



Parshas **Bamidbar - Shavuos Edition**

For the week ending 5 - 6 Sivan 5758
30 - 31 May 1998

Overview

The book of Bamidbar — “In the desert” — begins with Hashem commanding Moshe to take a census of all the men over the age of twenty — old enough for service. The count reveals just over 600,000. The Levi'im are counted separately later, because their service will be unique. They will be responsible for transporting the Mishkan and its furnishings and putting them together when the nation encamps. The Tribes of Israel, each with its banner, are arranged around the Mishkan in four sections: east, south, west and north. Since Levi is singled out, the tribe of Yosef is split into two tribes, Efraim and Menashe, so there will be four groups of three. When the nation travels, they march in a formation similar to the way they camp. A formal transfer is made between the first born and the Levi'im, whereby the Levi'im take over the role the firstborn would have had serving in the Mishkan if not for the sin of the golden calf. The transfer is made using all the 22,000 surveyed Levi'im from one month old and up. Only Levi'im between 30 and 50 will work in the Mishkan. The remaining firstborn sons are redeemed with silver, similar to the way we redeem our firstborn today. The sons of Levi are divided in three main families, Gershon, Kehas and Merari (besides the Kohanim – the special division from Kehas' family). The family of Kehas carried the menorah, the table, the altar and the Holy Ark. Because of their utmost sanctity, the ark and the altar are covered only by Aharon and his sons, before the Levi'im prepare them for travel.

Insights

THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE

“Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Yisrael” (Bamidbar 1:2)

Last time I was in America I went for a walk around the Warner Brothers store. It was amazing. All my childhood memories come to life. Original animation cells of “Lady and The Tramp” (a mere \$500). A Batmobile so real you could get a parking ticket for it. Bugs Bunny ashtrays, pajamas, cookie jars. I have never seen a store so full of things that I didn't need.

It was thirty years ago that American sociologist, Marshall Macluan coined the phrase “The Medium is The Message.” He diagnosed that Western society had replaced form with feeling. It wasn't so important what you said anymore, rather the way you said it. A former “B” movie actor could rise to be the most powerful man in the world. The entertainment industry had enshrined the principle that “feeling good” was the embodiment of the American dream. Feeling replaced thought as the vehicle of communication.

This week we celebrate Shavuos, the festival of the giving of the Torah. The Torah, as the blueprint of the world, is the ultimate expression of what reality is. Therefore, the way in which the Torah was given must also express a truth about the nature of reality.

The Torah was not given to the Jewish People as a group of individuals. Its giving required them to be a klal, a united entity, the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

When the Jewish People stood at Sinai they were “like one man with one heart” (Rashi).

Prepared by Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, Israel

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☎ 22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel

☎ 972-2-581-0315

fax: 972-2-581-2890

✉ info@ohr.org.il

☎ 38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA

☎ 1-212-213-3100

fax: 1-212-213-8717

✉ RZCorlin@aol.com or estern@Aol.com

☎ 613 Clark Avenue West, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 5V3, Canada

☎ 1-905-886-5730

fax: 1-905-886-6065

✉ Somayach@MSN.com

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Written and Compiled by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

General Editor: Rabbi Moshe Newman

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Interestingly, Rashi uses almost exactly the same phrase to describe Pharaoh and the Egyptian army at the crossing of the Sea: "With one heart like one man." A subtle reversal of the order. The Jewish People are "like one man with one heart." The Egyptians "with one heart like one man." What is the significance of this reversing of the word order?

The heart represents the raw matter of existence. The raw material which waits for an imprint, a form to define it. The heart is the medium. The nature of emotion is to be molded, to be channeled. Not to lead.

The form of something is its spiritual component. Its purpose. The form is the message.

A spoon, for example. A spoon consists of two parts. Its matter is the metal. Its form is its purpose: To scoop and stir. That's why it has a scoop at one end and a long handle. Its form expresses its purpose. The function of a thing is its spiritual dimension, its spiritual identity in the world.

The nature of physical things is to be passive. The nature of spiritual things is to be active. The shape of the spoon dominates the metal and defines it, not the reverse. That is the correct order of the world. Form shaping matter. The message shaping the medium.

The word for "man" in Hebrew is ish. Ish comes from the word aish meaning "fire." Fire symbolizes spirituality. It is the nature of fire to rise upwards; it is the nature of spirituality to aspire upwards. The nature of fire is to dominate; the nature of spirituality is to rule: A small nation imbued with a spiritual ideal can overcome a large nation which is apathetic and decadent. This has been the lesson of history. Someone with a spiritual motivation will ultimately rule over someone with a physical motivation because the physical desires inertia, to be passive, to take it easy.

When intellect dominates the emotions, when the message dominates the medium, then we have the very picture of how the Torah was given. "Like one man with one heart." The man — the intellect, the spiritual component leading the heart — the raw material, the medium.

However, when the heart dominates the mind, the medium becomes the message. This is the literal antithesis of the way the Torah was given.

Then you have a world where Bugs Bunny becomes the President.

THE GOOD BOOK

"In the desert" (1:1)

This week we start reading the Book of Bamidbar/Numbers. Bamidbar means "In the desert." Why was the Torah given in the desert?

The desert is the archetype of desolation, the antithesis of life and activity. The symbol of civilization, of the flow and vitality of life, is the city. A city consists of houses, and the houses, stones.

The letters of the alef-beis are like stones. Just as each stone by itself is devoid of life, but when combined together into a house they form a setting of life and vitality, so the letters of a word: By themselves they radiate no light or life, but built into words and sentences, sayings and utterances, they radiate the light of intellect that infuses life into man; that leads him and guides him.

"With the word of Hashem, the heavens were made." The entire world was created with the combination of the letters of the Hebrew aleph-beis. The letters and the words are spread out and dispersed over the whole face of the earth.

We have a choice. If, through these letters and words, we recognize Hashem in the world; if they are like beads of a necklace revealing the Godly thread that weaves the world into One, then the world is no longer a desolate wasteland, but a populous city vibrant with life and purpose.

However, if we fail to comprehend the writing of the Divine Hand, if we make no effort to assemble the letters of existence into words and sentences, then the world remains a desolate wilderness.

Picture two people reading the same book. One reads with insight and understanding; the other spews forth a jumble of letters and words without grasp or comprehension. The first reader kindles the light of wisdom that is in the words; he brings them to life. The second leaves behind him a trail of dead stones. The world is a large book. Fortunate is he who knows how to read and understand it.

PRELUDE

"In the desert" (1:1)

This year, Shabbos falls on the day before Shavuos. We go straight from Shabbos into Shavuos. Historically also, Shabbos was given to the Jewish People before the giving of the Torah. It was the power of Shabbos that brought us to Sinai: For Shabbos creates unity in the Jewish People. And unity among the Jewish People is a prerequisite for receiving the Torah. When the family sits together as one at the Shabbos table, we recreate that same unity.

If the unity that Shabbos creates is one way we prepare for receiving the Torah, another way is the self-abnegation that Shabbos represents: Instead of being full of ourselves, we make ourselves like the desert, void of all personal concerns. We free ourselves of the shackles and cares of the working week and dedicate ourselves to spiritual pursuits. All we wish is to be close to Hashem on this special day and do His will. Every Jew has this capability of self-denial which expresses itself in refraining from creative work on Shabbos.

Thus, Shabbos is a necessary prelude to the receiving of the Torah. As it says in the Haggadah of Pesach: "And He gave us the Shabbos and He brought us close to Mount Sinai."

Sources:

The Medium And The Message - Maharal, Rabbi Noach Orlowek
The Good Book - Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin - Torah U'Moadim
Prelude - Sfas Emes

Haftorah: Hoshea 2-1:22

THE SEA WALL

"But the limited number of the Children of Israel will become (as important) as the sand of the sea which is not measured nor counted" (12:1).

Israel is the smallest of the nations. Ten of its tribes, five-sixths of its number, have been completely lost to our sight. The remainder has been repeatedly battered by the storm-winds of history.

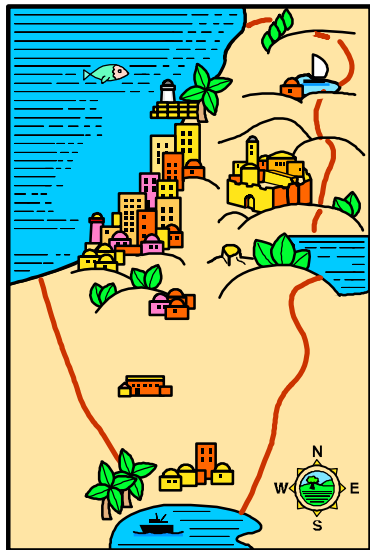
Numerically, we have little significance. And yet, it is this scattered remnant who are destined to be of vital importance to the nations of the world. Just as the sand on the seashore which seems so insignificant when considered grain by grain, yet holds back the mighty forces of the sea, so too the Jewish People, scattered amongst the nations, will form the mighty bulwark behind which a world, weary of blind dogma and rampant materialism, will ultimately find refuge.

(Shir Maon in Mayana Shel Torah)

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

THE TORAH AND THE LAND



In our Pesach Special we called attention to the arrangement of the long list of expressions of gratitude to Hashem in the "Dayenu" song which suggests that the gift of Torah was an indispensable prerequisite to the gift of the land of Israel. For our Shavuot Special, focusing on the Festival of the Giving of the Torah, we offer the following insight on the special dimension which Eretz Yisrael lends to the quality of Torah observance.

In the second chapter of the Shema which we recite each morning and evening we repeat Hashem's warning that turning away from Him to worship idols will result in being exiled from the land which He has given us. This is immediately followed by the commandments of tefillin and mezuzah.

This connection is explained by the Midrash (Sifri Parshas Eikev) with a parable.

A king became angry with his wife and sent her off to her parents' home. As he banished her he instructed her to continue wearing her royal jewelry even while she was away so that she would be familiar with them when she eventually returned to his palace.

In similar fashion Hashem instructed His beloved people as He banished them from His palace, Eretz Yisrael, to continue being distinguished with their mitzvos so that they would be familiar with them when they returned.

Tefillin and mezuzah are mitzvos which are not dependent on living in Eretz Yisrael, unlike the many mitzvos relating to agriculture, and they are as incumbent on a Jew outside of Eretz Yisrael as upon one in the land. Why then is this connection made between these mitzvos and the land?

The answer lies in the unique spiritual status of Eretz Yisrael, which is directly ruled by Hashem without the involvement of angels or any other heavenly forces. Mitzvos fulfilled in Eretz Yisrael therefore have the ultimate spiritual quality, alongside which those fulfilled outside of the land are of only secondary quality. This is communicated in the statement of our Sages (Sifri Parshas Re'eh) that living in Eretz Yisrael is equivalent to all the mitzvos of the Torah.

This unique status of Eretz Yisrael is also expressed in the land's sensitivity to sin. The Torah warns us that Eretz Yisrael is not like other lands and it will vomit out those who contaminate it (Vayikra 18:25). When the Kuttim (later known as the Samaritans) were brought to Eretz Yisrael by the Assyrian conqueror Sanheriv to replace the Ten Tribes he had exiled, they continued to worship idols and Hashem sent lions to devour them (see Melachim II chapter 17). In their native land they were not punished in such swift fashion, but Eretz Yisrael cannot tolerate idolatry.

Hashem sanctified the nation dwelling in His land by commanding them mitzvos and warned them that if they contaminate this land with idolatry or licentiousness the land will vomit them out.

"Love of the Land" is therefore not expressed by merely mouthing patriotic slogans but by maintaining a standard of loyalty to Hashem's Torah and living according to the moral standards set by the Torah, which will grant us the privilege of remaining in our beloved land with security and sanctity.

(Adapted from Nachmanides Commentary on Vayikra 18:25)