**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BAMIDBAR**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Bamidbar tells of the census which God commanded Moshe to conduct before *Benei Yisrael*’s departure from Mount Sinai. Moshe was commanded to count the males aged twenty and above, and to conduct a separate census counting the male *Leviyim* from the age of one month (3:15).

Rashi (3:16), citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, comments that the command to count even the infants of the tribe of Levi posed a logistical problem: “Moshe said before the Almighty: How will I enter all their houses and into their tents to know the number of their young children?” God replied by instructing Moshe to stand at the entrance of every Levite tent, and God would then prophetically inform Moshe of the number of family members living in that home.

It is perhaps significant that the Midrash could not even conceive of the possibility of Moshe entering the *Leviyim*’s tents in order to obtain information needed for the census. A census underscores the collective nature of the group, the fact that all members of the group blend together to form a single, organic entity. When each person is counted as one member of a certain group, he loses, to some extent, his personal identity, as his identified as part of that group. In the context of a collective unit, the danger exists that the members would allow themselves to enter into each other’s “tent,” to get involved in each other’s private affairs. As they are all part of the same group, they might assume that each person’s private affairs are directly relevant to the entire group, and thus they can meddle and get involved in each other’s personal matters. The Midrash here reminds us that although we are all mutually responsible for one another, and we are all part of one nation with a shared mission and destiny, nevertheless, we must respect the privacy and individuality of each member. We have no right to “enter the tent” of any member of our nation, to assume the right to involve ourselves in their affairs due to our shared membership in *Kelal Yisrael*. Even as we cherish our close relationship to each other, and commit ourselves unconditionally to help and assist one another whenever needed, we must remain outside each other’s “tent,” and allow all our fellow Jews the opportunity to express and develop their unique individuality and conduct their private affairs in the manner that they see fit.

Sunday

In the beginning of Parashat Bamidbar, the Torah lists the names of the tribal leaders appointed to assist Moshe and Aharon in counting *Benei Yisrael*. The leader of the tribe of Gad named by the Torah was Elyasaf ben Deuel (1:14), which is also the name mentioned later, in Parashat Naso (7:42), where the Torah describes the special offerings brought by the tribal leaders when the *Mishkan* was consecrated. However, elsewhere in Parashat Bamidbar (2:14), in describing the formation of the various tribes during travel and encampment, the Torah refers to the leader of Gad as Elyasaf ben Reuel. Meaning, the *dalet* there is replaced by the *reish*, yielding “Reuel” instead of “Deuel.”

The Chida, in his [*Chomat Anakh* commentary](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=39746&st=&pgnum=13), cites the *Imrei Noam* (Parashat Vayetze) as explaining that the name “Deuel” was changed to “Reuel” in order to allude to the phrase “*re’a Kel*” – “God’s confidant.” This allusion is a reference to Moshe Rabbenu, the Almighty’s closest “confidant,” so-to-speak, who was buried in the territory of the tribe of Gad (see Rashi to Devarim 33:21). The *Imrei Noam* explains that Gad earned this special privilege because this tribe’s members did not protest the arrangement assigned to them in the wilderness. As we read here in Parashat Bamidbar (chapter 2), the Israelite camp consisted of four groups of three tribes each, with one tribe named the leader of each group. Gad was assigned to the group led by Reuven, rather than being named a leader of a group. This tribe could have protested this assignment, as it was the only tribe whose founder was a firstborn of one of Yaakov’s wives but was not named a leader. Reuven (Leah’s firstborn), Efrayim (the official “firstborn” of Yosef, who was Rachel’s firstborn) and Dan (Bilha’s firstborn) where all named leaders, but Gad, whom we would have expected to be named the fourth leader, was replaced, so-to-speak, by Yehuda. As such, the tribe of Gad had a legitimate grievance against Moshe for losing its leadership status to Yehuda. But the tribe members accepted God’s command without complaint, and for this they were rewarded with the special privilege of having Moshe buried in their tribe’s territory. The Torah alludes to this special privilege in the context of the camp’s arrangement, through which Gad earned this distinction, by changing the name of Gad’s leader from “Elyasaf ben Deuel” to Elyasaf ben **Reuel**,” indicating that God’s “confidant,” Moshe Rabbenu, was buried in this tribe’s territory.

Whether or not one accepts this explanation as the actual reason behind the change from “Deuel” to “Reuel,” underlying the *Imrei Noam*’s insight is a simple, real-life truism: leaders harbor special feelings of affinity for those constituents who avoid petty arguments and complaints. The *Imrei Noam* here teaches that Gad’s decision to accept the camp’s arrangement without protest resulted in a special bond between this tribe and Moshe. A leader is burdened with a wide range of responsibilities in caring for the people under his charge, and it is all but impossible to satisfy each and every individual’s personal preferences and wishes. It is thus only natural that the leader will feel special affection for those who make his job easier, or at least less difficult, by accepting less-than-ideal circumstances without complaint, by declining to argue and protest even when they have a valid claim.

The *Imrei Noam*’s comments remind us to refrain from unnecessary, petty complaints, to accept situations even if they are not precisely to our liking, rather than childishly demanding and insisting upon every preference and every privilege to which we feel – even rightfully – entitled. Living together with people as a family, as a community, and as a nation means that our individual preferences will not always be met, and this reality must be accepted with humility and maturity, so that we can live together in peace and harmony, without unnecessary and damaging strife.

Monday

The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 1:6) makes the following remark in its comments to the opening verse of Sefer Bamidbar, where it explains the significance of the fact that the Torah was given to *Benei Yisrael* in a desolate wilderness: “Anyone who does not make himself ‘*hefker*’ [‘ownerless’] like a desert is unable to acquire the Torah.”

An “ownerless” territory is one which anyone can come along and develop without any difficulty or obstacles to overcome. If one wishes to settle and take over an area that is already developed, he will face considerable challenges in his attempt to demolish or undo what is already there so he can build the kind of structure he wishes in the style that he wishes. *Chazal* here teach that we must approach Torah with an “ownerless” mindset, meaning, without preconceived notions and without predispositions. We must make ourselves “*hefker*” – humbly open to embrace and practice whatever the Torah instructs and commands, without predetermined ideas that could stand in the way.

One of the applications of this “*hefker*” concept is the need to avoid preconceptions of what Torah life looks like and what it requires of us. The laws, values and goals of the Torah impose different obligations upon different people, and different obligations upon any given individual in different situations and at different stages of life. Making ourselves “*hefker*” in relation to Torah means, among other things, being open to the different responsibilities that we might need to assume at various different times, and the kinds of obligations which we must fulfill that might differ from those of others. While we are all certainly bound by the same halakhic code at all times, nevertheless, different people are expected to focus on different areas at different stages. A person’s obligations during his youth when he is unencumbered by family responsibilities will, quite obviously, differ from his or her obligations later in life, when there is a family to tend to, and these demands will of course differ from one’s responsibilities during old age. Likewise, a person with one set of talents will bear different obligations than those people who have different areas of skill. In order to “acquire” our unique share in Torah, we need to approach Torah life with a “*hefker*” mindset, acknowledging that the Torah will demand different things from different people at different times, and being prepared at any moment to fully accept and fulfill the obligations that the Torah imposes upon us on any given occasion.

Tuesday

Parashat Bamidbar begins with the census that God commanded Moshe to conduct at Mount Sinai approximately one year after the Exodus. Many writers addressed the question as to the purpose of the census, in consideration of the fact that a census had been taken just several months earlier. As we read towards the end of Sefer Shemot (38:25-28), the men among *Benei Yisrael* were commanded to donate a half-shekel of silver which served both as a means of counting the nation, and to provide the silver needed for the construction of the *Mishkan*. Now, just several months later, *Benei Yisrael* are counted again, and the obvious question arises as to why this was necessary. Rashi, in his opening comments to Sefer Bamidbar, writes based on the Midrash that God, in His great love for *Benei Yisrael*, wanted them to be counted at every significant moment during this early, formative period of their history. He thus ordered that they be counted in preparation for the *Mishkan*’s construction, which took place after the sin of the golden calf, and now, after the *Mishkan* was completed and He was establishing His residence among them, He wanted an additional census conducted.

*Da’at Zekeinim* cites a different answer from Rabbenu Yosef Bekhor Shor, who noted that there was a fundamental difference between the two censuses. At the end of Sefer Shemot, a simple census was taken of the entire nation, while here, in Parashat Bamidbar, the census was taken by tribe. In addition to determining the total number of men in the nation, the census here also counted the population of each individual tribe, as God was now commanding the nation to arrange itself according to tribe around the *Mishkan* during travel and encampment. Thus, this second census did not simply repeat the first, and it served a different purpose.

We might add that indeed, tribal identity seems to emerge as an important theme in the early part of Sefer Bamidbar, where the Torah tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s preparations for travel. The book begins with God naming the tribal leaders who were to assist Moshe and Aharon in conducting the census, right away setting a tone of tribal affiliation. We then read the results of the census, which are presented on a tribe-by-tribe basis, and are followed by the description of the nation’s arrangement during encampment and travel, emphasizing each tribe’s population and leader, and that each tribe had its own unique banner. The development of this theme might also answer the question many have asked concerning the special offerings brought by the tribal leaders on the occasion of the *Mishkan*’s inauguration, which the Torah tells later, in Parashat Naso (chapter 7). Seemingly, this section should have appeared in Sefer Vayikra, specifically, in Parashat Shemini, which tells of the events that took place at the time of the *Mishkan*’s consecration. The answer, perhaps, is that the theme of tribal affiliation is developed specifically here, in Sefer Bamidbar. Throughout Sefer Shemot and Sefer Vayikra, there is very little mention of the different tribes of Israel; the Torah speaks of *Benei Yisrael* as a single entity, with only the *kohanim* being designated for a unique status. Now, in Sefer Bamidbar, the Torah seeks to emphasize the individual identities of all the tribes, and so in this context, it highlights the individual offerings brought by each tribal leader, representing his tribe. Each brought an offering on a separate day, because each tribe was now assuming its unique importance and individual quality.

The likely reason for this emphasis here in Sefer Bamidbar has to do with the fact that *Benei Yisrael* were now preparing for what was to be their journey to *Eretz Yisrael*. Although they ended up spending forty years wandering in the wilderness, their departure from Sinai was intended to lead them directly to the Land of Israel, a process that was frustrated by a series of mistakes made by the people, particularly, the sin of the spies. After forging their collective national identity at Mount Sinai, joining together to receive the Torah and then again to construct the *Mishkan*, the time now came for them to forge individual tribal identities in preparation for their residence in *Eretz Yisrael*. Whereas in Sinai the people encamped altogether at the foot of the mountain, in the Land of Israel they would be dispersed and divided by vast distances. They would, of course, continue maintaining their collective identity through the *Beit Ha-mikdash* – the successor, so-to-speak, of the *Mishkan* – but they would also, by necessity, be required to forge individual geographic identities. Members of each tribe would settle in the same region and develop their own unique qualities and subculture within the multicolored fabric of *Am Yisrael*. In preparation for this inevitable eventuality, *Benei Yisrael* already in the wilderness were to travel and encamp according to tribes, and to strongly identify with their individual tribes even as they strongly identified with the collective entity of *Benei Yisrael*. This sense of tribal affiliation was a vital part of the people’s preparations for entering the Land of Israel, where they would live and serve God both as a single nation and as individual communities.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Bamidbar of God’s commands concerning *Benei Yisrael*’s arrangement as they journeyed and encamped in the wilderness. The commands are very specific, requiring the nation to divide into four groups of three tribes each, with each group positioned at a particular location around the *Mishkan* during encampment, and journeying in a particular sequence during travel. The Torah concludes this section by telling, “The Israelites did in accordance with everything the Lord commanded Moshe – so did they encamp by their banners and so did they journey…” (2:34).

The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 2:20) observes that the phrase “*ke-khol asher tziva Hashem et Moshe*” (“in accordance with all that the Lord commanded Moshe”) hearkens back to the account at the end of Sefer Shemot (39:42) of the *Mishkan*’s construction. There, too, the Torah tells that *Benei Yisrael* did “*ke-khol asher tziva Hashem et Moshe*.” This parallel prompts the Midrash to comment, “The banners are beloved before the Almighty, for it says regarding them, ‘as the Lord commanded Moshe,’ just as is written in regard to the construction of the *Mishkan*.” The parallel formulation indicates that the arrangement of the Israelite camp according to banners is as precious to God as the construction of the *Mishkan*.

The Midrash here teaches us that our compliance with God’s laws outside the *Mishkan*, in the “camp,” as we go about our daily lives, is as significant and valuable as our service to Him inside the “*Mishkan*,” when we are involved in matters of sanctity. God cherishes our prayers and study, our devotion to the “*Mishkan*” in its various forms, where we encounter and experience *kedusha* directly, but He cherishes no less the way we conduct our ordinary, mundane affairs in the “camp,” outside the “*Mishkan*,” when we live in accordance with the laws, principles and values of the Torah. *Benei Yisrael*’s compliance with the laws concerning the *Mishkan* and their compliance with the laws concerning the banners are described with the same formulation because they are both beloved by God, who wants us to serve Him devotedly both inside the *Mishkan*, through direct involvement in sacred matters, and also outside the *Mishkan*, by applying the Torah to our mundane affairs.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Bamidbar tells of the process whereby the firstborns of *Benei Yisrael* were substituted by the tribe of Levi. As God explains to Moshe (3:12-13), the firstborns were consecrated on the night of the Exodus when He protected them from the plague that killed the Egyptian firstborns. He then later chose to replace the firstborns with the *Leviyim*. In order for this to happen, God commanded Moshe to count the *Leviyim* and then count all the firstborn in the nation. These censuses found that there were 273 more firstborns than *Leviyim* (3:46). God then instructed that as one Levi replaced one firstborn, the extra 273 firstborns needed to “redeem” themselves by paying a sum of five shekels. This money, God commanded, was to be given to Aharon and his sons (3:48).

Rav Meir Simcha Ha-kohen, in his *Meshekh Chokhma*, cites the Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 4:10) as commenting that this money was divided into two equal portions, one of which was given to Aharon, and the other to his two sons (Elazar and Itamar). When God commanded giving the money to Aharon and his sons, He meant that half should go to Aharon, and the other half to his sons. Indeed (as Rav Meir Simcha cites earlier), there are also other contexts in which a command to give something “to Aharon and to his sons” requires dividing the item in question into two equal halves. In Masekhet Bava Batra (143a), for example, the Gemara comments that the *lechem ha-panim* – the special bread baked in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* – was to be divided into two equal portions, one of which went to the *kohen gadol* and the other to the other *kohanim*. Here, too, the Midrash explains that half of the firstborns’ redemption money was given to Aharon, and the other half to his sons.

Rav Meir Simcha adds that this method of distribution is consistent with the laws of *pidyon ha-bein* – the required “redemption” of a firstborn son – established by the Gemara in Masekhet Bekhorot (51b). The obligation of *pidyon ha-bein* requires giving five shekels to a *kohen*, but the Gemara establishes that one may fulfill the obligation by dividing this money among several different *kohanim*. Even though no single *kohen* receives the required amount, nevertheless, the *mitzva* is fulfilled since the required sum was given to *kohanim*. Rav Meir Simcha notes that this ruling can be proven from the redemption that took place in the wilderness, when the redemption money was divided into two equal halves. As precisely 273 firstborns were required to make this payment, it turns out that 272 of those payments were evenly divided between Aharon and his sons, but the 273rd then had to be split into two equal parts. The odd number of firstborns requiring redemption necessitated splitting one firstborn’s payment into two portions. This would seemingly prove that one fulfills his *pidyon ha-bein* obligation even if he divides the payment among two or more *kohanim*.

Interestingly, however, the *Hafla’a* (Rav Pinchas Horowitz), in his *Panim Yafot* commentary, disagrees with the Midrash’s reading. He writes that the redemption money specifically could not be divided into two equal portions, since each firstborn’s payment had to be given in full to a single recipient. According to the *Panim Yafot*, then, God required dividing this money evenly among Aharon, Elazar and Itamar. The number 273 is divisible by three, and thus each firstborn was able to make his payment in full to one of the three *kohanim*.

Several later writers questioned the *Panim Yafot*’s reading, noting that it seems to contradict both the Midrash and the Gemara’s aforementioned ruling in Masekhet Bekhorot. (See Rav Chaim Shaul Kaufman’s [*Mishchat Shemen*, vol. 1, p. 314](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=47336&st=&pgnum=334).)

Friday

Yesterday, we noted the discussion among the commentators regarding the “redemption” of the firstborns among *Benei Yisrael* at Mount Sinai, which the Torah describes in Parashat Bamidbar. We read that the firstborns had initially been consecrated as God’s attendants in the *Mishkan*, but were replaced by the *Leviyim*. However, as the number of firstborns exceeded the number of *Leviyim*, it was necessary for the extra firstborns – 273 in number – to “redeem” themselves by each of them paying five shekels to Aharon and his sons. The *Panim Yafot* commentary claimed that this money was divided into three equal portions – each consisting of 91 payments of five shekels – and each of the three *kohanim* – Aharon and his two sons – received one portion. The distribution had to be done this way, the *Panim Yafot* wrote, because each firstborn had to make a complete payment to one *kohen*. If the firstborns’ payments were divided into two equal portions (as other commentators claimed), with one going to Aharon and the other to his sons, then the 273rd firstborn would have had to divide his payment among the two groups, which was not allowed.

As we mentioned, later writers questioned the *Panim Yafot*’s comments in light of the Gemara’s explicit ruling in Masekhet Bekhorot (51b) that the obligation of *pidyon ha-bein* – “redeeming” one’s firstborn son from a *kohen* – may be fulfilled even by dividing the required sum of money among several *kohanim*. The *Panim Yafot* clearly assumed that the payment must be made in full to one *kohen*, seemingly in direct contradiction with the Gemara’s ruling.

One answer that has been proposed to reconcile the *Panim Yafot*’s comments with the Gemara’s ruling is that the *Panim Yafot* understood the Gemara as referring only *be-di’avad* – after the fact. In his view, perhaps, although one fulfills the *mitzva* of *pidyon ha-bein* even if he divided the required payment among several *kohanim*, optimally, the payment should be made in full to a single *kohen*. Indeed, the *Panim Yafot*’s most illustrious disciple, the *Chatam Sofer*, writes in one of his responsa (Y.D. 297) that *pidyon ha-bein* should preferably be paid entirely to one *kohen*. Quite possibly, this was the view of the *Panim Yafot*, and he therefore insisted that each of the 273 firstborns in the wilderness needed to pay his redemption money to a single *kohen*. It should be noted, however, that the *Chokhmat Adam* (150:2) disputes the *Chatam Sofer*’s ruling, and maintains that even *le-chatekhila* (optimally), one may divide the *pidyon ha-bein* payment among several *kohanim*.

This entire question works off the assumption that the redemption of the 273 firstborns in the wilderness was subject to the same rules and guidelines that apply to the usual *pidyon ha-bein* performed for every firstborn. One might argue that the redemption of the firstborns at Sinai, at the time when their status of distinction was formally transferred to the *Leviyim*, stands separate and apart from the eternal obligation of *pidyon ha-bein*, and it is therefore not bound by the same detailed guidelines. Accordingly, Rav Meir Dan Platsky, in his *Keli Chemda* (Bamidbar 2:2), writes that in the view of the *Panim Yafot*, the special redemption required of the firstborns in Sinai could not be divided among several *kohanim*, and this in no way contradicts the Gemara’s explicit ruling that the regular *pidyon ha-bein* payment may be divided.

(See Rav Chaim Shaul Kaufman’s [*Mishchat Shemen*, vol. 1, pp. 314](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=47336&st=&pgnum=334)-316.)

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