralleling the *shekalim* given by the Jews in the time of Mordechai and Esther, which facilitated the first row of stones for the Second Temple.

At the outset we asked why *Am Yisrael* were not punished when Moshe counted them. Now we can answer that it is because the Moshe's census expressed the opposite idea of David's. Moshe counted *Bnei Yisrael* for the purposes of building a *Mishkan* for God, not in order to conquer territory for his own glory or that of the nation. We may add that the word "*negef*" (plague) suggests not only a physical plague, but also the idea of military defeat (*hinagfut*). God is warning Moshe that if the census is meant for personal conquests or unnecessary wars, *Am Yisrael* will suffer a "*negef*" and they will lose their battles for the conquest of the land.

(This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat parashat Ki Tisa 5762 [2002].)