YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT NASO**

**Divine Perspective vs. Human Perspective**

There are some Torah passages that seem “unlucky” when it comes to the volume of discussion devoted to them. Mountains of exegesis have been written about the Revelation at Sinai, the Exodus from Egypt, and identifying Moshe’s sin for which he was held back from entering the Promised Land. Innumerable works have addressed the 613 *mitzvot*, and especially the passage known as the Ten Commandments. In this *shiur* I wish to address some “lower profile” passages that have not had reams of commentary created out of every word. We will start with the order of the vessels of the *Mishkan*; from there we will proceed to the order of journeys and encampments of Bnei Yisrael in the wilderness; and then we will briefly look at the order of the stones of the *efod* and the breastplate. I believe that through these discussions, we will detect a theme common to many different parts of the Torah, offering a conceptual framework for units consisting of lists of elements.

**The *Mishkan***

A cursory look at the structure of the *Mishkan* shows that it is built on an east-west axis; the entrance is on the eastern side, and the level of holiness increases as one moves westward. Upon entering via the gate of the courtyard, one encounters the *Mizbeach* (sacrificial altar) and then the entrance to the Sanctuary. Inside the Sanctuary is the incense altar, and then, still further in, the *Shulchan* (Table) and the *Menora*. Continuing westward, one encounters the entrance to the *Kodesh Ha-Kodashim*, within which lies the *Aron* (Ark) with its cover and the *keruvim*.

Corresponding to this structure, the Rambam writes that the vessels of the *Mishkan* are likewise oriented on an east-west axis: “The length and width of all the vessels in the Sanctuary paralleled the length and width of the Sanctuary…” (*Hilkhot Beit Ha-Bechira* 3:12), with the exception of the *Aron*.[[1]](#footnote-1) The fact that the *Aron* stands perpendicular to the axis of the *Mishkan* makes sense: it is the holiest place in the *Mishkan*, and the other vessels all lead towards it.

The seemingly whole and perfect picture that we have described has one conspicuous exception: the *Mizbeach*. The ramp leading up to the altar is located on the southern side and not, as we might have expected, on the eastern side. Its positioning means the *Mizbeach* obstructs the entrance to the Sanctuary, rather than merging into the general structure and orientation. We might suggest that the *Mizbeach* is in fact just like the other vessels in this regard, insofar as the activities surrounding it are carried out on the southern side, just as the activities surrounding the *Shulchan* – and perhaps the *Menora* as well – are carried out on the north-south axis. However, it would have made more sense for the ramp to lie on the east-west axis; it is an integral part of the altar[[2]](#footnote-2) and should have been positioned on the central axis like the other vessels.

Closer examination of the laws pertaining to the *Mizbeach* gives rise to another question regarding its direction. The Mishna (*Zevachim* 5:3; 53a) stipulates that after ascending the ramp, the *kohanim* should turn to the right (eastward) and proceed to encircle the altar counterclockwise. The Gemara offers the following principle in explanation: “All the turns that you make should be only to the right” (*Yoma* 15b). However, specifically in light of that principle, it seems it would have made more sense for the *kohanim* to make the first turn to the left, so that all four of the remaining turns would be to the right! Obviously, we might posit that only when both directions are an option is one required to show preference for a right turn, and that when it is only possible to turn left, there is no problem in doing so. However, I will propose a different, more fundamental answer below.

In order to understand the strange positioning of the *Mizbeach* and the direction of its encirclement, let us consider another “less popular” Torah passage: the description of the tribes’ encampment in the wilderness.

**Each person according to his camp**

Israel’s camp in the wilderness comprises four groups of tribes, with three tribes in each group. We will first examine how the tribes are divided into these groups, and then how the arrangement of their encampment is established.

Theoretically, the tribes should be arranged in their birth order, with the children of each mother grouped together. This is the order of the list of Yaakov’s offspring (minus Yosef) at the beginning of *Parashat Shemot* (*Shemot* 1:2-4), and it is also how they appear in *Parashat Vayishlach*:

The sons of Leah – Yaakov’s firstborn, Reuven; and Shimon and Levi and Yehuda and Yissakhar and Zevulun. The sons of Rachel – Yosef and Binyamin. And the sons of Bilha, Rachel’s handmaid – Dan and Naphtali. And the sons of Zilpa, Leah’s handmaid – Gad and Asher.” (*Bereishit* 35:24-26)

The tribe of Levi is not included in the list in *Sefer Bamidbar*, and it is not part of the Israelite encampment. Instead, the tribe of Yosef is divided into two – Ephraim and Menashe – in order to arrive at the total of twelve. When the Torah sets forth how the tribes are to be divided into four groups, one of which will camp on each of the four sides of the *Mishkan*, it has each group led by the firstborn of one of the four mothers. Obviously, four mothers produced four firstborn sons: Reuven is the firstborn of Leah; Yosef is the firstborn of Rachel; Gad is the firstborn of Zilpa; and Dan is the firstborn of Bilha. However, Reuven’s birthright is divided into three parts: the title of “firstborn” remains with Reuven himself; Yosef receives the double portion of the inheritance; and the kingship is handed to Yehuda.[[3]](#footnote-3) In total, then, there are five firstborn sons who could potentially lead groups of tribes: Reuven, Yehuda, Ephraim (who receives Yosef’s birthright – *Bereishit* 48:19), Gad, and Dan.

If we try to divide the tribes into four groups based on their birth order, with a firstborn heading each group, we end up with the following initial division:

* Reuven, Shimon, Levi
* Yehuda, Yissakhar, Zevulun
* Ephraim, Menashe, Binyamin
* Gad, Asher, Dan, Naphtali

Since the sons of Leah are born before the sons of Rachel and thus take precedence over them, we would expect that the sons of Zilpa, Leah’s handmaid, would be counted before the sons of Zilpa, Rachel’s handmaid, and hence Gad and Asher appear in this initial list before Dan and Naphtali.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, since the tribe of Levi is not counted in this context, he is replaced in the first group by the tribe of Gad, firstborn of Zilpa, so that we have four groups of three each. The tribe of Dan, firstborn of Bilha, is then upgraded to be the head of his group, maintaining the model of a firstborn leading each of the four groups, and the order of the group comprising (most of) the sons of the handmaids is therefore Dan, Asher, and Naphtali.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Now that we understand how the tribes are divided into groups, let us try to understand the order of their encampment.

The simplest way to explain the encampment of the tribes is to look at why each group holds its specific location: Why does Yehuda camp to the east of the *Mishkan*; what is the connection between Reuven and the south; and how could we have guessed that Dan would camp to the north? However, in this *shiur* we shall take a different and somewhat innovative approach to the question: rather than examining on an individual basis which direction each tribe occupied in relation to the *Mishkan*, we will try to understand the overall picture of the Israelite encampment.

It is easy to see that the four groups are arranged in order of birth. If we start our survey from the group headed by Reuven, on the southern side, and then proceed counter-clockwise, we encounter all the tribes in their birth order (with the exception of Levi being replaced by Gad, as discussed above).[[6]](#footnote-6) At the same time, the groups of tribes can also be listed in a different order (and this is how they appear in the Torah): if we start with the group headed by Yehuda, on the eastern side, and proceed clockwise, we encounter the tribes in order of their status: first the group headed by Yehuda, who is the leader of the brothers; then the group headed by Reuven, the firstborn; then the two tribes of Yosef, firstborn of Rachel and inheritor of a double portion; and finally, Dan and the sons of the handmaids.

We can identify the same order within the camp of the *leviim*. The most important *leviim* are, of course, Moshe, Aharon, and Aharon’s sons – the *kohanim*, who are encamped on the eastern side. Proceeding clockwise from them, we come to the next most important group: the sons of *Kehat*, who carry the *Aron*, are on the southern side. Next are the sons of Gershon – who bear the *Mishkan*, and who are encamped on the west. Finally, the sons of Merari, who carry the beams, are encamped on the northern side. Thus, we see that both in the outer Israelite camp and in the inner Levite camp, the tribes are arranged in order of importance if we start on the eastern side and proceed clockwise.

Now let us go back to the *Mizbeach*. We questioned above why, when a *kohen* encircles the *Mizbeach*, all his turns (except the first one) must be made to the left, despite the general principle that “all the turns that you make should be to the right.” If we once again adopt the overall perspective that aided us in analyzing the encampment, we find that the *kohen* ascends the *Mizbeach* from the south, and then starts to encircle it counterclockwise. As noted, there are two different ways of surveying the groups of tribes in the Israelite camp: if one starts in the south, the direction of the circle (in birth order) will be counterclockwise; if we start in the east, the direction of the circle (in order of importance) will be clockwise. The Levite camp is arranged in order of importance when we start in the east and proceed clockwise. It seems that all these models share a common rule: when the Torah arranges groups in a circle, in clockwise order, the count should start from the east; when the groups are arranged in a circle in counterclockwise order, the count should start from the south. In other words, the east-west axis parallels a clockwise circle, while the north-south axis parallels a counterclockwise circle.

**Direction, encirclement, and revelation**

The Torah does not waste words. Each word is deliberate and meaningful, and our job is to try to understand its full meaning. Surely, then, the first two *parashot* of *Sefer Bamidbar*, which are almost completely devoted to descriptions of the directions of the journeying and encampment of Bnei Yisrael, serve a meaningful purpose. So far, we have explained the reason for the order of the encampment of the tribes; now we will try to understand its significance. Studying the meaning of the compass points and the directions of encirclement will help us understand why the *Mizbeach* is situated as it is, as well as shedding light on other units in the Torah that deal with similar themes.

As we have seen, the *Mishkan* was built on an east-west axis, with the degree of holiness increasing as one progresses westward. We might therefore suggest that the east-west axis is the axis of holiness. Many verses in the Torah provide support for this idea. When Lot separates from Avraham and journeys eastward to settle in Sedom, the Torah states: “Lot journeyed from the east (*mi-kedem*)” (*Bereishit* 13:11) and Rashi cites *Chazal*’s teaching: “He journeyed away from the ancient One (*kadmono*) of the world.” Based on what we have seen, this teaching does not conflict with the plain meaning of the text, since the direction of Lot’s journey – from west to east – does indeed represent a change (decrease) in the level of holiness. Similarly, after the sin of Adam and Chava, the *keruvim* are placed “*mi-kedem* *le-Gan Eden*,”to the east of the Garden of Eden; furthermore, the winds that God causes to blow tend to be easterly winds, as in the plagues in Egypt, the splitting of the sea, the quails in the wilderness, and so on. The north-south axis, on the other hand, is a human axis. This is why the Gemara states: “One who places his bed on a north-south axis will have male children” (*Berakhot* 5b), and likewise, “One who wishes to be wise should set himself southward; one who wishes to be rich should set himself northward” (*Bava Batra* 25b). What Avraham proposed to Lot was a division of the land on the north-south axis (this is the meaning of his suggestion, “If you go to the left, I will go to the right,” when the speaker is facing east) – in other words, a division on the human axis.[[7]](#footnote-7)

According to what we have said, it is clear why the *Mishkan* is built on the east-west axis, while the *Mizbeach* stands on the north-south axis. Unlike the *Mishkan* itself, representing God’s abode, as it were – “Let them make Me a Sanctuary that I may reside among them” – the *Mizbeach* is a meeting place between man and God. On the day of inauguration, God was revealed to the entire nation in the form of fire atop the *Mizbeach*, and the perpetual fire that burns thereafter symbolizes God’s constant presence amongst the nation. In fact, every sacrifice creates an encounter of sorts between man and God, with the fire that consumes the sacrifice showing that the sacrifice was accepted. It is therefore natural that the *Mizbeach* – in contrast to the *Mishkan* itself – should stand on the north-south axis.

We mentioned above that the north-south axis parallels a counterclockwise direction, while the east-west axis parallels encircling clockwise. If we look at the camp of Israel starting from the east – the side of the Divine Presence – and then move clockwise, we encounter the leading tribes in descending order of importance: Yehuda, Reuven, Ephraim, Dan. In contrast, if we start in the south – the human side – and move counter-clockwise, we encounter the tribes in order of their birth.

The direction of Bnei Yisrael’s entry into the Promised Land can be explained in the same way. Originally, they were supposed to fight an ordinary, earthly war against the Canaanites and then enter the land from the south. After the spies claimed that Bnei Yisrael would not be able to conquer the land, God led them through the wilderness, until they eventually entered from the eastern side, and in a miraculous manner: the Jordan River was split in half, and Yericho was conquered by miraculous means. Yericho, the easternmost city in the land, was declared “*cherem*” – in other words, it was prohibited for anyone to take or benefit from its spoils – because it recalled the sin of the spies that had necessitated the miraculous conquest from the east.

**The *Efod* and the *Choshen***

In *Parashat Tetzaveh*, the Torah instructs that the *Kohen Gadol* will bear the names of the tribes of Israel upon his person, inscribed on two different garments: the stones of the *efod*, and the stones of the *choshen*. Two parallel questions arise concerning the manner in which the names were engraved on these garments: First, which list of tribes was inscribed on each – did it include Levi and Yosef, or Ephraim and Menashe (without Levi)? Second, in which order are they written?

With regard to the order, the Torah states explicitly, “according to their birth (*ke-toldotam*)” (*Shemot* 28:10). This expression seems to suggest not only that they would be listed in order of birth, but also that Levi’s name should appear; otherwise, it should have said “according to their tribes (*ke-shivteihem*).” Indeed, the *Rishonim* concur that the names on the *efod* stones include Levi and Yosef, and not Ephraim and Menashe (e.g., Rambam, *Hilkhot Klei Ha-Mikdash* 9:9).[[8]](#footnote-8) The earliest source regarding the order of the tribes’ inscription on the *efod* is a *beraita* that appears in *Massekhet Sota*:

The *Kohen Gadol* had two precious stones on his shoulders, one on each side, and the names of the twelve tribes were written on them – six on one stone and six on the other stone, as it is written, “Six of their names on the one stone…” (*Shemot* 28:10). [This implies that only on] the second stone [were the names written] according to [the order of] their birth, but not according to their birth on the first, because Yehuda was [written] first… R. Chanina ben Gamliel says: [The names] were not divided on the stones of the *efod* the same way they were divided in [the list at the beginning of] *Sefer Bamidbar*. Rather, the way they were divided in *Sefer Shemot*. How [were they written]? The sons of Leah in order; the sons of Rachel [on the other stone], one on one side and one on the other side; and the names of the handmaids in the middle. But then how can I understand [the expression]: “according to their birth”? [It means] as they were named by their father [Yaakov], rather than as Moshe referred to them: ‘Reuven,’ rather than ‘Reuveni’…. (*Sota* 36a)

The usual way of understanding this Gemara is that the *Tannaim* disagreed only regarding the order in which the names of the tribes are inscribed on the *choshen*: according to the *Tanna Kama*, they are written in accordance with birth order, with the exception of Yehuda, who is written first; R. Chanina ben Gamliel, on the other hand, maintains that they are listed in accordance with the mothers – the first stone holds the names of Leah’s sons, and the second stone begins and ends with the sons of Rachel, with the sons of the handmaids in the middle.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, we might suggest that their disagreement also involves the more fundamental question of whether the list includes the names Levi and Yosef or Ephraim and Menashe. R. Chanina ben Gamliel uses the word *chalukin* (divided), rather than *sedurim* (ordered), which may suggest that the names of the tribes, too, and not just their order of appearance, follows the beginning of *Sefer Shemot*; therefore, the names that appear are Levi and Yosef – unlike in *Sefer Bamidbar*, where Ephraim and Menashe appear instead. Perhaps (although this is not necessarily so) the *Tanna Kama* disagrees with R. Chanina in this regard, too, and in his view, the names that appear on the *efod* are Ephraim and Menashe, rather than Levi and Yosef.

In contrast to the inscription of the names of the tribes on the stones of the *efod*, the Torah makes no stipulation regarding their order on the stones of the *choshen*. According to the Rambam, the names appear on the *choshen* in accordance with their birth order, like on the stones of the *efod* (*Hilkhot Klei Ha-Mikdash* 9:7; Rashi, too, on *Shemot* 28:21). However, the *Sefer Ha-Zohar* (*Pekudei* 230a) and the *Teshuvot Ha-Geonim* (*Harkabi*, *siman* 4) draw a comparison between the special structure of the *choshen* – twelve stones in four groups of three – and the order of the tribes’ encampment in the wilderness. According to this interpretation, there may be a dual difference between the *choshen* and the *efod*: first, the order of the tribes on each, and second, the names Levi and Yosef on the *efod* vs. the names Ephraim and Menashe on the *choshen*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The difference between the *choshen* and the *efod* can also be explained in light of what we have said above. The tribes were listed on the stones of the *efod* in accordance with their birth order; hence, the *efod* symbolizes the original state, in which there was no difference between Levi, Yosef, and the other sons of Yaakov. In contrast to the *efod*, whose stones were inscribed with the names of the sons of Yaakov, the *chosen* is inscribed with the names of the tribes. In the camp of Israel in the wilderness, with the *Mikdash* – the Divine Presence – in the midst of the camp – there is a shift from birth order to order of importance. Similarly, on the *choshen*, which contains the *urim ve-tumim*, the tribes are inscribed in order of holiness and importance, and therefore the order there follows the order of their encampment.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. The direction of the *Menora* is a matter of dispute among the *Tannaim*, and it is codified differently by Rambam and Ra’avad. According to the Rambam, the *Menora* stood perpendicular to the general layout of the Sanctuary; in his view, only the *Shulchan* was parallel to the structure of the Sanctuary (since both the *Menora* and the *Aron* were perpendicular to it, and the two altars are both square structures). In light of this, the Rambam’s language is rather surprising: “The *Shulchan*… stands with its length and width paralleling those of the Sanctuary, and likewise all other vessels of the *Mikdash*: their length and width parallel those of the Sanctuary….” However, this is not the place for further analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although there was a small gap between them, in many respects the ramp is part of the *Mizbeach*. Even when the Rambam mentions this gap, he makes a point of noting the purpose it served: “so that the limbs [of the sacrifices] would have to be tossed to reach the altar [as required by *Zevachim* 62b]” (*Hilkhot Beit Ha-Bechira* 2:13). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* (5:1-2) calls Reuven “Yisrael’s firstborn” and then states that the birthright was taken from him and divided between Yosef and Yehuda. Immediately following this description, however, the text repeats: “The sons of Reuven, Yisrael’s firstborn” (v. 3). This indicates clearly that Reuven retains the title as “Yisrael’s firstborn” even after he is stripped of the double inheritance and the kingship. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The order of the tribes in the *parashot* of *Vayishlach* and *Shemot* rests solely on their birth order, with Rachel taking precedence over the handmaids since she is an “original wife” of Yaakov. For this reason, the sons of Bilha take precedence over the sons of Zilpa – since the former were born earlier. When it comes to the order of encampment, the criterion of status comes into play, and according to this criterion, Zilpa takes precedence over Bilha. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Once Gad moves over to the group of Reuven and Shimon, we are left with the sons of the handmaids in jumbled order – even when Gad returns to his natural place among them. It is for this reason that in the first census in *Parashat Bamidbar*, the order of the sons of the handmaids is Dan, Asher, Gad, Naphtali. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Here, too, the Torah groups the sons of each mother together. Among the *Acharonim* there are some who maintain that in relation to the names of the tribes as inscribed on the stones of the *choshen* (the breastplate of the *Kohen Gadol*), too, with the command that the be written “*ke-toldotam*,” meaning “according to their birth,” the sons of each mother are to be grouped together. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. With this explanation we can also explain the discussion that appears in several places in the Gemara concerning the importance of the compass directions (see *Gittin* 31b, *Bava Batra* 25b, *Eruvin* 65a, and more). It can be demonstrated that the various *Amoraim* are consistent in their attitudes towards the compass directions: Mar Ukva (who served as Exilarch) and Rav Nachman bar Yaakov maintain that an easterly wind is the strongest, while Geniva, who argued against Mar Ukva, was convinced that a southerly wind is the strongest. We may assume the Gemara would not bother to record a debate that is purely meteorological; it seems instead that each direction represents a certain idea, and the dispute in fact revolves around the importance of that idea. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This consensus has one exception – the view of the *Geonim*, which we will discuss below. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A) I have explained the Gemara here in the simplest and most literal way, and as Rashi explains it. The *Rishonim* offer different interpretations so as to accord with the Rambam’s view.

B) The *Rishonim* disagree as to how the names of the twelve tribes are divided over the stones of the *efod*: Rashi (*Shemot* 28:10) maintains that the first six tribes are written on the first stone, and the remaining six on the other. The Rambam posits that the tribes are written on the two stones in alternating order: Yehuda on the first stone, Reuven on the other, Shimon on the first, and so on (*Hilkhot Klei Ha-Mikdash* 9:9). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A) *Teshuvot Ha-Geonim* states that the order of the names of the tribes on the *Kohen Gadol’s* garments followed the order of their encampment (with no distinction between the *efod* and the *choshen*). According to the *Geonim*, then, the names Ephraim and Menashe appeared on both garments instead of Levi and Yosef. However, even if we accept that the order of the names on the *choshen* followed the order of the encampment, we might still draw a distinction between the *efod* and the *choshen*, with Levi appearing on the former but not on the latter. The same may be suggested with regard to the *Zohar*, which makes explicit mention only of the *choshen*, in order not to go against the Gemara which seems to suggest that Levi appeared on the stones of the *efod* (“according to their birth”).

B) *Teshuvot Ha-Geonim* states explicitly that the order of the tribes on the *efod* and on the *choshen* was “according to the order of their growing up (*gedilatam*),” but this is quite surprising, since the very same responsum goes on to list a different order for the *efod* than for the *choshen*. Perhaps with regard to the *choshen* we should read *gedulatam* (their size) rather than *gedilatam*; this would explain why, according to the *Geonim*, the order of the tribes on the *choshen* follows the order of their encampment, while the order on the *efod* is in accordance with their birth. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)