

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT BAMIDBAR

Not Just Numbers By Rav Yair Kahn

I. A Strange Opening

Even a superficial glance at *Parashat Bamidbar* reveals a basic difficulty. The counting and recounting of the people seems superfluous and trivial. The Torah, which at times is so exacting regarding the use of words, is quite expansive and generous with respect to the census of Israel. Not only do we note surprising detail, but puzzling repetition as well. This presents a number of basic questions. How is this *parasha* relevant to us? Why was it included in the Torah, whose message is eternal? In short, what is the Torah trying to tell us by recording these statistics?

It is noteworthy that our Sages referred to the entire *Sefer Bamidbar* as "*Chumash Ha-pekudim*" (see *Yoma* 3a, 68b, *Sota* 36b). "*Pekudim*" means counting and refers to the census. At first glance, this title is no more than an associative reference, resulting from the introductory section of the *sefer*, but in no way an expression of the essence of *Sefer Bamidbar* in its entirety. However, a closer examination of this introductory section forces us to reconsider our initial reaction.

Upon reflection, we should note that the position of the poll at beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar* is baffling, even if we concede the necessity of the census. Why does the *sefer* begin with this computation, in defiance of the chronological order of events? After all, the census occurred in the second month:

On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, Hashem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, saying: (*Bamidbar* 1:1)

Eight chapters later, however, we read of events that occurred a month prior to the census.

Hashem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai, on the first new moon of the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, saying: (*Bamidbar* 9:1)

According to our Sages, the events recorded in chapter 7 also preceded the census, which opens the *sefer*.

On the day that Moshe finished setting up the *Mishkan*, he anointed and consecrated it and all its furnishings, as well as the altar and its utensils... (*Bamidbar* 7:1)

Although there is no explicit reference to a specific date in this verse, we find elsewhere that the date on which Moshe completed the building of the *Mishkan* is identified as the first day of the first month of the second year.

And Hashem spoke unto Moshe saying: "On the first day of the first month shall you rear up the *Mishkan* of the tent of meeting ... And you shall take the anointing oil, and anoint the *Mishkan* and all that is therein, and shalt hallow it, and all the furniture thereof; and it shall be holy. (*Shemot* 40:1-9)

In fact, our Sages derived the famous principle, "*ein mukdam u-me'uchar ba-Torah*," that the order of the Torah does not necessarily correspond to chronological sequence, from the opening section of *Sefer Bamidbar* (*Pesachim* 6b).

We see, then, that the Torah went out of its way to write the story out of order so that it could open *Sefer Bamidbar* with the census. This suggests that we are dealing with an event integral to the *sefer*.

Furthermore, the census at the beginning of *Bamidbar* is not the only one found in the *sefer*. The people are counted once again in detail in *Parashat Pinchas*. (We also find elaborate statistics of the spoils won in the war with Midyan in *Parashat Matot*). Therefore, the title awarded to this *sefer* by Chazal, "*Chumash Ha-pekudim*," may reflect a deeper understanding of the essence of the *sefer*. If we succeed in discovering the significance of the census, it will help us not only gain a greater appreciation of *Parashat Bamidbar*, but a more profound insight into the entire section of the Torah known as "*Chumash Ha-pekudim*."

II. The Meaning of *Pekudim*

The word "*pekudim*" is derived from the root *P'K'D*. This root is used in two seemingly unrelated ways.

Do not count (*tiFKoD*) the tribe of Levi or take a census of them with the Israelites. You shall appoint (*haFKeD*) the Levites over the *Mishkan*, all its furnishings, and everything that pertains to it; they shall carry the *Mishkan* and all its furnishings, and they shall tend it; and they shall camp around the *Mishkan*. (*Bamidbar* 1:49-50)

In the first verse, the word "*tifkod*" refers to counting. However, in the second verse, the word "*hafked*" means appointing. It is fascinating that we find a parallel dualism in the Aramaic translation. The word "*tifkod*" is translated as

"*timnei*," which is derived from the word "*minyán*" and refers to a numerical counting. "*Hafked*" is translated as "*mani*," meaning an appointment (as in "*minuy*").

Perhaps this is no more than a scriptural pun. However, the fact that we find the same relationship in the Aramaic leads me to believe that there is an inherent connection between these two concepts. (See for instance, how "*tifkod*" is used in Bamidbar 3:10.) Accordingly, the beginning of *Bamidbar* is not concerned with dry statistics, but rather the formation of "*machane Yisrael*." *Bnei Yisrael* are not only enumerated; rather the role of each individual is designated within the context of the nation being formed. The members of each tribe are not only counted, but enrolled as well, thus forming the twelve tribes of Yisrael. The tribes must be tallied once again in order to enlist the people to specific banners, as the tribes are divided into the four units that are to surround the *Mishkan*. Accordingly, "Numbers" is a poor translation of "*Ha-pekudim*."

III. Harmony vs. Uniformity

At this point, we should note the composition of "*machane Yisrael*." It is interesting that the tribal units were retained, not only at this stage, but even later when *Bnei Yisrael* enter Canaan. Indeed, we find the division into tribal units in Yechezkel's prophesy of the future *Mikdash* (chapters 47-48). Theoretically, one could have imagined that at this juncture, the tribal system should be abolished and replaced, as *Bnei Yisrael* form a national entity. Instead, we find that the nation is actually comprised of those tribal units. This point is instructive insofar as it describes the nature of the nation being formed. The "*machane*" is not developed at the expense of the individual tribes. There is no evidence of a nation-wide melting pot creating a homogeneous entity, which suppresses any expression of non-conformity. *Bnei Yisrael* form a harmonious society, not a uniform one. Each of the tribes is encouraged to express its singular qualities and unique characteristics. They are nurtured and woven together in perfect balance to form a magnificent multi-colored garment. Indeed, our Sages viewed the number twelve as expressing the completeness and perfectness formed by the sons of Yaakov. (See our *shiur* on *Parashat Vayeshev*.)

The tribal unit was not the only institution that was preserved. We find that each individual was recorded according to his family and paternal household. These subdivisions are additional support for our thesis that the "*machane*" was intended as a harmonious entity based on the pre-existing social structure, not as a melting pot.

Furthermore, the Torah stresses that every person was counted "*le-gulgilotam*," by his head – that is, as an individual. In other words, the singular characteristics exclusive to each individual are not to be suppressed and destroyed, but protected and only then integrated into the national whole. The ideal of "*machane Yisrael*" rejects both individualism, in which the particular denies his communal obligations and responsibilities, as well as uniformity,

which forces the individual to conform and thereby deadens his singular characteristics and qualities.

The sum total of individuals that form the holy nation of Israel is "*shishim ribo*" – 600,000. This number mysteriously repeats itself. *Bnei Yisrael* number approximately 600,000 when they leave Egypt. A year later, this number appears again at the beginning of our *parasha*. When the people are counted for the final time in the Torah, at the end of the forty years in the wilderness, once again the number settles around 600,000. Our Sages considered "*shishim ribo*" as the sum total of distinct individual personalities.

One who sees masses of Israel [Rashi – a great host of 600,000] says: "Blessed the wise one of secrets." (*Berakhot* 58a)

The Ramban is more explicit.

Our Sages received a tradition that only 600,000 faces were created, and this number includes all personalities. Therefore, the Torah was given to this number. They said that the Torah needed to be given to be acceptable to all personalities, and since the Creator knows the personality of all creatures and creates the minds of all, therefore we make this blessing. (*Torat Hashem Temima*).

Based on the above, we can further clarify the significance of the *pekudim* that open and set the tone of *Sefer Bamidbar*.

Take a census ("raise the heads") of the whole Israelite community by their families and ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head. (*Bamidbar* 1:2)

The head of each individual is "raised" as he is counted and awarded his specific role within the *machane*. Unique characteristics are not suppressed, but recognized and utilized in the formation of the nation. Conformity, which celebrates the lowest common denominator, is rejected in favor of harmony, which delicately combines the genius found in specific individuals who combine to form the community.

IV. Light and Dark

Sefer Bamidbar as a whole describes a journey that begins at Sinai and continues until *Bnei Yisrael* arrive at the shores of the Jordan River. However, we are not only dealing with a geographic distance. Sinai represents a religious and ethical ideal that must be implemented in the land of Israel. In *Sefer Bamidbar*, "*machane Yisrael*," the national body responsible for this implementation must be formed. *Bnei Yisrael* reach the plains of Moav along the shores of the Jordan River only when this process is complete and the nation is ready to actualize the Siniatic vision.

The beginning of *Bamidbar* describes the formation of the "*machane*" in all its facets. The first section lists the tribal leadership. The Torah continues

with the census, and thereby illustrates the creation of this multi-dimensional community together with its various subdivisions. The discriminating eye can also detect additional components that complete the "*machane*." There is a detailed description of the Levite camp and its subdivisions, as well as a reference to the "*machane Shekhina*."

At this juncture, let us look at an additional rabbinic source which relates to *Sefer Bamidbar*.

"And God divided the light from the darkness" –this refers to *Sefer Bamidbar*, which divides the generation of the exodus from that which entered the land. (*Bereishit Rabba* 3:5)

According to this *midrash*, *Sefer Bamidbar* distinguishes between two generations. The generation that was redeemed from Egypt received the Torah at Sinai, but ultimately failed in its mission and expired in the wilderness. This generation is contrasted with the generation that was raised in the wilderness and fulfilled its destiny when it crossed the Jordan River and entered *Eretz Yisrael*. This *midrash* seems to focus on this distinction as the central theme of *Sefer Bamidbar*.

We have already established that "*Chumash Ha-pekudim*" ignores chronological sequence in order to introduce the major theme of the *sefer*, which is the establishment of "*machane Yisrael*." However, the initial attempt failed and all the people that comprised the first "*machane*" were doomed to perish in the wilderness.

In this very wilderness shall your carcasses drop of all of you who were recorded in your various lists from the age of twenty years up, you have muttered against me. (*Bamidbar* 14:29)

However, the first generation is succeeded by their children, and the *sefer* continues with an account of the second generation and the "*machane*" which they form. This "*machane*" is established in *Parashat Pinchas* when once again the people are counted and enlisted to their respective roles, new leaders are appointed, and the subdivisions are clarified.

In the coming weeks, during our study of "*Chumash Ha-Pekudim*," we will try to discriminate between the light and the dark. We will attempt to determine why the first generation failed and show how the second generation differed from the first, as we join *Bnei Yisrael* on their march from Sinai to the plains of Moav and the shores of the Jordan River.