**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BAMIDBAR**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Bamidbar (3:40-51) of the process whereby the *Leviyim* were designated as God’s special tribe at Mount Sinai, assigned to minister in the *Mishkan*, in place of the firstborns. The firstborns had been consecrated for this role by virtue of their having been saved during the plague of the firstborn on the night of the Exodus, and God now chose to substitute them with the tribe Levi (3:11-13). Rashi (3:12), citing the Midrash, explains that the *Leviyim* earned this privilege by being the only tribe that did not participate in the worship of the golden calf.

The Torah relates that at the time the substitution was made, there were 22,000 male *Leviyim*, and 22,273 firstborns. The 22,000 *Leviyim* assumed the place of 22,000 of the firstborns, and the remaining 273 firstborns needed to “redeem” themselves by paying five shekels to the *kohanim*. Rashi (3:50), based on the Gemara (Sanhedrin 17a), writes that lots were drawn to determine which 273 firstborns were required to pay for their redemption. This process resembles the *pidyon ha-bein* “redemption” payment which every father must make to a *kohen* after the birth of a firstborn son, as the Torah mentioned already earlier, in Sefer Shemot (13:13), and repeats later in Sefer Bamidbar (18:16).

A number of *poskim* pointed to the redemption of the firstborns at Sinai as proof to the fact that a *pidyon ha-bein* may be performed before the infant is circumcised. Circumcision, of course, is performed on a child’s eighth day, whereas the *pidyon ha-bein* is to be conducted when the boy is one month old (Bamidbar 18:16). If the child is unwell, such that the circumcision must be delayed, the question arises as to whether the *pidyon ha-bein* is also delayed until after the *berit* can be performed. A number of *poskim* note that the two *mitzvot* are not linked in any way, and thus the inability to perform the *berit mila* has no effect on the obligation of *pidyon ha-bein* on the thirty-first day. The *Tzemach Tzedek* (128) and Chida (*Chayim Sha’al* 1:31) suggest drawing proof to this conclusion from the initial redemption of the firstborns at Sinai. The verse in Sefer Yehoshua (5:5) states explicitly that all the infants born in the wilderness, after *Benei Yisrael* left Egypt, did not undergo *berit mila*, and the Gemara in Masekhet Yevamot (72a) explains that the hot desert conditions made the procedure of circumcision unsafe. Undoubtedly, the 22,278 firstborns who were redeemed at Sinai included those who were born over the previous year, after the Exodus, and were thus uncircumcised. The fact that they were nevertheless redeemed appears to prove that *pidyon ha-bein* may be performed even for an infant who had not yet undergone circumcision.

Chida concedes that one might refute this proof. First, it is possible that the firstborns who were born since the Exodus were included in the 22,000 firstborns who were substituted by *Leviyim*, such that they did not require redemption. As such, they do not prove that a *pidyon ha-bein* may be performed for an uncircumcised child. Secondly, one could certainly argue that this situation was exceptional, as God foresaw that *Benei Yisrael* would spend many years in the desert without the opportunity to perform *berit mila*. Therefore, this was an extraordinary circumstance which does not necessarily prove that generally, a *pidyon ha-bein* may be performed for a child who had yet to be circumcised. Nevertheless, Chida concludes that the *mitzva* of *pidyon ha-bein* is unrelated to, and hence independent of, the *mitzva* of *berit mila*.

Chida distinguishes between this question and the case addressed by the Ra’anach (79) where a firstborn became medically fit for *berit mila* on the 31st day – the day when the *pidyon ha-bein* is performed. The question arises in such a case as to which of the two *mitzvot* – which are being done on the same day – should be performed first. On the one hand, we might assume that as the *pidyon ha-bein* is meant to be performed on this day, it should be performed before the *berit mila*. On the other hand, perhaps the *berit mila* should be performed first, as the child is already “late” for this *mitzva*, which normally would be performed several weeks earlier. In any event, the Ra’nach ruled that the *berit mila* should be performed first, since *berit mila* signifies one’s submission to God’s authority, and thus takes precedence over other *mitzvot*. Chida writes that this line of reasoning requires performing *berit mila* before *pidyon ha-bein* when both are being performed on the same day, but it does not suffice to delay the *mitzva* of *pidyon ha-bein* beyond the child’s 31st day so he can first be circumcised.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Bamidbar describes the arrangement of *Benei Yisrael*’s camp in the desert, stating that they encamped around the *Mishkan*, which stood in the center, and they were situated “*mi-neged*” (2:2). The Rashbam and Ibn Ezra interpret this term to mean “at a distance,” and Rashi, citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, specifies that the people’s tents were pitched 2,000 *amot* away from the *Mishkan*. They did not encamp any further from the *Mishkan*, Rashi writes, “so they could come on Shabbat.” This comment refers to the prohibition of *techum Shabbat*, which forbids walking beyond a distance of 2,000 *amot* outside one’s city – or, in this case, the Israelite camp – on Shabbat.

On one level, Rashi speaks here of the purely practical concern to ensure thepeople’s ability to visit the sacred site of the *Mishkan* even on Shabbat. During the week, it did not matter whether the people’s tents were 2,000 *amot* away from the *Mishkan* or more than 2,000 *amot* away, but in order to allow for visits to the *Mishkan* on Shabbat, the tents could not be situated beyond this distance.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe ([*Likutei Sichot*, Bamidbar, 5730](https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14938&st=&pgnum=17&hilite=)), however, suggested that there is also deeper significance to Rashi’s comment. Symbolically, it teaches that the spiritual focus experienced Shabbat affects us even during the workweek. Just as the people were situated close to the *Mishkan* all week long because of Shabbat, similarly, the Shabbat experience helps ensure our close connection to the “*Mishkan*” – to sanctity – even throughout the week. Shabbat is the day when we are free from our material pursuits, when are told to put our professional and financial aspirations on hold so we can direct our attention towards the “*Mishkan*,” towards Torah and our relationship with God. On Shabbat, we are kept close to the “*Mishkan*” by the absence of the pressures and distractions of the workweek. Rashi alludes to us that the proximity to the “*Mishkan*” which we maintain on Shabbat has the effect of keeping us close to the “*Mishkan*” throughout the rest of the week, as well. The weekly experience of spiritual focus is to impact the totality of our lives, and infuse everything we do, all week long, with holiness and spiritual meaning. Although we spend most of our time during the week involved in worldly endeavors, working to earn a livelihood and tending to our basic needs, we are to maintain a connection to the “*Mishkan*” each and every day, and this is accomplished, in part, by utilizing Shabbat as a time for special spiritual focus that has an impact upon us all week long.

Monday

Parashat Bamidbar begins with God’s command to Moshe to conduct a census of *Benei Yisrael*, several weeks before they journeyed from Sinai towards the Land of Israel. God named twelve leaders – one from each tribe – who would assist Moshe in the process, as each tribe was counted separately.

God’s list of these twelve men (1:5-15) is presented according to the sequence of Yaakov’s four wives. It begins with the tribes descending from Leah’s six sons, proceeding from oldest to youngest (Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yehuda, Yissakhar, Zevulun), and then lists the tribes descending from Rachel’s two sons – Efrayim and Menashe (Yosef’s two sons), and Binyamin. The list concludes with the four tribes produced from the sons of Yaakov’s maidservants (Dan, Asher, Gad and Naftali).

Interestingly, however, when the Torah presents the results of the census (1:20-43), it follows a different sequence, based on the tribes’ arrangement as they encamped. It first tells the population of the tribes of Reuven, Shimon and Gad – the three tribes who encamped to the south (2:10); followed by Yehuda, Yissakhar and Zevulun, who encamped to the east (2:3); then Efrayim, Menashe and Binyamin, who encamped to the west (2:18), and, finally, Dan, Asher and Naftali, who encamped to the north (2:25).

We might wonder why God did not list to Moshe the names of the tribes’ representatives in the same sequence in which the census was conducted. As these men were appointed to assist Moshe, with each assigned over the census of his tribe, then we would have expected to find symmetry between the way they are introduced and the way the census is presented.

Rav Shaul Lowenstam of Amsterdam, in his *Binyan Ariel*, reaches a surprising conclusion based on the sequence in which the representatives are introduced. He suggests that although one representative was appointed for each tribe, this does not mean that – as we would instinctively assume – each appointee was involved only in the census of his tribe. All twelve worked together with Moshe and Aharon in conducting the entire census, rather than each dealing only with the counting of his own tribe. Therefore, the list of the representatives is not parallel to the list of the twelve censuses, because the representatives were not appointed only to work with their respective tribes. They all took part in all twelve censuses.

Rav Lowenstam suggests that this is Rashi’s intent in commenting on God’s instruction to Moshe and Aharon, “And one person for each tribe shall be with you [when conducting the census]” (1:4). Rashi writes: “When you count them [the nation], the leader of each and every tribe shall be with you.” At first glance, Rashi does not appear to add anything to our understanding of this verse. Perhaps, Rav Lowenstam writes, Rashi means that the leaders of all the tribes would accompany Moshe and Aharon throughout the entire process, rather than each leader working only to count his own tribe.

Great emphasis is placed on tribal affiliation throughout the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar. We read how each tribe was counted separately, and arranged in a particular location during travel and encampment. Even in the celebration of the dedication of the *Mishkan*, each tribe’s leader brought a special offering each day (chapter 7). This emphasis expresses the notion of singularity and distinctiveness, how different groups are encouraged to develop their unique characters and qualities. However, Rav Lowenstam’s insight into the role of the tribal leaders during the census shows that even as the different tribes preserve their distinct identities, they must also work together and look out for one another. The differences between the different groups the comprise *Am Yisrael* must never lead them to disregard one another, and we must all be prepared to help all our fellow Jews, even those who identify with a different “tribe” than ours.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Bamidbar describes the arrangement of the Israelite camp as *Benei Yisrael* traveled and encamped in the wilderness. Rashi (3:38), based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, observes that the area where Moshe and Aharon encamped was adjacent to the area assigned to three tribes – Yehuda, Yissakhar and Zevulun. These tribes’ proximity to Moshe, Rashi writes, had a significant impact upon them: “Since they were neighbors of Moshe, who was involved in Torah, they became accomplished in Torah.” Moshe’s unique devotion to Torah had an effect on these three tribes, who would thus later produce impressive cadres of Torah scholars.

Rashi proceeds to cite verses from later in Tanakh showing that accomplished scholars emerged from the tribes of Yehuda, Yissakhar and Zevulun. In Tehillim (60:9), God speaks of the tribe of Yehuda as “*Yehuda mechokeki*” – “Yehuda My legislator,” referring to scholars from the tribe of Yehuda who clarified the laws and determined policy. And the tribe of Yissakhar, as a verse in Sefer Divrei Hayamim I (12:32) tells, produced “*yode’ei vina la-itim*,” which *Chazal* (*Bereishit Rabba* 72:5) understood as a reference to experts in astronomy, who made the calculations of the lunar cycle necessary for establishing the Jewish calendar. As for Zevulun, Rashi cites the prophetess Devora’s description of this tribe as “*moshekhim be-sheivet sofer*” – “holders of the scribe’s staff” (Shoftim 5:14), implying that Zevulun produced “scribes,” who were responsible for the accurate copying of Torah texts.

[Rav Moshe Taragin](https://www.yutorah.org/sidebar/lecture.cfm/925706/rabbi-moshe-taragin/10-minute-rashi-bamidbar-specialization-in-torah-can-a-talmid-fully-appreciate-a-gadol-invested-leadership-maintaining-focus/) noted the significance of the fact that Rashi here speaks of three very different types of Torah achievement. The scholars of Yehuda are described as “legislators,” authority figures entrusted with the responsibility to determine laws and policies, how to implement the Torah’s principles and ideals on a practical level. By contrast, the Yissakharite scholars are depicted as astronomers and mathematicians, making complex, abstract calculations. These are the brilliant theoreticians, who master science and mathematics. Finally, Rashi points to the “scribes” of Zevulun – those who do the technical, often tedious, work of copying texts and ensuring precision and accuracy. These different forms of scholarship show that there are different models of Torah greatness. Different scholars specialize in different areas of Torah. Some focus more on the theoretical principles, while others seek to determine the practical halakhic application of Torah, and another type of scholar deals mainly with more technical subjects such as grammar and textual precision. Neither group is necessarily greater than any other. Each group pursues an area of specialization in which to achieve to the best of its ability.

And, all three groups, as Rashi writes, drew their inspiration from the same individual – Moshe. Part of Moshe’s uniqueness was that he succeeded in guiding and inspiring different types of scholars. He had the ability to speak to and to uplift a range of students and followers. Rather than appeal to only a certain type, he motivated all his adherents to develop and achieve in the manner that was right for them. This is part of the secret to Moshe’s success as a leader and teacher, and to his ability to produce scholars of many different kinds.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Bamidbar of the separate census that was conducted for the tribe of Levi, after all the other tribes had been counted. Levi’s census differed from that of the other tribes in that the census of the other tribes counted only the males from age 20, whereas the *Leviyim* were counted already from the age of one month (3:15).

Rashi (3:16) writes that the inclusion of young infants in Levi’s census explains why the Torah describes Moshe as counting this tribe “*al pi Hashem*” – “by the word of God,” a phrase which does not appear in the context of the counting of the other tribes. Citing from the *Midrash Tanchuma*, Rashi relates that after hearing God’s command to count the *Leviyim* from the age of one month, Moshe found himself in a quandary. He turned to God and asked, “How will I go into all of their homes and tents to know the number of their suckling babies?” Moshe found it inconceivable that God expected him to enter people’s homes to count the infants. God replied to Moshe, “You do yours, and I will do Mine.” Meaning, as Rashi proceeds to explain, Moshe went to the front door of every Levite tent, and a heavenly voice announced to him to number of people in the household. This way, Moshe was able to count even the infants of Levi without invading the Levites’ privacy by entering their homes. And thus the Torah says that Moshe counted the tribe of Levi “*al pi Hashem*” – as God informed him the number of infants in each Levite family.

What might be the significance of this depiction of the counting of the *Leviyim*?

Often, people who are in a position to offer assistance to those in need lack the information they need in order to help. Educators, for example, might be unaware of their students’ personal hardships and struggles, and are thus incapable of helping and guiding the students. Obtaining this information will, in many instances, necessitate intruding on the students’ privacy. The Midrash here perhaps teaches of the need to go as far as we can to find out about other people for the sake of helping them, without going into their “tents.” Just as Moshe went to the *Leviyim*’s tents without entering, we, too, should take interest in others while ensuring to maintain appropriate boundaries and respect their privacy. We are not entitled to meddle in other people’s affairs, even if our intentions are sincere – just as Moshe could not imagine entering the *Leviyim*’s homes, even for the important purpose of counting them. However, at the same time, we should go as far as we can to find out about other people and their needs so that we will be able to offer whatever support and assistance that they require. A delicate balance must be maintained between respecting people’s privacy, on the one hand, and being attuned to their needs, on the other, so we can intervene in a useful and helpful way without inappropriately intruding upon people’s private space.

Thursday

Yesterday, we noted that in the census conducted of each of the tribes of *Benei Yisrael* at Mount Sinai, God singled out the tribe of Levi by commanding that the census of this tribe include even the infants, from the age of one month (3:15). This is in contrast to the other tribes, whose members were counted only from the age of twenty.

The Midrash (*Bamidar Rabba* 3:8) raises the question of why the census of the tribe of Levi included even the infants. After all, the uniqueness of the *Leviyim* lay in the special role they filled in the *Mishkan* (and, later, in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*). Quite obviously, these duties could not be filled by infants; the *Leviyim* did not begin serving until adulthood. Why, then, did God include even the infants in the census?

The Midrash answers: “In order to multiply their reward… For you find that they came to serve [in the *Mishkan*] only at the age of thirty, so why were they counted from the age of one month – so they could receive reward already from the age of one month.” Counting the *Leviyim* already from infancy signified the fact that although they began serving in the *Mishkan* only at the age of thirty, nevertheless, they would receive reward even for the earlier years, already from the youngest age. The Midrash draws proof from the verse in Sefer Shmuel I (7:15) which tells that the prophet Shmuel “judged Israel all the days of his life” – despite the fact that he served as the nation’s leader for only ten years. (As the Midrash explains, Shmuel lived for 52 years, and there were only ten years from the death of Eli, the *kohein gadol*, and the appointment of King Shaul, the period during which Shmuel led the people.) Nevertheless, Shmuel is credited with governing the nation his entire life, even during the years before he actually assumed the role of leader. Similarly, the Midrash comments, the *Leviyim* were credited with serving in the *Mikdash* their entire lives, already from infancy, even though in practice they began only at the age of thirty.

The Midrash here teaches that we are credited not only for our accomplishments per se, but also for the years of preparation and struggle that facilitated those accomplishments. Like the *Leviyim*, we cannot serve God properly without first going through many years of growth and training. Already from infancy, we learn and develop in preparation for lives of devotion to God. Those years, the long process of growth which prepares us to serve God, are to be viewed as part of our service itself. The *Leviyim* did not actually begin their service until adulthood, but they were counted already as infants because every step of preparation was laden with inherent value and significance insofar as it facilitated the *Levi*’s service of God. Similarly, everything we do and experience in life that contributes to our growth, to preparing us to be devoted servants of the Almighty, is immensely valuable. Often, we might look at certain periods of our lives as wasted time, as phases in which we failed to accomplish. The Midrash here teaches us to see the value in the process of growth and preparation. Our “wasted” time, in retrospect, was not actually wasted if it was part of our development, part of our training to use our time and opportunities productively. The Midrash assures us that we will be credited even for the years of our “childhood,” for all the years of growth and progress that contributed to our becoming loyal servants of the Almighty.

Friday

Parashat Bamidbar begins with God’s command to Moshe to conduct a census of *Benei Yisrael* before the nation’s journey from Sinai. God told Moshe that he and Aharon were to count the people “*le-tziv’otam*” (1:3). Onkelos translates this word as “*le-cheileihon*” – “their armies,” meaning that *Benei Yisrael* were to be counted in preparation for the arrangement of the army that would wage battle against the Canaanites. Likewise, Netziv writes in *Ha’ameik Davar* that the word “*le-tziv’otam*” means that the people should be prepared to fulfill the particular military duties assigned to their tribe.

The Ramban explains this word differently, claiming that it means simply, “in their multitudes.” According to the Ramban, it seems, God here simply emphasized to Moshe that the entire nation, including all its many members, were to be counted in this census.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his comments to this verse, refers us to his commentary to Sefer Shemot (12:51) where he briefly discusses the meaning of the word “*tziv’otam*” used to describe *Benei Yisrael* at the time of the Exodus. There he writes that this word denotes family units. The Torah emphasizes that God did not simply bring *Benei Yisrael* from Egypt as a large assemblage of people, but rather as an assemblage of different “*tzeva’ot*” – families and households. Rav Hirsch writes: “…all the masses of the Jewish people had crystallized by birth or choice into family groups… Accordingly not only every tribe, but each family, each household could in truth be described as a *tzava*, as a group forming itself about God…” If so, then God’s command to count *Benei Yisrael* “*le-tziv’otam*” parallels the command in the previous verse that the people should be counted “*le-mishpechotam le-veit avotam*” – “by their families, by their father’s households,” instructing that each family was to be counted separately.

A chassidic reading of the word “*le-tziv’otam*” is offered by Rav Shlomo of Radomsk, in *Tiferet Shlomo*. He references the Mishna’s teaching in *Pirkei Avot* (4:11) that each *mitzva* a person performs creates an “advocate” – an angel that petitions on his behalf before God. Each individual, the *Tiferet Shlomo* comments, has with him or her countless “angels” which were produced through that person’s good deeds. And therefore, in order for a census to be accurate, the one conducting the census must count not only each individual – but also that individual’s “army” of angels. The danger of a census is that it reduces each person to just a number, as though there is nothing more to his or her being. God therefore emphasized that *Benei Yisrael* must be counted “*le-tziv’otam*,” without overlooking the multitudes of “angels” created by each and every individual through his or her innumerable *mitzvot* and accomplishments.

The *Tiferet Shelomo* adds that for this reason, God wanted the census to be overseen specifically by Moshe and Aharon. It takes great, righteous individuals like Moshe and Aharon to be able to recognize how each and every person is actually a “multitude.” Most people tend to magnify the faults and shortcomings of others, and to minimize their accomplishments. People on the level of Moshe and Aharon, however, do just the opposite, appreciating the precious value of each and every *mitzva*, and thus appreciating the greatness of each and every individual. And so God assigned the census specifically to Moshe and Aharon, to ensure that the people are counted “*le-tziv’otam*,” together with the “angels” which they have created – teaching us that we must never underestimate the great worth and value of any person, and must instead recognize the “multitudes” of good deeds performed by the people around us, rather than dwell upon their imperfections.

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