

## PARASHAT HASHAVUA

### PARASHAT BAMIDBAR

#### The Leviim and the Firstborn By Rav Ezra Bick

The opening *parasha* of *Sefer Bamidbar* is famous for being mostly a series of censuses, some quite detailed, of the entire Jewish people, of the individual tribes, of the Levites, and of the firstborn. The usual understanding of the divisions is that God likes to count the Jews (based on the Rashi to the opening verse), the firstborn were meant to be the servants of the *mishkan* and are here being switched with the Levites, because of their respective roles in the sin of the golden calf, and the Levites are not included in the general census because they are sanctified in place of the firstborn. I would like to show that these assumptions are either wrong or at least incomplete, and that is the theme of today's shiur.

Let us first sketch the different sections of the censuses:

1. (1,1-46) God commands Moshe to count the entire Jewish people, which he proceeds to do. Immediately after the total ("603,550"), The Torah adds the statement that "The Levites according to the tribe of their fathers were not counted among them" (1,47).
2. (1,48-53) God commands Moshe not to count the Levites among the Jews. He commands Moshe to appoint the Levites to take care of the *mishkan*. This section concludes with a general statement that the Jews fulfilled all of God's commands, as delivered to Moshe (1,54)
3. (2,1-31) God commands Moshe to arrange the tribes in a camp, divided into four, with the numbers of each tribe repeated, and the sums of each subcamp, consisting of three tribes under a leader, specified as well. This section is concluded with the total of the entire Jewish people being given again, a repeated statement that the Levites were not included, and a repeated statement that the Jews fulfilled all of God's commands, as given to Moshe (2,32-34).
4. (3,1-4) "These are the descendants of Moshe and Aharon...."
5. (3,5-10) God commands Moshe to assign the tribe of Levi to Aharon, to serve him, and to guard the *mishkan*.
6. (3,11-13) God tells Moshe that He is taking the Levites to Himself, in place of the firstborn.

7. (3,14-39) God commands a census of the Levites, which includes a general listing of the specific jobs of each subgroup of the Levites.
8. (3,40-43) God commands a census of the firstborn, and a "taking" of the Levites in their place.
9. (3,44—51) God commands the switching of the 22,273 firstborn with the 22,000 Levites, with the excess 273 to be redeemed with five shekel a head, which is given to Aharon and his sons.

The questions:

1. Why is the census described (in great detail) twice (1 and 3)?
2. Why are the Levites not included in the census, and only afterwards is Moshe commanded not to include them (1 and 2)?
3. Why are the Levites commanded to care for the *mishkan* twice (2 and 5)?
4. Why are the Levites assigned to Aharon, and only afterwards are they switched with the firstborn (5 and 6)?
5. Why are the descendants of Moshe and Aharon listed separately; in fact, why are they listed at all (4)?

The Ramban addresses the second question by claiming that Moshe decided on his own not to count the Levites, based on the fact that God had appointed the princes of each tribe by name and commanded that they be in charge of the census for each tribe, but had not designated anyone to lead the tribe of Levi. The absence of a designated *nasi* for the tribe Levi lead Moshe to exclude them from the census. This could be understood either as an inference by Moshe as to God's unexpressed will, or simply as a technical difficulty – Moshe had no *nasi* of the Levites to assist him, and therefore he simply did not perform the census for them, even if he had understood that in principle they were to be included. I prefer the latter version, which is apparently more or less what the Ramban means when he writes that Moshe was "unsure what to do about the Leviim." In other words, verse 1,47, "The Levites according to the tribe of their fathers were not counted among them," records a matter of fact, which describes a puzzle for Moshe, and also for us, the readers. The answer to the puzzle is given in the next verse, when God **commands** Moshe not to count the Levites.

This does not actually answer the question, but merely raises it to a different level. Why did God not explicitly command Moshe in the beginning to count all the Jews except for the Levites, who were not to be counted? Why did He command Moshe to count "the **entire** congregation of Israel" (1,2), omit the *nasi* of Levi, and only afterwards explicitly exclude Levi from the census?

The answer, I think, is found in the first Rashi of the *parasha*.

Because of His love for them, He counts them all the time. When they left Egypt He counted them, and when they died during the (incident of the golden) calf he counted them, in order to know how many survived, and when He came to rest His presence on them, He counted them.

A charming midrash, but is it *pshat*? I would think not, as it is clear from the continuation of the *parasha* that the census now was instrumental in establishing the *machane*, the structured encampment of the Jews, each to his *degel* and each to his *machane*. This was not simply a counting of love, but was necessary in order to know how to place each tribe in the structure of the *machane*. And while it is true that I cannot say exactly why it is necessary to know the numbers in order to establish the *machane* – after all, the four *degalim* (subcamps) were not equal in population size, it is clear from the detailed counting both of individual tribes and the four *degalim* in the context of the command to establish the *machane* that the numbers were somehow a part of the mechanism of setting up the camp. Apparently, the *machane*, which clearly represents a Divinely mandated structure with great spiritual significance, includes a population census as part of its fabric.

But, as we have seen, the numbers are repeated twice, once in general, as the census was taken, and once again when the numbers were applied to the construction of the *machane*. This is what the midrash is building on. It is true that the particular and specific need for a census is functional – in order to construct the *machane*. But the opening command, which has no mention of the *machane*, and the repetition of the numbers when the *machane* is actually being designed, indicate that above and beyond the functional aspect of the census, there is an inherent importance to it. Counting the individual Jews one by one is an expression of God's love for them, and a demonstration of the inherent importance of each one of them. This is indicated as well by the double expression used to define a census. Literally translated – "Raise the heads of the entire congregation of the children of Israel... You shall count them." "*Se'u et rosh*" is an idiomatic expression meaning "to count", but the literal meaning cannot be ignored. It elevates the person to be counted in this way.

Hence, the opening *parasha* does not explicitly exclude the Levites. Since the actual and practical purpose of the census was for the *machane yisrael*, of which they are not part, they are in fact not meant to be included, and Moshe correctly leaves them out. But since the *parasha* is conveying the additional aspect of any census of the Jewish people, the language expresses the general universal theme of the importance of each individual Jew in the eyes of God, as He counts them from time to time. Only after the census is complete does God apply the census for its pragmatic purpose, setting up the *machane*, and then, at the same time, He explicitly excludes the Levites from **that** aspect of the census. However, that makes it necessary to explain why, since otherwise Moshe, or the reader, might conclude that they are excluded from the census of love, of individual importance as well, and therefore God, immediately after excluding them from the census (*lo tifkod*, 2,49), charges them with their task (*hafked et haleviim*, 2,50), to show that they too have individual importance and a place in the overall scheme. They are not

counted, at least not yet, but they are appointed, and the two words are in fact based on the same root – *pekod*.

How do we know that in principle the census includes every individual Jew, even if someone is left out in the functional side? The curious and unexplained reference to the children of Moshe and Aharon (section 4, above) fills in the missing gap. In the end, the Levites are counted, when a functional need arises for their number to be known, when they are switched with the firstborn. But Moshe and Aharon are not included in the Levites, even though they are technically members of the tribe. This is clear, since the counted Levites are switched with the firstborn, and are given to Aharon as Levites. Aharon is not given to himself, and does not serve as a Levite but as a *kohen*, as is Moshe. In fact, in the *parasha*, there is no indication that Aharon is a Levite, even as the Levites are given to him. So, in the end, the census of "the entire congregation of the children of Israel" will have some omissions. Since there is no functional reason to count the *kohanim*, they will not be counted, but God's love of course encompasses them as well. The *parasha* therefore does count them, even if Moshe did not. "These are the children of Moshe and Aharon ...", and the Torah lists them each by name, thereby completing the missing part of "the entire congregation of the children of Israel."

Like the other tribes, the Levites are also granted a double attention. Once, right before the Jewish people are assigned their place in the *macheneh*, the Torah first assigns them their place in their own *machane* (2,48-54, section 2 above). This section defines the Levites role in very general terms, and **also** states that they will dwell (*yachanu*, the root of the word *machane*) around the *mishkan*, even as the rest of the tribes will dwell (*vechanu*), each person in his *machane* and by his *degel*. I think that definition of the Levites here as servants of the *mishkan* is only in order to explain why they are dwelling in their own *machane* around the *mishkan*, which in turn is only to explain why they are not to be counted among the other tribes, since the counting was **functionally** for the purpose of setting up the general *machane*. But the Levites will be counted, and that is for another purpose, the switch with the firstborn. Now I ask – why are the Levites to be switched with firstborn? It is not in order to give them the credentials to serve as Levites in the *mishkan*, as this role is assigned to them **before** the switch is made, or even mentioned. The Torah deliberately separates the designation of the Levites as servants of the *mishkan* (section 2 above, in general terms as part of their *machane*, but legally and formally in section 5 above), and the switch with the firstborn (section 6 above). This is not only a literary distinction into two different commands of God, and two different speeches of God (*vayidaber HaShem el Moshe leimor*, 3,5, and again 3,11), but is defined very differently, in fact, in terms that are nearly contradictory. When the Levites are assigned their jobs as servants of the *mishkan* (3,5-10, section 5), they are "given to Aharon and his sons." "Given, given, are they to him" (3,9) . When God tells Moshe that the Levites are to be switched with the firstborn, He says, "And now, I have taken the Levites unto Me, from among Israel, in place of the firstborn of the Jews, and the Levites will be Mine" (3,12). As servants of the *mishkan*, the Levites belong to Aharon, and this is followed by another assignation, whereby the Levites belong to God. It is the second designation

that requires them to be switched with the firstborn, who have had that status as belonging to God. "For the all the firstborn are Mine, from the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I have sanctified all the firstborn of Israel, from man to animal, they are Mine, I am HaShem" (3,13) .

It is commonly believed that the firstborn were meant to have been priests. This is based on a statement of the *Mishna* in *Masekhet Zevachim*. But aside from the fact that this is nowhere indicated in the *pshat* of the Torah, the *gemara* (*Zevachim* 117b) divorces this totally from our *parasha*. If this status of the firstborn did in fact exist, it was either limited to a one-time occurrence during the giving of the Ten commandments at *Har Sinai*, or continued only up until the building of the *mishkan*, where the status of Aharon and his sons is clearly indicated and is an essential part of the construction of the *mishkan* (*parashat Tetzave*). At this point in the narrative, they no longer have this status. In any event, what does that have to do with the status of the Levites as Levites (and not as priests)? I think the verse in our context makes this clear, when it states that the status of the firstborn which is being transferred to the Levites applies also to the firstborn animals. Later on, when the switch is performed, the Torah explicitly says that the animals of the Levites are being switched with the firstborn animals of Israel (3,45). What that actually means and what are its legal ramifications is a very good question, which we shall not address here, but it clearly implies that we are not dealing with a sacerdotal status of the firstborn as priests. Rather, the Torah is sanctifying the Levites, taking them and dedicating them as belonging to God. Serving in the *mishkan* is defined as being the servants of Aharon. Serving the *mishkan* and belonging to God are two different positions. They could have served the *mishkan* without this dedication (and then they would not have counted in a census either), but God has chosen to make them His property instead of the firstborn, sanctifying them. Ultimately (in *parashat Behaalotekha*), they will not enter actual service until the sanctification of them is complete.

So, once we have read through all of the *parasha*, the Levites are both functional, and also designated, counted by God individually. They have a special status, of love and chosenness, aside from the functional placement within the *machane*, just as we saw the double status of the Jewish people within the context of the census. Four Jews – Moshe, Aharon, Elazar, and Itamar – have not seemingly received this mark of love, of special status, since they have been left out of all the censuses, so the Torah points out to us that they are also special, with individual status – "these are the descendants of Moshe and Aharon.... the **anointed** priests, who were consecrated to serve."

The *parasha*, while taking care of various pragmatic functional necessities of the Jews in the desert, also goes out of its way to indicate that every Jew is the object of "His love for them," as indicated by God's counting them, each one with his particular role. There are in principle two countings. The first one is functional and therefore divided for different groups according to the different purposes. The second is personal and essential, addressed to

"the entire congregation of the children of Israel," and expressed generally in the first section of the *parasha* for all Jews. It is later extended to the Levites in their separate counting and sanctification in place of the firstborn, and to the *kohanim* in their mention individually in the course of the *parasha*.