**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**MIDRASH ON THE PARASHA**

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***Parashat Bamidbar*:**

**The Banners in the Wilderness**

**Introduction**

Over the course of the *parashiyot* of the Book of *Vayikra,* we have become acquainted with the style of the classical Amoraic work of Eretz Israel, *Vayikra Rabba.* As we move on to the Book of *Bamidbar*, we will shift our attention to the *derashot* appearing in the Tannaitic halakhic Midrash on this book (and the Book of *Devarim*), known as *Sifrei.* Like in the Babylonian Talmud, so too in *Sifrei Bamidbar* words of Aggada are interwoven in the halakhic *derashot*.

However*, Sifrei Bamidbar* opens with *Parashat Naso.* We will, therefore, focus our study of *Parashat Bamidbar* on the *derashot* of *Chazal* all across Midrashic literature on one verse in the *parasha*:

The Israelites shall pitch by their fathers' houses; every man with his own banner (*diglo*), according to ensigns (*otot*); a good way off shall they pitch round about the Tent of Meeting. (*Bamidbar* 2:2)

**Tannaim**

This verse appears in the words of the Tannaim as an expression of the remarkable order in the encampment of the Israelites in the wilderness, with clear boundaries and a separate place for each tribe (three to each compass direction, the leader with its banner and two accompanying tribes). They surround the Levite encampment, which itself is arranged along the four compass directions around the camp of the *Shekhina*, the Divine Presence, i.e. the precincts of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). (The *mil* is a measure of distance of about a kilometer and a half; the term is cognate to “mile.”)

The camp of Israel was twelve *mil* by twelve *mil*.

The banner of Yehuda was four *mil*.

The camp of the *Shekhina* and the camp of the Levites was four *mil*.

The banner of Reuven was four *mil*.

From north to south was twelve *mil*.

The banner of Efrayim was four *mil*.

The camp of the *Shekhina* and the camp of the Levites was four *mil*.

The banner of Dan was four *mil*.

It turns out that along the four corners of the *Mishkan* there were four camps that extended to all sides.

As it is stated: "Every man with his own banner."

(*Baraita Di-mlekhet Ha-Mishkan*, Ch. 13)

This meaning of the banners assumes practical significance in additional Tannaitic sources:

Rabbi Chanina ben Gamliel said:

These words [= words of praise for Yitro who loved the Torah and wished to cleave to the people of Israel] were stated only in the second year, when Moshe appointed officers over Israel.

When did he appoint them? In the second year.

As it is stated: "By their fathers' houses; every man with his own banner, according to ensigns*.”*

(*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* 18, 27)

Rabbi Chanina ben Gamliel is a Tanna of the fourth generation, the son of Rabban Gamliel of Yavneh and brother of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, the father of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi. He describes the background and timing of the acceptance of Yitro to accompany the people of Israel as the time at which Israel assumes its order by way of banners. The Jews’ organization in space finds expression in an identity that allows also for the absorption of fitting elements from the outside.

In the *Sifra*, the Tannaitic halakhic Midrash on the Book of *Vayikra*, we find a mirror image of this reality in the story of the blasphemer:

"And the son of an Israelitish woman went out" (*Vayikra* 24:10).

From where did he go out? From the court of Moshe.

For he had come to pitch his tent within the camp of Dan. They said to him: Who are you to pitch [your tent] within the camp of Dan?

He said to them: I am [the son] of one of the daughters of Dan.

They said to him: The Torah states: "The Israelites shall pitch by their fathers' houses; every man with his own banner, according to ensigns."

He went in to Moshe's court, and came out vilified, and so he stood up and blasphemed.

(*Sifra Emor*,14)

The blasphemer falls between the cracks and cannot find a place for himself among the banners organized "by their fathers' house," as he is the son of an Egyptian man. His inability to fit into the given framework gives rise to frustration and alienation toward its creator. The *derasha*, then, highlights the Divine origin of the directive regarding the ordering of the banners.

This meaning of the banners in the wilderness is especially emphasized in an anonymous Amoraic *derasha* appearing in *Vayikra Rabba* 36, 2:

Just as a vineyard is planted not in an irregular manner, but in rows, so too the Israelites were arranged according to banners.

This is what is written: "By their fathers' houses; every man with his own banner, according to ensigns."

***Shir Ha-shirim Rabba***

The root *dalet-gimmel-lammed* appears four times in the Book of *Shir Ha-shirim*:

He has brought me to the banqueting-house, and his banner (*diglo)* over me is love. (2:4)

My beloved is white and ruddy, pre-eminent (*dagul*)above ten thousand. (5:10)

You are beautiful, O my love, as Tirtza, comely as Jerusalem, formidable as an army with banners *(ka-nidgalot*). (6:4)

Who is she that looks forth as the dawn, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, formidable as an army with banners (*ka-nidgalot*)? (6:10)

The first verse cited here from *Shir Ha-shirim* refers to the affection shown by the beloved, i.e., God, for his love, i.e., Israel. The second verse is part of a description of the beloved. The last two verses relate to the love, the people of Israel, who stir up dread or wonder among those who behold them. In the verse, "You are beautiful, O my love, as Tirtza," the appeal is from the beloved to his love, whereas the fourth verse describes the impression left by the love on all those who behold her.

The common root and the various contexts form a rich foundation for the formation of *derashot*. We will focus on those that link the banners of *Shir Ha-shirim* to the tribal banners in the wilderness: "By their fathers' houses; every man with his own banner, according to ensigns."

Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin said in the name of Rabbi Levi:

The people of Israel said:

The Holy One, blessed be He, brought me into a great wine cellar — this is Sinai.

And there I saw Mikhael and his banner, Gavriel and his banner, and my eyes saw the heavenly order and I loved it.

At that very time, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe:

Since my children wish to camp by banners, let them camp by banners.

This is what is stated: "Every man with his own banner, according to ensigns."

(*Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 2, 4)

This *derasha* is reported in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin, an Amora of Eretz Israel of the fourth generation, and it relates to the verse: "He has brought me to the banqueting-house, and his banner (*diglo*)over me is love." When Israel come to the "banqueting-house," they see the heavenly host, God's "banner," and they love what they see, and by virtue of this they themselves merit camping by banners. The organization of the camp of Israel according to the format spelled out in *Parashat Bamidbar* is transformed from a Divine command to God's compliance with Israel's desire to be like the angels. The *derasha* is far from the plain sense of the verse, the subject of which is God, who brings His chosen people to Mount Sinai and showers them with love. The following question may be raised: what is the objective of this *derasha* of Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin?

The "banner" and "ensign" serve as visual signs bearing symbolic significance.[[1]](#footnote-1) The *derasha* as well relates to the visual-aesthetic plane: "And my eyes saw the heavenly order, and I loved it." One of the classic definitions of the beautiful in the ancient world is "unity in multiplicity." The people of Israel admire the celestial order; they merit being those who embody this harmony in their very bodies in their own world.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The *derasha* relates to the significance of the Sinaitic experience in the shaping of the people's spiritual aspirations. The revelation allows Israel to behold the spiritual order prevailing in the upper worlds, and that vision becomes etched in their consciousness as a memory of harmony and perfection.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is this consciousness that gives rise to the desire, known only to God, "to camp by banners." Israel's love for the heavenly banners points to the inner matching of their nature to the "Divine essence," precisely in accordance with the words of the Maharal in his work, *Tiferet Yisrael*:[[4]](#footnote-4)

Because the Torah's commandments, which are Divine acts, relate to the Jewish people, who, according to the level of their souls, are prepared for the Divine acts, as they are especially suited to them…

Now those who have a Divine soul are prepared for Divine matters, like prophecy or the holy spirit, and this you will find only in a people who is chosen by God.

Rabbi Mordekhai Yafeh, in his commentary *Yefei Kol* (ad loc.), identifies the point of Israel's connection to the order of the heavenly banners in a more specific manner:

The reason that Israel wanted banners was in order that everybody should know his tribe and recognize his family. When they saw that there was no confusion among the heavenly entourage and that each party carried out his duty according to his mission and level, they too desired this.[[5]](#footnote-5)

He explains that the word "ensigns" (*otot*) in the verse cited at the end of the *derasha*, "Every man with his own banner, according to ensigns," is expounded in the sense of desire (*ta'ava*). This interpretation emphasizes that the manner of Israel's encampment in the wilderness is not necessarily a precise replica of the celestial order, and that the parallel between them lies in the organizing principle.

Another significant issue that arises in the *derasha* is the presentation of the people of Israel as playing an active role at Mount Sinai. In contrast to the description found in the Torah, in which the people of Israel retreat in the face of the intensity of the Divine revelation, the *derasha* points to a desire for connection to the heavenly reality that they merit seeing.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Another *derasha* brought in *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* points to Israel's desire to be ordered under banners already at the time of the Splitting of the Reed Sea:

Rabbi Levi said:

Israel hoped for three good things at the sea.

They hoped for Torah, they hoped for banners, [and] they hoped for the *Mishkan*.

They hoped for the Torah, as it is written: "Under his shadow I delighted to sit" (*Shir ha-Shirim* 2:3).

They hoped for the banners, as it is written: "I delighted."

They hoped for the *Mishkan*, as it is written: "to sit."

This is what is written: "For I have not dwelt (literally: sat) in a house since the day that I brought up the Israelites out of Egypt" (II *Shemuel* 7:6).

As that which was stated by Rabbi Menachman:

"And they went out into the wilderness of Shur" (*Shemot* 15:22).

This teaches that they prophesied about themselves that in the future they would be arranged in camps, in banners, and in rows (*shurot*), like the formation of a vineyard.

Rabbi Yitzchak said: These are the twelve months that Israel spent before Mount Sinai, becoming sweet with words of Torah.

What is the reason? "And his fruit was sweet to my taste" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 2:3).

(*Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 2, 3)

This *derasha* places Israel's arrangement by banners on par with the most significant spiritual crowns bestowed upon Israel in the wilderness — the Torah and the *Mishkan.* The three "hopes" relate to three planes of Divine presence: in the study and observance of the Torah, which is God's shadow in the world; in the *Mishkan* — in the permanent revelation and resting of the *Shekhina*; and in the banners — in the people who are grouped into tribes. The banners are characterized in the *derasha* by the words "I delighted," an expression of Israel's desire to be "the camp of the *Shekhina.*" As opposed to the previous *derasha*, it is not explicitly stated that this desire stems from seeing the heavenly worlds, but the Splitting of the Reed Sea is also a foundational experience of revelation, as stated in the *Mekhilta*:

Rabbi Eliezer said: From where do you say that a maidservant saw at the sea what Yeshayahu and Yechezkel did not see…[[7]](#footnote-7)

If so, in both *derashot* the source of Israel's desire for banners is identified with an unmediated encounter between the people and their God.

This *derasha* is attributed to Rabbi Levi, the teacher of Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin, author of the *derasha* discussed above. What is added in the words of the disciple is that they focus on the banners in themselves, and in the fact that God accedes to the desire of the people when He commands them about the banners.

So too the second *derasha* appearing in this source, that of Rabbi Menachman, focuses on the banners, not as the object of Israel's hopes, but as words of prophecy that reflect certainty: "This teaches that they prophesied about themselves that they would in the future be arranged in camps, in banners, in rows, like the formation of a vineyard.[[8]](#footnote-8)" The wilderness that appears together with Israel's first journey after the splitting of the Reed Sea — the wilderness of Shur — is expounded in two ways, in the sense of seeing/ prophecy and in the sense of a row (*shura*). The image of a vineyard expresses Israel's developing self-awareness. From now on they are no longer a collection of runaway slaves, but rather a people who send out roots and become implanted in their God.

In the context of these *derashot*, perhaps we should go back and read the last verses of the Song of the Sea ("You bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, the place, O Lord, which You have made for You to dwell in, the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established,” *Shemot* 15:17), not as relating to Eretz Israel and the Temple, but to the solidification of the people as God's people at Mount Sinai, with the banners, and in the *Mishkan.*

What is common to all the *derashot* of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel relating to the banners is noting the desires or actions that characterize the people of Israel to establish themselves as God's people. The people identify with their destiny, and from the great events of the Giving of the Torah and the Splitting of the Reed Sea, they draw strength and inspiration to realize it. The *derashot* of the Amoraim concerning the establishment of the order of the banners in the first *parasha* in the Book of *Bamidbar* add another layer to the way we relate to the Generation of the Wilderness. Its lot is not only failures and missed opportunities, but also desire, joy, and identification with being God's chosen nation.

**The Latter Midrash**

The Midrash on *Shir Ha-shirim* presents the command regarding the order of Israel's encampment in the wilderness according to banners as God's reaction to Israel's desire in the wake of the Revelation at Mount Sinai or the Splitting of the Sea of Suf. Two late Midrashim on the Book of *Bamidbar*, *Midrash Tanchuma* (Buber) and *Bamidbar Rabba*, open the discussion of Israel's encampment by way of banners with a *derasha* that carries within it the opposite idea, that the order of Israel's encampment, "every man with his own banner, according to ensigns," is done for the sake of God.[[9]](#footnote-9)

"Every man with his own banner, according to ensigns.”

This is what is stated: "We will shout for joy in Your victory, and in the name of our God we will set up our banners (*nidgol*)" (*Tehillim* 20:6).

Israel said: O Lord, God, we shout for joy in Your victory, what You did for us in Your name.

"We will shout for joy in Your victory," as it is stated: "Thus the Lord saved Israel that day" (*Shemot* 14:31).

It is written *vayivasha* [God was saved], as it were; Israel was redeemed, and it was as if God was redeemed.

"And in the name of our God we will set up our banners," for God fixed His name in our names and made us into banners. As it is stated: "Every man with his own banner, according to ensigns."[[10]](#footnote-10)

(*Tanchuma* [Buber] *Bamidbar* 10)

Israel's encampments in the wilderness according to banners are "signs" of the heavenly entourage in a world in which God's presence is hidden. This is the historic role of the people of Israel — to wave the banner of Divine Presence in the world — which is given concrete expression in the manner of their camping around the *Mishkan*. The daring idea that God, as it were, needs the people of Israel in order to make His kingship known is found in *Sifrei Vezot Haberakha*, in the name of the Tanna Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai:[[11]](#footnote-11)

"The tribes of Israel together" (*Devarim* 33:5).

When they form a single brotherhood, and not when they form many factions.

And so it is stated: "It is He that builds His upper chambers in the heaven, and has founded His vault upon the earth" (*Amos* 9:6).

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said:

This may be likened to one who brought two ships and tied them to anchors and iron weights.

And he set them in the open sea and build palaces upon them.

As long as the ships were tied together, the palaces stood.

When the ships were separated, the palaces could not stand.

So too Israel.

When they do God's will, "He builds His upper chambers in the heaven."

And when they do not do His will, as it were, "And has founded His vault upon the earth."

And similarly it is stated: "This is my God, and I will glorify Him" (*Shemot* 15:2).

When I thank Him, He is glorified, and when I do not thank Him, as it were, He is glorified in His name.

Similarly: "For I will proclaim the name of the Lord" (*Devarim* 32:3).

When I proclaim His name, He is great, but if not, as it were…

Similarly: "Therefore you are My witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God" (*Yeshayahu* 43:12).

When you are My witnesses, I am God; and when you are not My witnesses, as it were, I am not God.

Similarly: "To You I lift up my eyes, O You that are enthroned in the heavens" (*Tehillim* 123:1). Were it not for me, as it were, You would not be enthroned in the heavens.

Here too you say:

"The tribes of Israel together" — when they form a single brotherhood, and not when they form many factions.

(*Sifrei, Vezot Haberakha* 346)

Presenting the banners in the wilderness in the context of this idea is a conceptual development of the latter Midrash. It seems that the *Tanchuma* stands apart from the *derashot* of the Amoraim also with respect to its relating to the precise manner in which the banners are arranged. It follows from the Amoraic *derashot* that the main thing is the very existence of order ("by their fathers' houses"), and not their place or the manner in which they are ordered. In contrast, the latter Midrash reflects a different understanding, that the camp of Israel is a precise reflection of the upper worlds.

The issue of the banners is significantly developed and expanded upon in the latter Midrash, first in *Tanchuma* [Buber] *Bamidbar*, and afterwards in *Bamidbar Rabba* 2, 8-16. You are invited to open these sources and continue to study this fascinating subject.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. *Tefillin* are referred to as "a sign upon your hand" (*Shemot* 13:16), and the words "pre-eminent (*dagul*)above ten thousand" (*Shir ha-Shirim* 5:10), are expounded by Rabba bar Bar-Chana in the name of Rabbi Yochanan in *Chagiga* 16a as: "He is the example among His ten thousand." Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra* Commentary to *Shir Ha-shirim* (Jerusalem: 5733), p. 16, note 1, points out that the primary meaning of the root *dalet-gimmel-lammed* in Akkadian relates to seeing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The proliferation of multiplicity from unity is also connected to this "order." The concept of beauty here is connected also to the belief in unity, but this is not the forum to expand upon the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The words, "formidable as an army with banners (*ka-nidgalot*)," in the verse, "Who is she that looks forth as the dawn, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, formidable as an army with banners?" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 6:10), are also expounded as relating to the angels. See *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 6, 10; *Midrash Tehillim* 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Tiferet Yisrael*, Ch. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The arrangement of the Israelite camp according to families and tribes, so that each of them has a different essence and a different role, and all of them together constitute a single entity, reflects heavenly reality. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This *derasha* reflects a conception of the Giving of the Torah different from that which follows from the well-known statement of the Babylonian Amora, Rav Dimi bar Chama: "This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, suspended the mountain over Israel like a barrel, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, it will be well with you, but if not, there will you find your grave" (*Avoda Zara* 2b). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Beshalach*, *Shira* 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This is the only place where we find the name "Rabbi Menachman." [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Similarly, see *Bamidbar Rabba* 2, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. "Thus the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians…" (*Shemot* 14:30) is expounded in this manner in other sources as well; see *Tanchuma* (Buber), *Acharei Mot* 13; *Shemot Rabba* 29. In contrast, it appears in the Midrash of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel and in the *Mekhilta* in relation to the miraculous salvation of the Splitting of the Reed Sea; see *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael,* *Beshalach, Vayhi* 6; *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 2, 2; *Pesikta de-Rabbi Kahana, Ba-chodesh* 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Both reflect the idea under discusion, but the issues and lessons arising from them are different. The parable of the ships in the *derasha* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai expresses the need for the joining together of God and Israel in order to build a palace. The *derasha* in the *Tanchuma* differs from it in that it relates to the representation of God in the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)