

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash  
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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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PARASHAT KI-TISA

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This year's Parashat HaShavua series is dedicated  
in loving memory of Dov Ber ben Yitzchak Sank z"l.

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This *shiur* is dedicated *le-zekher nishmot*  
Amelia Ray and Morris Ray on the occasion of their ninth  
*yahrtzeits* by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray

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THE CENSUS AND THE PLAGUE

BY Harav Yaakov Medan

I. The census and the plague in our *Parasha*

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: **When you take the sum** of the children of Israel after their number, then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul to the Lord, when you number them, that there be no plague among them, when you number them. This they shall give, every one that passes among them that are numbered, half a shekel after the shekel of the sanctuary (a shekel is twenty gera); a half shekel shall be the offering of the Lord. Every one that passes among them that are numbered, from twenty years old and above, shall give the offering of the Lord. The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less than half a shekel, when they give the offering of the Lord, **to make atonement for your souls**. And you shall take the atonement money of the children of Israel and shall appoint it for the service of the Tent of Meeting; **that it may be a memorial to the children of Israel before the Lord, to make atonement for your souls.** (*Shemot* 32:1-16)

It is not clear from the verses why the numbering of the people of Israel should lead to a plague or why their counting requires atonement by way of the half-shekel. The question becomes stronger in light of what happened in the days of David, who counted the people, in the wake of which a plague arrived that led to the deaths of seventy thousand people. The plague in the time of David ended and did not kill additional people only after the threshing floor of Aravna the Yevusi was purchased with the money offered by the people of Israel; only then did the attribute of mercy rest upon them.

The answer proposed by Rashi, Rabbeinu Bachya, and other commentators is that a count allows an evil eye to be directed at the number of the people of Israel, especially at a time when we hope for blessings: "Which cannot be numbered for multitude" (*Bereishit* 32:13). However, that answer no longer satisfies many, now that our understanding of the evil eye has diminished. The Abravanel and Shadal addressed the meaning of the "evil eye." In their view, there is no substance to it; it is a popular belief that causes no harm. The idea may be to strengthen the belief in God's providence and the need to avoid pride, to which a count might lead as a result of population

growth. Therefore the Torah permitted a count, and to address the popular concern about the evil eye, the Torah established the cure of giving shekels for the service of the Tent of Meeting, in order to strengthen the hearts of Israel so that there would be no plague.<sup>1</sup>

This answer also does not satisfy, and we will follow here the words of the *Chizkuni*:

When you count them – When they go out to war.  
(*Shemot* 30:12)

According to the *Chizkuni*, counting the people does not cause a plague. Rather the count itself is conducted primarily in order to know the size of the army in preparation for battle with the enemy. A census is usually taken on the eve of a difficult battle, and war is a time of danger when Satan stirs up trouble. There is no guarantee that we will emerge victorious in battle or that it will not exact a heavy price from us, even if we do win. The soldiers should therefore give God a ransom for their souls in order to receive His help and protection in battle and so that, in His mercy, He will prevent them from falling into enemy hands.

We may prove this from the verses describing the war waged against Midyan:

And the officers who were over the thousands of the host, the captains of thousands, and captains of hundreds, came near to Moshe; and they said to Moshe: Your servants have taken the sum of the men of war who are under our charge, and not one man of us is missing. We have therefore brought an offering for the Lord what every man has gotten of jewels of gold, chains, and bracelets, rings, earrings, and girdles, **to make atonement for our souls** before the Lord. And Moshe and Elazar the priest took the gold of them, all wroth jewels... And Moshe and Elazar the priest took the gold of the captains of thousands and of hundreds, and brought it to the Tent of Meeting, **a memorial for the children of Israel before the Lord.** (*Bamidbar* 31:48-54)

The great similarity in wording between the passage about the war waged against Midyan and the section dealing with the counting of Israel cited earlier proves the connection between them. There too, the people who were counted brought an offering for the service of the Tent of Meeting as a memorial before God that not one man was missing in war. There, the offering was brought after the war, whereas in our *parasha* the atonement is required before the war. It seems, then, that this is the purpose of giving the half shekel in our *parasha*: the offering to the Tent of Meeting will protect the soldiers from death when they come into contact with the enemy.

II. The census and the plague in David's army

<sup>1</sup> According to them, David's count stemmed from pride and was not really necessary, and it therefore caused the plague. In our *parasha*, the situation was different because the count was meant as preparation for entering the land; there was no concern whatsoever about it.

We are left with two questions: 1) Why did a plague break out among the people after David counted them?<sup>2</sup> 2) How does an offering to the Tent of Meeting protect the soldiers in battle?

The Ramban deals at length with the first question. He explains that it is permitted to count the people before a war by way of the half shekel, as stated in our *parasha*. But they must not be counted unnecessarily, and David counted the people unnecessarily:

But in my opinion the anger against him was because he counted them unnecessarily, because he was not going out to war, and he was not doing anything with them at that time; [he counted them] only to gladden his heart that he ruled over a great number of people... And I saw in *Bamidbar Rabba* (2:17): "R. Eliezer said in the name of R. Yose ben Zimra: Whenever the people of Israel were counted for some necessity, nobody was missing; unnecessarily, people were missing. When were they counted for some necessity? In the days of Moshe, for the standards, and for the division of the Land [of Israel]; unnecessarily, during the days of David. (Ramban, *Bamidbar* 1:2-3)

In my humble opinion, if this is a tradition, we will accept it; but if by logical reasoning, this can be refuted. David did not count the entire people, but only the soldiers, and presumably he did so in preparation for war:

But the king's word prevailed against Yoav and against the captains of the host; and Yoav and the captains of the host went out from the presence of the king to number the people of Israel.

And Yoav rendered the sum of the census of the people to the king; and there were in Israel eight hundred thousand warriors, that drew the sword; and the men of Yehuda were five hundred thousand men. (II *Shmuel* 24:4, 9)

In *Divrei Ha-yamim*, the number is slightly different:

And Yoav gave the sum of the number of the people to David. In all Israel there were one million one hundred thousand men that drew sword: and Yehuda was four hundred and seventy thousand men that drew sword. (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:5)

But it is clear from both places that David counted only the armed forces – including, of course, the reserves – and that the people conducting the count were the general of the army and his captains.

It may be assumed that if David counted his entire army – about one and a half million soldiers – he did this for a military purpose. It is possible that the plague that broke out among the people prevented the war, because the people were weakened and David was forced to change his war plan. But why did the plague break out?

*Chazal* say (among other things), that the plague broke out as a punishment for the people's failure to demand that the Temple be built:

To what may David be likened at that time? To one who would beat his son, who did not know why he was being beaten. At the end he said to him: Know that I beat you in revenge for So-and-So. Similarly

all those people who fell, fell only because they had not demanded the building of the Temple (*Midrash Shmuel* 31:4; this explanation appears also in *Midrash Tehilim* 17).<sup>3</sup>

And yet, what is the connection between the punishment of the plague and the count of the people?

It is possible that the census was connected to David's great war on the eastern front against the allies of the people of Amon. The nations who participated in that war against David were Aram Tzova, Aram Naharayim, Aram Damasek, Ma'akha, Tov, Amon, and apparently also Moav and Edom. For this war, David needed an especially large army owing to the great size of the front and the large number of enemies and their power.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that the great military census conducted by David did not find favor in God's eyes, just as his many conquests in the east were not favorable in His eyes.

The reader may wonder about the claim that expresses reservations about David's conquests in the east, seeing that they strengthened his kingdom and brought to realization God's promise to Avraham to give him the land until the Euphrates River. And yet, with all of the importance of the conquests in the east, when they come not in the proper time, the damage they cause may be greater than the benefit they bring:

David acted improperly. The Torah says: After you conquer the Land of Israel you will be permitted to conquer outside the Land. But he did not do this, but rather he conquered Aram Naharayim and Aram Tzova, while the Yevusi close to Jerusalem he did not conquer. God said to him: The Yevusi close to your palace you did not conquer. Why then do you conquer Aram Naharayim and Aram Tzova? (*Sifrei, Eikev* 51)

David conquered Aram Naharayim until the banks of the Tigris, but the threshing floor of Aravna the Yevusi, Mount Moriya, still remained in foreign hands. Aravna the Yevusi was not just any other Yevusi who owned a field in Jerusalem. He was the king of Yevus:

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<sup>3</sup> The explanation provided by the *midrash* of the sin that led to the punishment for the count is not alluded to in the verses that preceded the punishment of the plague, but it fits in well with the fact that the solution to the plague was the purchase of the threshing floor of Aravna the Yevusi and the establishment of the altar of the Temple in it, as well as the fact that when the fire descended from heaven to the offering, the plague stopped. According to *Chazal* – and this too is supported by the verses – the threshing floor was purchased with the shekels of all of Israel by way of a law similar to that of the half shekel.

This method of interpretation, locating the sin by way of the solution, is found in several places. One striking example is the unexplained sin of Moshe when God meets him at the place where he spends the night and seeks to kill him (*Shemot* 4). Most of the commentators conclude that the sin was that he did not circumcise his son based on the fact that the solution and the atonement arrive when Tzipora circumcises her son, at which point the angel lets him go.

<sup>4</sup> The count may have been after the war and for the purpose of continuing David's great conquests in that war, or it may have been before the war, which was not viewed favorably by God.

Let us add a little about one of the wars on the eastern front, the war of revenge against the people of Amon for the humiliation of David's emissaries (II *Shmuel* 10). David's emissaries to the king of Amon were sent as part of a show of gratitude on the part of David for the kindness performed for him by the late king of Amon. It may be demonstrated that another motive was involved. It is possible that the pact with Amon, which David sought, was connected in one way or another to the desire to return to the conquests of Shaul in the east, which reached the Euphrates river, and perhaps even further, for David also defeated the king of Aram Naharayim, which lies between the Euphrates and the Tigris.

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<sup>2</sup> See II *Shemuel* 24 and I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 21.

All these things did the king Aravna give to the king. (II *Shmuel* 24:23)

Yevus as a kingdom had degenerated and no longer existed as an independent state. But the king of Yevus preserved his "historical rights" in the threshing floor of Aravna as the heir of the kings of Yevus. Because of his desire to maintain good neighborly relations with the remnant of the kingdom of Yevus, David left Mount Moriya in the hands of the Aravna the Yevusi. The *Sifrei* criticizes him for having gone to conquer distant lands before conquering the site of the Temple, located at the entrance to the City of David.

But it is possible that the criticism is not confined to the priority that should have been given to the conquest of Mount Moriya over that of Aram Naharayim, but rather relates also to the priority that should have been given to national and other social needs over conquests in the east. The successive wars might inflict a devastating blow on the wholeness of the families when the heads of those families are found for so long far from their homes. They might bring to unbearable economic disparities between those who go out to war and those who remain at home and advance their own prosperity. Those wars might also lead to the moral corruption connected to raising capital resources for the war effort,<sup>5</sup> and undermine Torah study and the spiritual progress of the people towards their encounter with God.<sup>6</sup> The effects of war continue even after the war is over, as the land is flooded with slaves taken from among the prisoners of war and with female captives with whom the soldiers are permitted to engage in sexual relations, and later marry.

It is possible that political and military aggrandizement and conquest of expanded frontiers are part of the spiritual and social uplifting of the nation, and they are desirable only together with this uplifting. These conquests are similar to the conquest of *Eretz Yisrael* after the exodus from Egypt, which took place only after the giving of the Torah, the declaration of "We shall do, and we shall obey," and the social cohesion in matters of righteousness and justice, to which the difficult journey in the wilderness, together with the food and water shortages that were experienced there, were directed. David initiated the campaign of conquests in the east even before he saw to the people's progress in the aforementioned areas, and to a certain extent the plague put a brake on that campaign. *Chazal* might be expressing the disadvantages of David's external conquests while there were still tears in Israel's internal wholeness through the fact that David had still not conquered the area "close to his palace" – Mount Moriya, the site of the *Shekhina* – and yet he sent his troops to Aram Tzova and Aram Naharayim.

### III. The purchase of the threshing floor of Aravna and the atonement achieved through the shekels

And Gad came that day to David, and said to him:  
Go up, rear an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Aravna the Yevusi. (II *Shmuel* 24:18-19)

The angel tells David to "conquer" the threshing floor of the Aravna the Yevusi before counting his soldiers for the great war in the east. We are certainly not dealing with forceful, military conquest. Aravna the king of Yevus, despite the lofty title, conducted himself at his threshing floor as a simple farmer, and had never tried to raise his head against David who ruled in

Jerusalem. There was certainly no reason or moral justification to go against him with a military force. The "conquest" was conducted through the purchase of the threshing floor at full price, and specifically with shekels:

And the king said to Aravna: No, but I will surely buy it of you at a price; neither will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God of that which costs me nothing. So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. (II *Shmuel* 24:24)<sup>7</sup>

Buying Aravna's threshing floor and establishing an altar there, at the site where an altar would be built by Shlomo in the Temple, constitutes a demand for the building of the Temple, which, according to *Chazal*, atoned for the fact that they had not demanded the Temple's building beforehand. It is possible that in the wake of the purchase of the threshing floor and the establishment of the altar, David brought the ark up from Kiryat-Ye'arim to Jerusalem, as related in II *Shmuel* (chapter 6).

Let us move from here to the essential connection between the giving of the shekels for the service of the Tent of Meeting and the atonement for the census and the prevention of the plague in the *mitzva* in our *parasha*. The Temple, the heart of Israel, is located on Mount Moriya, on the site where Avraham stood with a knife at Yitzchak's neck, at the neck of the people of Israel across the generations. At this foundational moment, the ram that was caught in the thicket was seen, and then slaughtered in place of Yitzchak. Yitzchak came down from the altar alive and well, and from his seed emerged God's people. When the people of Israel are in danger, at a time of war which requires counting the people for war, the shekels come in their place and redeem them from the danger of death, just as the five shekels redeem the firstborn son from the plague inflicted upon the firstborns.

The giving of shekels took place also in the *Mishkan* in the wilderness, even though it was not Mount Moriya. The *Mishkan* as well is the heart of Israel, and strengthening it on the eve of battle – through the giving of half shekels by all those who go out to war – strengthens the hand of Israel's fighters who leave the camp to wage war against their enemies. Even when they are in the external camp, which is defiled by those who fall in battle, they are still connected to the *Mishkan*, the heart of Israel. Giving the half shekels strengthens also the inclination of God, who leaves the *Mishkan* in order to go before the camp of Israel in war, to save the soldiers and strike out at their enemies.

For the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you. (*Devarim* 23:15)

### IV. In the days of Achashverush

"If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver" (*Esther* 3:9). Resh Lakish said: It was well known beforehand to Him at whose word the world came into being that Haman would one day pay shekels for the destruction of Israel. Therefore, He anticipated his shekels with those of Israel. And so we have learned: "On the first of Adar proclamation

<sup>5</sup> See especially I *Shemuel* 8; *Mikha* 2-3; and elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup> Moshe Shamir, in his important book, *Melekh Basar Va-Dam*, proves at length the extent to which wars waged by a king of Israel (in his case, King Yannai) out of lust for conquest are liable to harm the proper spiritual development of the people. According to him, the Sages opposed Yannai's military moves, as is alluded to in tractate *Kiddushin* (66b).

<sup>7</sup> In the parallel chapter in I *Divrei Ha-yamim* (21), mention is made of six hundred shekels. *Chazal* explain that each tribe contributed fifty shekels towards the purchase of the threshing floor. This explanation brings us close to each person of Israel giving a half shekel, the rich not giving more, and the poor not giving less; here, the same was done by the tribes.

is made regarding the shekels and the mixed seeds." (*Megilla* 13b)

According to the simple understanding, Resh Lakish's exposition relates to the customary practice of reading the section dealing with the shekels before the holiday of Purim. But Haman asked of Achashverush to destroy the Jews on the thirteenth of Nisan: "On the first month on the thirteenth day thereof" (*Esther* 3:12)!

The words of Resh Lakish might be alluding also to something else. The half shekels of the census in our *parasha* were used primarily for the silver sockets for the boards of the *Mishkan*, and thus they constituted the base for the walls of the *Mishkan*:

And the silver of them that were numbered of the congregation was a hundred talents, and a thousand seven hundred and seventy five shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary; a beka for every man, that is, half a shekel, after the shekel of the sanctuary, for everyone that went to be numbered, from twenty years old and upward, for six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty men.

**And of the hundred talents of silver were cast the sockets of the sanctuary, and the sockets of the veil;** a hundred sockets of the hundred talents, a talent for a socket. (*Shemot* 38:25-27)

In the Temple, the walls were made not of boards, but of stone. The bottom row of stones was set in place in a stronger manner than the rest of the wall, and it marked the direction and length of the wall. This row stood in place of the sockets of the boards of the *Mishkan*. In the building of the Second Temple, this row of stones was related to with special affection:

Now in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubavel the son of Shealtiel, and Yeshua the son of Yozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they who were come out of the captivity to Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites from twenty years old and upward to superintend the work of the house of the Lord... And when the builders laid the foundation for the Temple of the Lord, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaf with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the form prescribed by David king of Israel. And they sang responsively in praising and giving thanks to the Lord; because He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever towards Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. (*Ezra* 3:8-11)

The builders only laid the foundation of the Temple – the bottom row of stones, which corresponds to the silver sockets in the *Mishkan*. Then an accusatory letter was sent by the enemies of Yehuda and Binyamin to the Persian king (apparently Koresh),<sup>8</sup> and the work on the building was stopped for eighteen years. According to *Chazal's* calculations, during most of those eighteen years, Achashverush ruled as king, so that in his days as well the work on the Temple was stopped. It was only in the days of Daryavesh that the construction work was resumed. The 24<sup>th</sup> of Kislev of the second year of Daryavesh's reign is mentioned by the prophet Chaggai as the last day of the eighteen years of work stoppage, and on that very

day (or on the next day), the construction of the Temple continued:

And now, I pray you, consider from this day onward. Before a stone was laid upon a stone in the temple of the Lord. (*Chaggai* 2:15)

In other words, the first row of stones was laid down already in the days of Koresh by those who returned to Zion. The second row was laid down only in the days of Daryavesh, after an eighteen year hiatus.

In the days of Achashverush, in those eighteen years, the work on the Temple was stopped, and the people of Israel sat down to enjoy the meal prepared by Achashverush in his palace.<sup>9</sup> This was not an isolated meal, but with a way of life, which preferred loyalty to Achashverush, who cancelled the construction of the Temple, over loyalty to God's Temple. As in the days of David, when the people of Israel became liable for the plague because they did not demand the building of the Temple, so too Haman's decree threatening Israel's annihilation stemmed from their forsaking the building of the Temple.

Now we can understand the *midrash*: In those days of accusation, God in His mercy remembered that the first row of stones had already been laid, and it was likened to the half shekels of Israel, to the silver sockets. Haman was too late. Israel's shekels preceded those of Haman; the shekels intended for the building of the Temple preceded the shekels intended for Israel's annihilation.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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<sup>8</sup> See *Ezra* 4:5, 24.

<sup>9</sup> See *Megilla* (12a) regarding the sin that caused Haman's decree of annihilation that threatened Israel.