

## PARASHAT HASHAVUA

### PARASHAT PINCHAS

#### The Second Census By Rav Yair Kahn

#### I. A Mid-Sentence Break

The beginning of our *parasha* contains a rare scriptural phenomenon known as a "*pesik be-emtza pasuk*" – a break in the middle of a verse. In the Torah scroll, there is a space between the beginning of verse 26:1, "When the plague was over," and the continuation of the *pasuk*, "Hashem said to Moshe and to Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen."

This abrupt break itself demands an explanation, but the difficulty is compounded when we take a closer look at the context of this verse:

Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, "Assail the Midianites and defeat them, for they assailed you by the trickery they practiced against you, because of the affair of Pe'or and because of the affair of their kinswoman Kozbi, daughter of the Midianite chieftain, who was killed at the time of the plague on account of Pe'or." When the plague was over, Hashem said to Moshe and Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen, saying, "Take a census of the whole community of *Bnei Yisrael* from the age of twenty years up, by their ancestral houses, all of Yisrael able to bear arms." (*Bamidbar* 25:16-26:2)

Initially, the Torah introduces the command to attack the Midianites following the Ba'al Pe'or disaster. Suddenly, we find a thematic digression as the Torah introduces the recounting of *Bnei Yisrael*, the incident of the daughters of Tzelofchad, and the appointment of Yehoshua. This is followed by two halakhic sections, a lengthy description of communal sacrifices and a brief section dealing with personal vows. Finally, the Torah returns to the campaign against Midian and repeats the command to attack:

Avenge *Bnei Yisrael* on the Midianites; then you shall be gathered to your kin. (*Bamidbar* 31:2)

This raises a number of questions. Why is the command to attack Midian repeated? What is the meaning of this digression? Why was it necessary for the Torah to insert this entire section into such an inappropriate location? The question deepens when we note that halakhic sections are not characteristic of *Sefer Bamidbar*, and are usually introduced when they can be

integrated thematically into the narrative. (See the *shiur* on *Parashat Naso*.) What, then, is the connection between the war against Midian and these *parashiof*?

Before proceeding, it is important to recall that the census of *Bnei Yisrael* should be viewed as more than dry statistics. We already noted in the introductory *shiur* to *Sefer Bamidbar* that by means of the count, the people are enrolled into the various subsections of which the nation is comprised. When individuals are counted, they are thereby integrated into the communal framework as the national entity is formed. *Sefer Bamidbar* begins with the establishment of *machane Yisrael*, which embarks on the journey from Sinai to *Eretz Yisrael* but ultimately stalls. The second generation, raised in the wilderness, continues the march. However, before assuming their role, they too must form a harmonious whole that respects and reflects the individual qualities from which it emerges. Therefore, once again we find a lengthy documentation of all the statistics regarding the new generation, who coalesce to form a national entity capable of achieving its meta-historic role.

Based on the above, it would be reasonable to claim that at the beginning of our *parasha*, the new generation has not yet evolved into that national entity. They have yet to be crystalized into a harmonious body, sharing a common vision and destiny.

## II. Self Defense or Vengeance

With this insight, we are ready to re-examine the repetition of the command to attack Midian, while placing special emphasis on the subtleties distinguishing the two commands. The initial command, which precedes the census, is based upon the right to self-defense:

"Assail the Midianites" – Why? "For they assailed you." From here our Sages said: If one comes to kill you, kill him first. (*Bamidbar Rabba* 21:4)

This right applies to any individual, and certainly pertains to a collection of individuals who are joined politically. However, the second command, which follows the census, refers to vengeance:

"Avenge *Bnei Yisrael* on the Midianites; then you shall be gathered to your kin." (*Bamidbar* 31:2)

Moshe then refers to the Midian war not as Israel's vengeance, but as God's.

Moshe spoke to the people saying, "Let men be picked out from among you for a campaign, and let them fall upon Midian to wreak Hashem's vengeance on Midian." (*Bamidbar* 31:3)

Rashi comments:

"Hashem's vengeance" –for those who stand against Yisrael stand against God.

*Am Yisrael* as a harmonious national entity, committed to common goals represents God in this world. Therefore, the vengeance of *Bnei Yisrael*, which is interpreted by Moshe as the vengeance of Hashem, cannot be achieved until the harmonious national formation is complete. Only once the people are counted and the individuals are woven into the national fabric can the attack on Midian be re-defined in meta-historic categories.

Now we can understand why in the first command, immediately following the incident of Ba'al Pe'or, *Bnei Yisrael* are commanded to attack the Midianites for reasons of self-defense. The people at this point are not ripe enough to receive the second command, since they are still incapable of realizing the complete significance of the war with Midian. The collective vengeance of Yisrael is suspended pending the crystallization of the national entity. Therefore, the Torah chose this particular location to re-count the people who form the nation about to enter Canaan and inherit the land.

Among these shall the land be apportioned as shares, according to the listed names. (*Bamidbar* 26:53)

Within this context, the daughters of Tzelofchad raise the issue of the extent of their inclusion within this national entity. Aside from the specific legal issue, this section raises the important issue of the status of women within the context of the community. The Torah then addresses the issue of leadership, as it continues with the election of Yehoshua to lead the nation across the Yarden. (For the moment, we will ignore the *parashiot* which deal with the communal sacrifices and individual vows.) Only at this juncture, the Torah can charge the newly re-established nation with the meta-historic task of national vengeance, which is tantamount to divine vengeance.

Armed with this insight, we can return to the mid-verse break. The verse begins with the plague that devastated *Bnei Yisrael* and then continues with the divine command to count the people. Despite the pause, this verse implies a relationship between the plague and the census. The connection now seems obvious: the national unit that is to enter Canaan cannot be defined until we exclude all those who will not join it. Only after the plague which removes those who succumbed to the Midianite women can the remainder of the people combine to create that harmonious national entity.

### **III. Mind the Gap**

But how are we to explain the mysterious gap which separates the beginning of the verse, "And it was following the plague," from the conclusion introducing the divine command to count the people? After all, the end is a direct result of the introduction, and there should be no need to pause.

A look at another example of this phenomenon, found in *Parashat Vayishlach* (*Bereishit* 35:22), sheds light on our problem. The verse begins with a serious transgression perpetrated by Reuven:

While Yisrael stayed in that land, Reuven went and lay with Bilha, his father's concubine; and Yisrael found out.

Then the verse stops abruptly, and after a blank space it continues with an enumeration of the twelve sons of Israel:

Now the sons of Yaakov were twelve in number.

The Targum Yerushalmi (erroneously referred to as Targum Yonatan) fills this void with meaning:

When Yisrael dwelled in that land, Reuven went and mixed up the bed of Bilha his father's concubine, for he switched her bed with that of Leah his mother, and it was considered as if he had lain with Bilha. When Yisrael heard, he was distraught, for he thought, "Woe is me; perhaps there has issued from me a disqualified son, just as Yishmael issued from Avraham and Esav issued from Father." The Spirit of God answered him and said, "Do not desist; for all are righteous and there is not a disqualified one among them," for after the birth of Binyamin, the sons of Yaakov were twelve.

According to the Targum, the silence of the verse reflects a feverish tension of doubt, as Yaakov begins to question the role of his children within the covenantal community. Until this point, he thought that all his children were completely devoted to and destined to continue the tradition begun by Avraham; together they would form the twelve tribes from which the people of Israel would emerge. Reuven's sin generated the doubt that not all his children would necessarily continue his path. Perhaps, like his predecessors, he would experience the tragic division of his offspring, separating those destined to remain within the fold from those that must be expelled. The formation of the twelve tribes of Yisrael would be postponed for at least another generation, until there would be complete devotion by all the children to Avraham's legacy. (See the *shiur* on *Parashat Vayeshev* <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/parsha71/09-71vayeshev.htm>.)

Within the silence in the middle of the verse, our Sages detected the deafening cry of Yaakov Avinu, as he was tormented by doubt and overcome with fear. This silent cry is answered by a simple and clear formulation, revealed by the Torah: "Now the sons of Yaakov were twelve in number." All twelve children are destined to continue the legacy. Despite Reuven's terrible error, he nonetheless retains his position as one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

In the aftermath of Ba'al Pe'or, *Bnei Yisrael* find themselves faced with a similar dilemma. After all, there is strong evidence indicating that the tribe of Shimon specifically was involved with the daughters of Moav. The leader of the perpetrators was Zimri, who is identified as "the head of a clan of Shimon"

(25:14). In addition, we find a dramatic drop in population of the tribe of Shimon – at the beginning of *sefer Bamidbar*, the tribe of Shimon numbers 59,300 and is the third largest tribe, while in our *parasha*, they are by far the smallest tribe, numbering a mere 22,200. This unparalleled drop can be accounted for if we attribute the 24,000 who perished in the plague of Ba'al Pe'or to the tribe of Shimon (see Ramban). If we add 24,000 to 22,200, the difference between the first generation and the second is only 13,100, which is a reasonable deviation.

Furthermore, we find that Moshe refrained from blessing Shimon explicitly prior to his death. Although all the other tribes are blessed individually, regarding Shimon we find no more than a veiled reference. According to our Sages, this was because Moshe blamed Shimon for the disaster at Ba'al Pe'or.

Moshe blessed eleven tribes, and why did he not bless the tribe of Shimon? Because he resented them for the act they had committed at Shittim. It says, "Yisrael dwelled in Shittim" (*Bamidbar* 25:1), "And a man from Yisrael (Zimri) [brought near the Midianite woman], etc." (25:6). For this he did not bless them, but nevertheless they were subsumed under [the tribe of] Yehuda, for it says, "... Hear (*shema*), O Lord, the voice of Yehuda" (*Devarim* 33:7), and the word "*shema*" refers to Shimon, as it says (*Bereishit* 29:33), "For God has heard (*shama*) that I am unloved." (*Pesikta De-Rav Kahana*, Addenda, 1)

After the plague that destroyed over half of the tribe of Shimon, following the divine sanction of the execution of Zimri, the tribal leader, there is a scriptural pause. The Torah is silent, but this silence expresses the frightening possibility, which tormented Moshe and *Bnei Yisrael*, that the tribe of Shimon must be expelled from its ranks. The deathly plague subsided. The people began to bury their dead and must somehow continue. However, they do not know how to proceed, what path to follow. What far-reaching conclusions are they to draw from the destruction of the tribe of Shimon?

Finally, Moshe receives the divine order: "Take a census of the whole community of *Bnei Yisrael* from the age of twenty years up, by their ancestral houses, all of Yisrael able to bear arms." All twelve tribes must be enumerated and included within the national framework. All twelve tribes must combine in order to achieve the harmonious balance that constitutes *Knesset Yisrael*. Thus, the people are counted, including the remainder of the tribe of Shimon; once again, the total mysteriously settles around 600,000, which reflects completeness. (See the *shiur* on *Parashat Bamidbar*.) Although decimated, the survivors of Shimon are integral; without them the nation cannot be complete.

#### **IV. The *Kohen* and the *Rav***

In closing, I will briefly discuss the two halakhic segments inserted in the section separating the two commands to destroy the Midianites, the segments dealing with communal sacrifices and individual vows.

In our discussion of *Parashat Naso*, we examined a similar phenomenon, in which halakhic passages concerned with stealing, an unfaithful wife, and the *nazir* are introduced in the section describing the establishment of the first *machane*. We attempted to demonstrate how the narrative deals with issues related to the enterprise of creating a harmonious socio-religious framework. According to our suggestion, the halakhic digression relates to the narrative theme.

We suggested that the Torah introduced the *nazir* as an example of a person who is religiously uncomfortable within *machane Yisrael*. He prefers the model of the (high) priest, who is somewhat removed from the tensions and pressures of society. The Torah therefore introduces the institution of *nazir*, which temporarily allows him to realize this aim without endangering the structure of the various camps. Similarly, in our context, the institution of communal sacrifice, which is concerned with both the rigid daily routine (*korban tamid*) as well as the unique ceremony reserved for special occasions (*musafim*), is juxtaposed with the institution of personal vows (*nidrei hekdes* mentioned in 29:39). This, like the *nazir*, allows for limited individual expression without compromising the universal institutions.

We also noted that in *Parashat Naso*, the Torah inserted the *parashot* of *sota* (the suspected adulteress) and *gezel ha-ger* (theft from someone with no inheritors) as examples of the interaction between *machane Shekhina* and *machane Yisrael*. Domestic friction and civil strife, which are typical of the human condition, are resolved via the involvement and influence of the *kohen*, who introduces a perspective of religious and ethical sensitivity into mundane affairs.

In our context, the laws of personal vows focus on this issue. The Torah explicitly deals with wife-husband relations in this regard. Furthermore, *nedarim* were often utilized within the framework of civil tension (see *Masekhet Nedarim*, chapter 4). However, at this point it is important to note a significant shift. The *kohen* as arbiter is replaced by "*rashei ha-matot*," the tribal leaders. Our Sages understood that this refers to *Beit Din*, the religious courts run by the Sages.

As *Bnei Yisrael* ready themselves to leave the wilderness and enter *Eretz Yisrael*, they must prepare themselves for a new situation. While in the wilderness, they camped around the *Mishkan* and were constantly exposed to the *kohanim*. Upon entering the Land of Israel, they will find themselves distanced from the Temple, and to a certain extent detached from the *kohanim*. The Torah relates explicitly to this transition regarding the permissibility of eating meat. While in the wilderness surrounding the *Mishkan*, one had to offer a sacrifice in order to eat meat. Upon entering the Land of Israel, eating meat was permitted even without offering a sacrifice, due to the distance from the Temple.

When Hashem enlarges your territory, as He has promised you, and you say, "I shall eat some meat," for you have the urge to eat meat,

you may eat meat wherever you wish. As the place where Hashem has chosen to establish His Name [i.e. the Temple] is too far from you, you may slaughter any the cattle or sheep Hashem gives you, as I have instructed you; and you may eat to your heart's content in your settlements. (*Devarim* 12:20-21)

This shift also demands a reevaluation of the people's required religious exposure and influence. Within this context, the shift from priests to sages can be appreciated. The Torah demands that religious courts be established in each and every city in Israel:

You shall appoint judges and officers for your tribes, in all the settlements that the Hashem your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people with due justice. (*Devarim* 16:18)

Thus, following the plague, *Bnei Yisrael* are counted once again as the national framework is reestablished. All twelve tribes, totaling 600,000 people, combine to form a harmonious community ready to enter *Eretz Yisrael* headed by Yehoshua. In anticipation of this new situation, the Torah suggests a shift from the *kohanim* to the sages. At this point, Yisrael is ready to continue their journey and to assume their meta-historical role as their destiny continues to unfold.