**S.A.L.T – PARASHAT BAMIDBAR**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Bamidbar of the census taken by *Benei Yisrael* after the construction of the *Mishkan*, which found that they numbered 603,550 adult males. This figure forms the basis of the well-known view among the *Rishonim* that the prohibition against carrying in a public domain on Shabbat applies only in public areas with 600,000 people. The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (98a) establishes that the Israelite camp in the wilderness (“*diglei midbar*”) forms the paradigm of a “*reshut ha-rabim*” (“public domain”) which is applied in the laws of Shabbat. And thus the Gemara rules that a public area covered by a roof does not qualify as a “*reshut ha-rabim*,” because the Israelite camp was not covered. By the same token, according to Rashi (Eiruvin 6a) and several other *Rishonim*, a public domain cannot qualify as a halakhic “*reshut ha-rabim*” unless it consists of all least 600,000 people, since the Israelite camp in the wilderness consisted of (roughly) this number of people.

The *Shulchan Arukh* (O.C. 345:7) cites this view as the second of two opinions. However, as noted by the *Arukh Ha-shulchan*, *Mishna Berura* and others, the *Shulchan Arukh* formulates this view differently than Rashi does. He writes that according to this opinion, a public domain qualifies as a “*reshut ha-rabim*” only if “600,000 people pass through it each day.” Rather than requiring simply an area with a population of 600,000 people or more, the *Shulchan Arukh*’s version of this view requires that 600,000 pass through the area every day. This version appears in the *Sefer Ha-teruma*, as cited in the *Beit Yosef* (O.C. 345). The *Mishkenot Yaakov* (O.C. 121) asserts that indeed, different opinions exist in this regard, as some *Rishonim* require simply the presence of 600,000 people, whereas others require that 600,000 pass through the area each (besides the view taken by the Rambam and others, who require neither condition for an area to qualify as a “*reshut ha-rabim*”).

The question arises, however, as to the reason underlying this condition, that 600,000 people pass through the area each day. As we noted, the basis for a requirement of 600,000 people is the fact that the Israelite camp in the wilderness serves as the paradigm of a “*reshut ha-rabim*” for Shabbat. The Israelite camp consisted of 600,000 men, but there is little reason to believe that this number of people left their homes and walked through the camp each day.

The *Mishkenot Yaakov* (O.C. 120) answers this question on the basis of the Gemara’s comment earlier in Masekhet Shabbat (96b) that the Levites’ section of the Israelite camp was a “*reshut ha-rabim*.” Rashi explains that the nation’s men would regularly come to be near Moshe, which made the Levite camp a public area. Accordingly, we might explain that it is particularly this area – the area where the *Leviyim* resided – which establishes the paradigm of a “*reshut ha-rabim*.” Therefore, since it frequently saw 600,000 people coming in and out, as the people came to be near Moshe and then returned to their tents, some *Rishonim* understood that a “*reshut ha-rabim*” requires not the presence of 600,000 people, but rather this number of people passing through on a regular basis.

(See Rav Chaim Leib Eisenstein’s [*Peninim Mi-bei Midresha*, Parashat Bamidbar](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=47426&st=&pgnum=11&hilite=))

Sunday

Parashat Bamidbar begins with God’s command to Moshe, “*Se’u et rosh kol adat Benei Yisrael*” – to count the nation. Rashi, citing the Midrash, presents a surprising interpretation of this phrase, which can be understood literally to mean, “Lift the head of the entire congregation of Israelites.” According to Rashi, this phrase is intended to evoke the gruesome image of an executioner who “lifts the head” of the condemned criminal to decapitate him.

Already the Ramban, in his Torah commentary, raises the question of why Rashi would introduce such a negative image in this context, when God simply issues a command to conduct a census. There does not appear to be any indication of anger or of looming catastrophe when this command was given, and it thus seems difficult to understand why Rashi chose to interpret this verse as foreboding doom.

The Ramban initially suggests that Rashi saw this phrase as foreshadowing the tragic end of this generation, which died in the wilderness as a result of the sin of the spies. The census included all men from age twenty – the precise same population against whom the decree of death was issued after the sin of the spies (14:29). Perhaps, then, Rashi was alluding to the tragic fact that these people who are now being counted in preparation to enter *Eretz Yisrael* would ultimately be destined to perish in the wilderness.

The Ramban then writes that Rashi understood this verse as alluding to the fact that “if they are meritorious, they will rise to greatness…and if they are not meritorious, they will all die.” The Ramban cites verses from other contexts to show that the phrase “*se’u et rosh*” could refer either to a designation of special stature, or as a warning of doom and calamity. Accordingly, he writes, the Midrash here notes the two opposite destinies that potentially await *Benei Yisrael*, depending on whether they act as they should.

The obvious question, however, arises as to why this message is conveyed specifically here, in the context of the census. What is the connection between the census and the two possibilities of greatness or calamity?

[The Klausenberger Rebbe](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36047&st=&pgnum=198) explained that the census underscored the indispensable role which each and every member of the nation plays. It conveyed the message that *Am Yisrael* requires the contribution of every individual, each achieving to the best of his or her personal capabilities. Each member of the nation was counted because each plays a vitally important role that nobody else can play. This notion allows each individual to achieve great distinction, but also to fail. Even a person with modest ability can achieve “*nesi’ut rosh*” – a stature of excellence – if he maximizes his limited potential and does the most he is capable of doing. Conversely, however, an exceptionally talented person who achieves great success and makes a significant contribution will be called to task if he failed to maximize his potential, if he fell short of the achievements he is capable of. This, the Klausenberger Rebbe suggested, is the message of the census, and thus in this context *Chazal* remind us that this message gives us both the opportunity to achieve greatness, as well as the prospect of failure if we do not live up to our full potential.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Bamidbar tells of the census taken of *Benei Yisrael* after the *Mishkan*’s construction, and informs us of how the census was conducted: “*Va-yityaledu al mishpechotam le-veit avotam*” (1:18). We find different interpretations of this phrase among the commentators, but the Ramban explains it to mean that each person who was counted had to identify himself by his name and details about his family (“*ani peloni ben peloni mi-mishpachat peloni…*”).

The Ramban’s interpretation seems striking in light of the fact that when the Torah records the census’ findings, it makes no mention whatsoever of the numbers of individual families within the tribes. The Torah tells us only the population of each tribe, without giving us the breakdown of the individual families. This is in contrast to the separate census taken of the tribe of Levi, the findings of which are presented later in this parasha and are indeed broken down into the three Levite families (Gershon, Kehat, Merari). In that context, the breakdown by family is necessary because, as the Torah discusses at length, the different families performed different roles in the transportation of the *Mishkan*, and the Levite census was conducted, at least in part, for the purpose of assigning the various *Leviyim* to their respective roles. But no such breakdown is made in the presentation of the findings of the nationwide census, presumably because there was no need to determine the numbers of members of individual families. We might therefore wonder why, according to the Ramban, it was necessary for each member of *Benei Yisrael* to identify himself by his family when he was counted. If individual families were not counted, why did the people need to identify their families?

[Rav Michael Rosensweig](http://torahweb.org/torah/2014/parsha/rros_bamidbar.html) explains that this was necessary to emphasize the importance of individual contribution, which could easily be overshadowed during the process of a national census:

The prominence of the nuclear and broader family units and of the individual even in this more general tribal project reflects the centrality, even the indispensability, of these themes in *halachic* life. The Torah's description as well as the actual process that ultimately produced the broader *shevatim* census figures conveys that absent singular personalities, individualistic contributions, and the cornerstone of the core family unit, there can be no meaningful larger cohesive structure. While numbers are sometimes useful and efficient in national and communal life, any broader count risks dehumanizing and objectifying human beings in a demeaning manner that is halachically objectionable.

Rav Rosensweig adds that this might also explain the Torah’s insistence on counting indirectly, through the donation of half-shekels, rather than simply counting people:

This is one of the reasons that the numbers were gathered by counting contributions rather than people and in the context of a donation that accentuated man's volitional and altruistic role as a subject, rather than as an object. The emphasis of individual names and family identity redeemed the use of numbers, ensuring the enumeration of subjects not objects.

The danger of a census lies in the reduction of individual members to numbers. By each member of the nation coming forward and announcing his name and family background, the message was compellingly conveyed that despite the assigning of numbers, each individual and each individual family assumed paramount importance. Without the efforts and achievements of individuals and family units, the final sum is meaningless. Even as we combine together to form the cohesive, organic entity of *Am Yisrael*, we must never lose sight of the fact that our collective success is entirely dependent upon our individual efforts, as each and every one of us must do his part, recognizing his indispensable role in the pursuit of our national goals.

Tuesday

In the final verse of Parashat Bamidbar, God warns the members of the Kehat family of *Leviyim*, who were assigned the role of transporting the sacred articles of the *Mishkan* when the nation traveled, not to see “*ke-vala et ha-kodesh*.” Rashi explains this warning to mean that the Kehatites must not look on as the *kohanim* placed the sacred articles of the *Mishkan* into their bags in preparation for travel. The Kehatites were to arrive to begin transporting these articles only after they were in their bags, rather than coming earlier and watching the process of packing them. This is also the view of the *Yerei’im*, who listed as one of the 613 Biblical commands the prohibition against watching as the sacred articles of the *Mishkan* are packed in their bags (352).

Ibn Ezra explains differently, claiming that God warns the Kehatites not to see the *aron* after the *parokhet* (curtain) was taken down. The *aron* was normally kept concealed behind the *parokhet*, and it would be disrespectful to view the ark in its unusual state of exposure.

According to both explanations, the Torah speaks here of the fact that as the *Mishkan* and its furnishings were being prepared for travel, they were in an “embarrassed” state. The ark is usually hidden behind the *parokhet*, which served to preserve its mystique and the aura of reverence surrounding it, and the altars, *menorah* and *shulchan* were normally in their assigned places ready to be used for their unique, sacred functions. As the nation prepared for travel, suddenly, these sacred articles were – outwardly – reduced to “luggage.” They were packed in bags much like the people likely packed their personal belongings in bags in preparation for travel. They no longer appeared sacred; they looked like ordinary objects ready to be shipped. The Torah therefore forbade looking upon them in this state, until they were covered and invisible, to ensure that their unique status would not be undermined, and that people would continue looking at them with awe and reverence.

This warning can and should be applied to the way we relate to other people, as well. All people have embarrassing moments and qualities, aspects of their lives and their personalities of which they feel ashamed. Just as we are forbidden from looking on “*ke-vala et ha-kodesh*,” when the sacred articles of the *Mishkan* are in a state of disgrace, similarly, we must not focus our attention on the unflattering flaws and deficiencies of our fellow. And just as God wanted us to see the *Mishkan* and its furnishings in its state of sanctity, with every article in its designated place serving its sublime function, we are to look for what is sacred and special about each person, the unique contribution he or she makes to us and to the world. Human nature is such that we are easily drawn, by curiosity or the need to feel superior, to look “*ke-vala et ha-kodesh*,” to find the unbecoming qualities of the sacred people around us, to magnify their mistakes and their character flaws. But the human soul is even more sacred than the *aron* and the other furnishings of the *Mishkan*, and so as with these sacred articles, we must view people with our attention focused upon their unique stature, upon their admirable qualities and special achievements. While certainly all people are flawed and far from perfect, we are to try, as much as possible, to magnify the noble and unique qualities of all people and treat them as the beloved children of the Almighty.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Bamidbar delineates the specific areas of responsibility assigned to the three Levite families – Gershon, Kehat and Merari – when *Benei Yisrael* traveled, as each group was responsible for carrying different parts of the *Mishkan*. The Kehat family was responsible for carrying the most sacred articles of the *Mishkan* – the ark, the table, the *menorah* and the two altars. The Torah also mentions that the Kehatites were assigned “*ha-masakh ve-khol avodato*” – “the curtain and all its work” (3:31). As Rashi explains, this refers to the *parokhet*, the curtain that hung inside the *Mishkan* to divide between the outer chamber, where the altar, table and *menorah* were situated, and the *kodesh ha-kodashim* – the most sacred chamber, where the ark was placed. The *parokhet* was included among the articles which were transported by the Kehat family, and we indeed read later in the parasha (4:5) that the *aron* was covered by the *parokhet* during travel, and so the Kehatites essentially covered the ark and *parokhet* together.

Netziv, in his *Ha’amek Davar*, raises the question as to the meaning of the phrase “*ve-khol avodato*” – “and all its work” – in this verse. What “work,” he asks, was entailed with the *parokhet*? The Torah later writes that the *kohanim* – not the Kehatites – would cover the ark with the *parokhet* before travel. Seemingly, then, there was no “work” required by the Kehatites with regard to the *parokhet*. What does the Torah mean when it speaks of the “work” associated with the *parokhet*?

Netziv answers by noting the Mishna’s comment in Masekhet Shekalim (8:5) that a new *parokhet* was made every year. (The Mishna actually says that two *parokhot* were made each year, because the *parokhet* consisted of two different curtains, as discussed in Masekhet Yoma 51b.) If a new *parokhet* was woven each year, Netziv writes, then we may presume that this role was assigned to a particular family of *Leviyim*. It stands to reason, then, that when the Torah speaks of “work” involved in the *parokhet*, it refers to this responsibility of weaving a new *parokhet* each year, a task which the Torah here tells us was assigned to the Kehat family.

It should be noted, however, that the Rosh, in his commentary to Masekhet Tamid (29b), raises the possibility that the Mishna refers not to the *parokhet* hung outside the *kodesh ha-kodashim*, but rather to the curtain that hung at the entrance to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. This curtain would become soiled as a result of the daily exposure to the smoke of the *ketoret* (incense offering), and therefore needed to be replaced each year. Netziv, in his comments, assumes the second explanation given by the Rosh, that the Mishna speaks of the *parokhet* outside the *kodesh ha-kodashim*.

Interestingly, the *Tiferet Yisrael* (in Shekalim) raises the question of how it was possible that a new *parokhet* was made each year. The Mishna there in Shekalim observes that the *parokhet* was very large and exquisite. Requiring a new *parokhet* each year would thus appear to violate the principle of “*ha-Torah chasa al mamonam shel Yisrael*” – the Torah ensures not to impose an unreasonable financial burden upon *Am Yisrael*. The *Tiferet Yisrael* therefore advances an entirely different reading of the Mishna. He explains the Mishna to mean that an extra *parokhet* was always available because the *parokhet* would be taken down to be immersed each year after Sukkot, due to the possibility that it had become *tamei*. A second *parokhet* was therefore needed to be hung in the interim while the standard *parokhet* was being immersed.

Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein, in his [*Chashukei Chemed* (Shavuot 11a)](http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=49720&st=&pgnum=57), suggests maintaining the straightforward reading of the Mishna, that a new *parokhet* was indeed made each year, explaining that this was necessary because the *parokhet* was stained by the sprinkling of blood on Yom Kippur. The special Yom Kippur service included the sprinkling of sacrificial blood on the *parokhet* (Yoma 57a), and thus the *parokhet* became dirtied each year on Yom Kippur. As it was disrespectful to keep a dirty *parokhet*, it was necessary to replace it each year, and this justified the expense involved.

Thursday

The Midrash, in introducing Sefer Bamidbar (*Bamidbar Rabba* 1:7), makes the following comment regarding the symbolic significance of the desert, where our nation’s early history took place: “Whoever does not make himself ownerless like a desert is unable to acquire wisdom and Torah.”

How exactly does one “make himself ownerless like a desert”?

The Midrash likely refers here to the fact that a person can pitch his tent and use property in a desert without anybody protesting. Wherever and whenever one wishes, he may take over any piece of land, and nobody could challenge his right to use the property. A desert is a place without restrictions, where one can act freely, as he wishes, without being disturbed or challenged. This is likely the Midrash’s intent when it speaks of desert lands as “*hefker*.”

Accordingly, the Midrash here teaches that we cannot allow any external factor to disturb our devotion to Torah. Our attitude to study and observance must be one of “*hefker*” – there is nobody and nothing that can get in our way. Making ourselves “ownerless like a desert” means that other people’s attitudes cannot interfere with our commitment to Torah; their scorn and ridicule are as inconsequential as a legal claim made on ownerless property in a desert. It means that our commitment is not shaken by our conditions and circumstances, like the legal security of a tent pitched on ownerless ground. The Torah was given and taught to our ancestors in the desert to teach us that it must be studied, cherished and observed under all conditions, that no person and no factor should ever succeed in undermining our loyalty or devotion. We are to make our religious commitment like “*hekfer*,” like something that can never be challenged or opposed by anything in the world.

(See Rav Yaakov Chaim Fleischman’s *Etz Chadash*, [p. 119](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=41878&st=&pgnum=132&hilite=).)

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Bamidbar (chapter 2) describes the formation of the Israelite camp in the wilderness, which was arranged in four groups of three tribes, with each tribe assigned its own *degel* (banner).

The Midrash, in a famous passage (*Bamidbar Rabba* 2:3), tells that *Benei Yisrael* desired special banners for each tribe ever since the time of *Matan Torah*. When God descended upon Mount Sinai on that occasion, the Midrash relates, He was accompanied by throngs of angels, and *Benei Yisrael* noticed how the angels were arranged in groups, each with its own banner. They desired to be arranged in this manner, like the angels, and God granted their request and commanded that each tribe should have its own special banner.

Much has been written about the symbolic significance of these banners, but we might suggest that the most crucial point is the fact that *Benei Yisrael* desired to follow specifically the model of the angels, of heavenly beings. The idea of a large, colorful banner is to evoke people’s admiration and respect by appealing to the senses, by appearing grand and impressive. At the time of Revelation, which was a moment of unparalleled clarity, when *Benei Yisrael* were able to perceive things the way they truly are, without being misled or confused by the vanities of this world, they were impressed and enchanted by only the “banners” of the angels. They were not drawn or attracted to the colorful and appealing “hype” of other nations and cultures, but rather to the angels, to the spiritual ideals taught to them by God. At this moment of clarity and a keen perception of the distinction between truth and vanity, the “banners” which appealed to *Benei Yisrael* were those of the angels. The “bells and whistles” sounded by the nations of this world did not impress them, as they were drawn solely heavenward, to the angels. And thus the *Midrash Tanchuma*, in a parallel passage, comments, “The Almighty said: The pagan nations have many banners, but none are more beloved to me than the banners of Yaakov.”

The “banners” of the other nations, the grandeur and excitement which they generate, can easily mislead us into thinking that we would be better off following their example and embracing their values and lifestyle. The Midrash here teaches us that the models we should seek to emulate are the “angels,” the spiritual ideals taught to us at Sinai, and then we will be truly “beloved” to God.

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