YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Parashat Bamidbar**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**The Tragedy and Lesson of the Book of *Bamidbar***

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**Introduction: The Books of *Vayikra* and *Bamidbar***

It is hard to ignore the similarity between the opening of the book of *Bamidbar* and the opening of the book of *Vayikra*:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they were come out of the land of Egypt, saying. (*Bamidbar* 1:1)

And the Lord called to Moshe, and spoke to him out of the tent of meeting, saying. (*Vayikra* 1:1)

At the same time, the difference between the verses is also evident. The beginning of *Bamidbar* mentions the time and the location, while there are no such details included in the opening of *Vayikra*. What is the meaning of this difference?

It seems to me that the distinction stems from the fact that the book of *Vayikra* deals primarily with matters of holiness, e.g., the service in the *Mishkan* and the process of purification – that is to say, purely halakhic realms that, by definition, stand above time and place. In contrast, the book of *Bamidbar* continues the historical account of the exodus from Egypt and the journey through the wilderness; therefore, as we return to the narrative, the descriptions of place and time return as well.

Many years ago, I heard from Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun that the books of *Vayikra* and *Bamidbar* constitute two parallel continuations of the book of *Shemot*, and that the difference between them is well presented in the closing verses of the book of *Shemot*:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the *Mishkan*. And Moshe was not able to enter into the tent of meeting, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the Lord filled the *Mishkan.* Andwhenever the cloud was taken up from over the *Mishkan*, the children of Israel went onward, throughout all their journeys. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they journeyed not till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was upon the *Mishkan* by day, and there was fire therein by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys. (*Shemot* 40:34-38)

This passage describes two types of cloud – the cloud of the *Mishkan*,which represents the *Shekhina*, and the cloud of the journeys, which symbolizes the progress of the people of Israel through the wilderness. The book of *Vayikra* continues the first cloud, the cloud of the *Mishkan*, while the book of *Bamidbar* continues the second cloud, the cloud of the journeys.

The sequence of events of which the Book of *Bamidbar* is a significant part, from the exodus from Egypt to the entry into the Land of Israel and the building of the Temple, is described in the Song of the Sea:

You stretched out Your right hand, the earth swallowed them. You in Your love have led the people that You have redeemed; You have guided them in Your strength to Your holy habitation. The peoples have heard, they tremble; pangs have taken hold on the inhabitants of Peleshet. Then were the chiefs of Edom affrighted; the mighty men of Moav, trembling taking hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan are melted away. Terror falls upon them, and dread; by the greatness of Your arm they are as still as stone; till Your people pass over, O Lord, till the people pass over that You have gotten. 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 own hands have established. (*Shemot* 15:12-17)

This description adds another element to the story: the journey in the wilderness continues a process that began with the exodus from Egypt, and the process will continue until the Israelites reach the place of their rest and inheritance.

**The Ideal and Its Collapse**

In accordance with the nature of the destination, the beginning of *Bamidbar* reflects a utopian reality: the people are counted, and the tribal princes are chosen and offer their sacrifices. The process of preparing to enter the land continues in *Parashat Behaalotekha*, where the people are commanded to fashion trumpets: "Make you two trumpets of silver; of beaten work shall you make them; and they shall be to you for the calling of the congregation, and for causing the camps to set forward" (*Bamidbar* 10:2). The trumpets are intended for the camp’s forward movement, and their very fashioning heralds the fact that the people of Israel are advancing on their journey toward the Land of Israel. Indeed, after a short time, further progress on the planned journey is described:

And it came to pass in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, that the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle of the testimony. And the children of Israel set forward by their stages out of the wilderness of Sinai; and the cloud abode in the wilderness of Paran. And they took their first journey, according to the commandment of the Lord by the hand of Moshe. (*Bamidbar* 10:11-13)

The situation is so good that when Moshe encourages Yitro to remain with them, he does not need complicated reasons, but simply says: "Come you with us, and we will do you good; for the Lord has spoken good concerning Israel" (*Bamidbar* 10:29).

Immediately afterwards, we come to the climax, when the people actually begin their journey: "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moshe said: 'Rise up, O Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered; and let them that hate You flee before You" (*Bamidbar* 10:35). Things are perfect. Everything is progressing as it should.

But in keeping with the magnitude of the expectation, so is the magnitude of the crisis and the crash at the first obstacle, with the sin of the "murmurers": "And the people were as murmurers, speaking evil in the ears of the Lord" (*Bamidbar* 11:1). From there, everything gets worse, and the people go from one sin to the next: the deterioration continues with Kivrot ha-Ta'ava, the sin of the spies, the sin of the *ma'apilim*, the sin of the *mekoshesh,* Korach and his company, Mei Meriva, and others.

After a seemingly ideal beginning, everything collapses and the people of Israel begin to face crisis after crisis. A long time passes before the situation is truly rectified; even after their extended journey in the wilderness, the conquest of the land also takes longer than expected, and even after all this, the people (led by Yehoshua!) fail to conquer the entire land. Problems continue during the days of the judges after Yehoshua, and it takes time to reach the ideal state of affairs and build the Temple.

How did this happen? What caused the shattering of the great vision?

**The Problem of Leadership**

In our *parasha*, *Parashat* *Bamidbar*, the tribal princes are presented as junior leaders who will assist Moshe in his leadership. The princes are given a lot of space in this *parasha*, and certainly in the offerings that they bring in *Parashat Naso*,which will be read next week.

But even though the princes are given an honorable place in our *parasha*,when the people need them, they are not there for them: through all the sins and falls in the wilderness, there is no mention of the tribal princes whatsoever. Even with the sin of the spies, when each tribe sent a representative to scout out the land, it was not the princes who were sent, but "the chiefs of the children of Israel" (*Bamidbar* 13:3).

In fact, the princes were replaced de facto long before that, a very short time after our *parasha*: after only two failures – the sin of the murmurers and the sin at Kivrot ha-Ta'ava – seventy elders are appointed to assist Moshe in leading the people:

And the Lord said to Moshe: Gather to Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people, and officers over them; and take them to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you. And I will come down and speak with you there; and I will take of the spirit which is upon you and will put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you bear it not yourself alone. (*Bamidbar* 11:16-17)

However, just like the princes, the seventy elders are also not mentioned in connection with the rest of the troubles that beset the people in the wilderness. They too are silent and disappear. The journey in the wilderness is accompanied by an acute leadership problem. While this did not present an issue when everything was going smoothly, the journey in the wilderness was not easy at all.

The many difficulties of the journey were not only due to the physical challenge of the wilderness. They stemmed from the fact that the journey was intended to serve as a process through which the people of Israel would transform from being slaves in Egypt to being servants of God in the Land of Israel and in the Temple. When you want to go through a process in which you undergo a change, and especially when it is so significant and profound, the process must take time. In this vein, Rav Amital *zt"l* would say that there are two lies: "Peace now" and "Mashiach now" – because neither of these will happen until we undergo a long and significant process.

The people of Israel in the wilderness thought the process would be quick and simple, and it is possible that this recklessness, and the desire for everything to be immediate, is what caused the sin of the calf and all the other sins in the wilderness. God teaches the people that the process takes time, and that the road to significant change will not be smooth but will include many ups and downs.

**Learning from the Tragedy**

The great initial success that turned so quickly into a resounding failure is the great tragedy of the book of *Bamidbar.* But the lesson learned from that tragedy is extremely important – that in order for significant things to happen, you have to go through a long, deep process; there are no shortcuts.

What was true in the days of the wilderness is also true for us today. It is true that we are in a difficult situation and under internal and external threats, but we must understand that the State of Israel has existed for only seventy-two years, and from a historical perspective, this is a very short time. Thus, it is possible – and very likely – that we have not yet reached the ideal situation. It takes time.

In addition to the importance of time, we must internalize the need to conduct in-depth processes, and not be satisfied with immediate and superficial actions. There is a well-known paradox that always prevents in-depth processes from starting: when the situation in the country is good, people say there is no need for any process; and when we are at war, as now [Operation Guardian of the Walls], they say there is no time to engage in in-depth processes.

There is no lack of areas in which we need deep processes, both spiritually and socio-politically, "and if not now – when?"

May it be God's will that just as the people of Israel eventually went through the process and entered the Land of Israel, so we too will have the privilege of progressing in the right and appropriate way, and will have the privilege of the coming of the Redeemer and the building of the Temple.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on *Shabbat Parashat Bamidbar* 5781.]