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בס"ד

Parashat Bemidbar Part I

1. Brief Overview

The early years of the world and selected details of ancient history leading up to and including the lives of Israel's patriarchs are described in the book of Genesis. G-d's articulation of His objective that the patriarchs should bring blessing to the nations of the earth, and His pledges of covenant and nationhood for the patriarchs' progeny, with the land of Canaan as their homeland, are continually highlighted. That book concluded with narration of the incipient nation's descent to Egypt.

The book of Exodus describes the Israelites' bondage in Egypt and G-d's redemption of them, leading to establishment of the G-d-Israel covenant at Mount Sinai. After narrating the attached legislation and a number of covenant-protocol details, the balance of that book – except for the golden calf transgression – deals with establishment of the Tabernacle, the portable sanctuary that manifested G-d's presence in the nation.

The laws that G-d taught from the Tabernacle before Israel began their preparations to travel from Sinai constitute most of the book of Leviticus. This is essentially a three-pronged program comprising sections of legislation regarding sanctuary service, purity and holiness, a program that expanded and enriched the Sinai lawgiving. The covenant finalization, begun after the Mount Sinai lawgiving, was concluded with the blessings and curses in the penultimate chapter of Leviticus. This book – which lacks a single dated event (besides mention of the dedication ceremony of the eighth day) – spans a period of one month. Assembly of the Tabernacle, which took place on the first day of the first month of the second year from the Exodus (Exod. 40:17), is the point at which the book begins, while the book of Numbers opens on the first day of the second month of the second year.

The book of Numbers (the translation of the ancient Hebrew name of this book, *הַמִּשְׁמַר הַפְּקוּדִים*) resumes the narrative thread from Exodus. It begins with the Israelites preparing to leave Sinai (from which they had not yet moved after arriving there for the lawgiving almost a year before) to the land G-d promised them, which at that point was next on the agenda. Thus, the orderly and cohesive structure of the Torah to this point is clear.

From their arrival at Sinai on the first day of the third month of the first year (Exod. 19:1), exactly eleven months before the opening of the book of Numbers, the Israelites had not moved from their encampment. With their departure from Sinai a new phase of national history began. By the time of the writing of the book of Numbers many significant events had occurred and G-d had transmitted many additional laws that were necessary to be incorporated in the Bible. Accordingly, a fourth book of the Bible was necessary. Preparation for the departure from Sinai was a most appropriate spot to begin.

At the book's end it is late in the fortieth year from the Exodus and the Israelites are encamped at the Jordan River on the threshold of crossing into the promised land. Transjordan had been conquered and granted to the two and a half tribes that requested it for their land portion. Aaron and Miriam had passed away and Moses' death was looming. Joshua was selected to be the new leader. Preparations for distribution of the land had been concluded. The book of Deuteronomy begins at that point – on the first day of the eleventh month of the fortieth year.

Though Numbers contains considerable stretches of narrative, it is not at all a history of the forty years. From some point apparently in the second year until the beginning of the fortieth year there is no account of any event. And the narratives that the book does present are not a historical depiction of those times or

events – they do not provide the necessary details that would be required for such a portrayal. The narratives focus on very limited aspects of the events they describe and are directed toward informing about themes that are part of the Torah’s educative agenda.

2. On the First Four Chapters

Included in the first four chapters are organizational and logistical matters designed to ensure that proper protocol and a high degree of order would hold sway over the nation as it encamped and traveled. Since the Tabernacle, representative of G-d’s presence, was in the midst of the Israelites and accompanied them on all their journeys, the camping setup and travel arrangements took on great importance. They had to reflect the consciousness of His ongoing proximity and express reverence for Him in all particulars. Officiants had to be organized, disciplined, and assigned detailed responsibilities. The Tabernacle had to be protected at all times from encroachment by unauthorized individuals. A comprehensive system was prescribed that included the proper method for transporting the Tabernacle from place to place with the attendant instructions for disassembling and reassembling. It was not only necessary to ensure proper respect for the sanctity of the Tabernacle while traveling but also for all its furnishings and accoutrements, as well as for all the covering materials.

In order to facilitate orderly travel and be ready for the possibility of war (an impending, virtually unavoidable eventuality), as well as to prepare for the forthcoming division of the land, it was necessary to obtain detailed population figures. Tribal representatives were instructed to join Moses and Aaron in the taking of a comprehensive census, obviously to give confidence to all that it was carried out appropriately. Thus, at the opening of Numbers, G-d begins with instructions to Moses concerning these and related matters and chapters 1–4 are devoted to describing their fulfillment.

The following are specifically narrated: taking a census; division of the twelve tribes into four *degalim* of three tribes each (military units; *degel* possibly designates an identifying “banner”); assignment of positions for encamping and traveling; appointment of the tribe of Levi as Tabernacle servitors, assistants to

the priests, and designation of their leaders; obtaining the Levites’ numbers and delineation of their responsibilities.

The military dimension is most prominent in this census – manpower information according to tribes was required in order to be ready for the battles in which they would soon be engaged. Indeed, the census count was described as constituting *kol yoseh sabah* (“all who go forth to the army”), a phrase mentioned in G-d’s introductory instructions and repeated with the recording of each tribe’s numbers as well as with the grand total. The word *sabah*, by itself, refers to an organized formation of units, whether military or not, such as the array of the components of heaven and earth (Gen. 2:1). But the term *yoseh sabah* (“go forth to the alignment”) – the basic locution of our context – invariably appears with reference to military service. With the Levites, who do not participate in military service, *sabah* refers to the sanctuary service corps and the attached verb is never *yoseh* (go forth), but usually a form of *ba* (come).

The census counted males of twenty years of age and older; no upper age limiting who was to be counted was mentioned. This passage may have considered all such males without exception to be *yoseh sabah*, eligible for the military. This may be because the anticipated war was for the conquest of the land of Israel, a mandatory war, מִלְחֵמַת חֻבָּה or מִלְחֵמַת מִצְרָיִם in later terminology. Perhaps this lack of exemption was a precedent for the Mishnaic ruling (*m. Sotah* 8:7) that declares that the military exemptions specified in Deuteronomy 20 and 24:5 are inapplicable to such a war. (In the classifications for vow-connected valuations of people of Lev. 27:1-8, the law does differentiate between those twenty to sixty years of age and those above sixty.)

In the fortieth-year census recorded in Numbers 26, a highlighted purpose of the endeavor was to ensure equitable distribution of the land (Num. 26:52-56), a consideration not mentioned in our census. Of course this consideration was also of vital importance in the second year given that the nation was expected to enter the land shortly. One wonders what accounts for the omission. In addition, one wonders why in the Numbers 26 account the term *yoseh sabah* is attested only once, in the introduction (v. 2), in contrast to the frequent mention of it in our account. Of course the

military dimension was as relevant in the fortieth year as in the second year.

We may assume that the composition of the narrative of Numbers 1 took place after the transgression that caused the deferment of the nation's entry to the land until the fortieth year. Perhaps it was even written at the same time as was the account of the fortieth year census (see the discussion in *b. Git.* 60a regarding the method employed for writing the Torah). If both accounts were written at the same time it is possible that they were narrated in a complementary manner. In recording the first census, in acknowledgment of the lengthy postponement of entering the land, the consideration regarding land distribution was omitted. It was "relegated" to the account of the fortieth-year census since at the later time it was a most pressing issue. The military angle was stressed in the first census since the need for military preparation is always relevant. It should be noted that such "silent" intended intertextual associations do not violate the sequential progression of the narrative.

Viewing the accounts of the two censuses as complementary, each shedding light on the other, opens a window of understanding onto other aspects of them. In our discussion on the census numbers in our next study, we will cite several examples of intended complementarity in viewing the two sets of numbers.

3. Regarding the Levites

At the beginning of Numbers 1, G-d instructs Moses to take a census of the Israelite people. He is to have Aaron assist him and heads of the twelve tribes with them (Num. 1:2-16). The latter are called forth by individual names and with public honor: "The elect of the assembly, chieftains of their ancestral tribes, heads of the clans of Israel" (v. 16). The tribe of Levi was not included in this counting; although Aaron may be considered chieftain of the Levites, he was here summoned as a national leader, not on behalf of his tribe. The census taking is carried out promptly (in a manner similar to and recorded in terminology reflective of censuses of the ancient Near East) and the individual totals of the twelve tribes are given as well as the grand total of the Israelites. At the conclusion of the counting of the twelve tribes the

narrative mentions that the Levites were not included in the count (v. 47).

The following verses (48-49) inform us that G-d [had] instructed Moses not to count the tribe of Levi together with the rest of the nation since they were to be appointed over the Tabernacle and its accoutrements. Undoubtedly, G-d had communicated that message to Moses before beginning the census, for how else would he know to exclude the Levites. The text does not indicate why that information was placed afterwards.

Recording the Levite information in such a delayed and muted manner may reflect the approach Moses took to accomplishing the sensitive goal of installing the Levites in the prominent role of sanctuary servitors. Prior to establishment of the Tabernacle, although the Torah does not state so explicitly, it is likely that the firstborn males served as priests, as stated in the Mishnah (*m. Zebah.* 14:4). This would have been in accordance with the widespread practice in many cultures of the ancient Near East. In addition, the chieftains probably also played a prominent role in the sanctuary. The process of totally excluding these two distinguished classes from Tabernacle service had previously begun when the priesthood, charged with the most essential sanctuary service, was granted to Aaron and his sons.

The sanctuary was the recipient of many types of gifts from all members of the nation and often accumulated great wealth. Sanctuary leaders could wield significant power and had opportunities to abuse their positions and exploit the public. This often was the case throughout history. The Torah's program sought sanctuary officiants with an extraordinarily high degree of commitment to its values and to transmitting them to the nation. Firstborn and chieftains were not given any role in sanctuary leadership because these categories of leaders usually had their own goals and agendas and generally could not be expected to set the necessary high standard of religious leadership for the nation. Of course Torah law mandated many strictures to prevent priestly misbehavior, but regulations on their own are usually not adequate to prevent problems.

Even though Moses was acting upon instructions from G-d, he undoubtedly assumed that there would be

complaints on the selections of sanctuary officiants by men of high standing (correctly, it turned out, as attested by the later rebellions). Accordingly, it appears that he proceeded cautiously, honoring and paying due respect to the chieftains and highlighting their responsibilities as heads of their tribes, while citing the Levites in a low-profile manner and only at the end.

The Torah does not provide an explanation as to why the tribe of Levi, the tribe from which Moses stemmed, was assigned the responsibility of having the ongoing involvement with the sanctuary that it had. This also is the case as regards the selection of Aaron, also a Levite, as high priest and his children as priests. Many assume that we are dealing with a tribe whose forebears were of a higher religious caliber, and whose leaders possessed a deeper commitment to the values G-d looks for than did the leaders of the other tribes, and who transmitted these values to their children. The Torah provides substantial symbolic references to such a status (see our *Parashat Va'era Part II* study).

An example of the Levites' possessing a deeper commitment to the essential values of the covenant than others is their exemplary behavior associated with the golden calf episode. It was they who responded to Moses' call מִי לֵה' אֵלַי ("whoever is for Hashem [come] to me" [Exod. 32:26-29]). On that occasion, in a cryptic comment recorded in the text after the Levites concluded their faithful and courageous deeds, Moses said to them: מְלֵאוּ יְדֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם לֵה'... וְלָתַת עָלֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרַכָּהּ ("dedicate yourselves this day to Hashem... that He will place upon you this day a blessing" [Exod. 32:29]). The term מְלֵאוּ יְדֵיכֶם (literally: "fill your hands," which possibly may have originally referred to placing something in the hands of one being given a responsibility) connotes initiation to a position of responsibility. There was no explicit indication of divine approval for that statement of Moses although it may be assumed.

In his fortieth-year survey of events, Moses refers to the selection of the Levites "to carry the Ark of the Covenant of Hashem" in a context (with some ambiguity) that deals with the calf apostasy (Deut. 10:8-9). In his blessing to the tribe of Levi in his farewell speech (Deut. 33:9), he apparently again

made reference to that episode as instrumental in the tribe's selection. (See *Numbers Rab.* 1:10).

In any event, it cannot be gainsaid that the selection of a single tribe to be devoted to the priesthood could have significant advantages and raise the priesthood to heights that might otherwise be unattainable. Fathers would hopefully set an example and teach their sons about priestly responsibilities and the requirements of living at a higher level of sanctity than other Israelites from an early age. This would provide the possibility of a much greater knowledge of the many relevant details concerning the priesthood and a nurturing of commitment to religious service from early childhood.

4. Further Regarding the Levites

In chapters 3 and 4 the Levites are identified, their males of one-month-old and over are counted and they are exchanged for the firstborn males of the Israelites. The count of their males thirty to fifty years of age is taken for the purpose of sanctuary service and their responsibilities are delineated. We will elaborate on some of these details.

The introduction to chapter 3 states, "These are the *toldot* (children, generations) of Aaron and Moses" (Num. 3:1). Strangely, only the children of Aaron are then mentioned. The sages derived an edifying concept from this, that when one teaches another person's child Torah, that child is accounted as his own (*b. Sanh.* 19b). However, that does not explain why Moses' children are not mentioned.

S.D. Luzzato interpreted this unusual construction as intended to set an example from Moses. The passage is focused only on children who had leadership roles; they are the ones the reader must know about. The heading, "These are the *toldot* of Aaron and Moses" is following standard form; if there are no notable children of one or the other it does not contradict the heading. This brings out the point that Moses' children were not given such roles and demonstrates that he did not use his position to accord special privileges to his offspring in the manner widely practiced by leaders of the ancient world (as well as of the present-day world).

In the first Levite census, males of one-month-old and over were counted, reflecting the fact that the whole

tribe was being appropriated by G-d. Each male had to be presented to G-d in the exchange-redemption for the Israelite firstborn, for at the time of the death of the Egyptian firstborn G-d sanctified the Israelite firstborn as His (3:13).^{*} The Levites' animals were also exchanged for the firstborn animals of the Israelites. In the exchange, there were 273 more Israelite firstborn than Levites. The "overage" individuals were required to redeem themselves by payment of five *sheqalim*. (The selection of the 273 may have been based upon drawing of lots.)

In accordance with the tribe's importance, the Levite count included a genealogy of its three branches, which were treated individually as far as encampment and responsibilities were concerned. Their encampment positions were around the Tabernacle on three sides, with each of the tribe's branches stationed on one side. Moses and the priests were located on the most important eastern side, the side of the entrance to the Tabernacle. These four encampment positions comprised an honorary and protective ring around the sanctuary and separated it from the surrounding encampments of the twelve tribes. A responsibility of the Levites and the priests that was particularly emphasized was to guard against trespass, *וְהַיָּזְרֹהֶרֶב יָמֵת* ("the stranger who comes near is put to death" [1:51; 3:10, 3:38; 18:7]). In order to prevent non-priests coming forth, presumably to perform cultic service and possibly undermine the system, the most stringent protective measures were to be taken.

A second count of Levite males focused on those who were of age to perform service. For this purpose they were counted from thirty through fifty years of age (Num. 4:3), in contrast to non-Levite males who were counted from twenty years of age and up. This ensured that only mature and settled individuals, in the fullness of their judgment and strength, would serve in the sanctuary.

In a later passage, subsequent to the purification and dedication of the Levites, G-d instructed Moses to have the Levites report for service at twenty-five years of age (Num. 8:24). It is unlikely that the younger age is a modification in the law, as some conjecture, considering it to be in recognition of their having manifested great diligence and competency. It rather appears – as the Sifre and Talmud maintain – that the five-year difference refers to a training and

apprenticeship period that was instituted. Indeed, the text implies this. With the thirty-year citation it states: *כָּל בָּא לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלָאכָה בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד*, "all who came to the corps to do work in the Tent of Meeting"; they report for work, plain and simple. The formulation associated with twenty-five years of age is, *יָבוֹא לַעֲבֹד* *צָבָא בְּעִבְדַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד*, which translates as "[they] should come to congregate in formation around the work going on at the Tent of Meeting," consistent with observing and learning.

The details concerning the dedication procedures of the Levites are presented in Numbers 8, subsequent to the description of the altar dedication ceremony.

Our *parasha* concludes with Hashem exhorting Moses and Aaron to take care not to "cut off" the Kohathites, that is, to cause them to die, when they approach the Holy of Holies to dispense their transport responsibility. This branch of the Levites had the most important task, the carrying of the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting, a most perilous responsibility. Inappropriate contact with the holy might result in a fatal outcome, a possibility that should be prevented by proper management and extra care. The priests are instructed to assign each Kohathite his specific post and responsibility, which includes sequence and timing. It is imperative that "they should not come [enter] and see *כִּבְלַע* the holy lest they die" (Num. 4:20).

Some interpret *kebala*⁴ (literally: when swallowing) to mean, when "covering" the holy articles, an act easily recognized as "swallowing"; others take it to be saying, "when dismantling"; a third school interprets it to mean "even for an instant," taking the usage to derive from the brief duration of a person's act of swallowing (see Job 7:19).

In any event, viewing the ark is a most serious matter. When the Philistines returned the captured ark after it caused havoc in their cities, it arrived at Beth-shemesh. The Levites placed the ark on a large stone and the local residents offered sacrifices to G-d. Subsequently G-d struck a mighty blow at the men of Beth-shemesh for having gazed upon the ark (*כִּי רָאוּ*) *בְּאֵרוֹן ה'* peoples' wrongdoing was. The *ב* following *רָאוּ* is surely significant – it would not be required if the intention is merely to state "because they saw the ark

of Hashem.” It may connote critical looking, with the ך indicating “at,” in the sense of examining or “contrary to”, or perhaps unnecessary looking, therefore disrespectful. The sages interpreted it to mean that the men continued their harvesting, that is, they went about their business as usual, or they engaged in idle talk in its presence, not according it its due respect (*b. Sotah* 35a). It may be that they looked at the ark but only looked, and left it uncovered, returning to their business while not taking any action to cover it.

The exact details of what the blow entailed is not clear as the verse is ambiguous (it mentions seventy men and fifty thousand men), but it included death as the people mourned. Most commentators assume that seventy men died. The message is that a full measure

of conscientiousness in the presence of the holy is an imperative of the highest order.

Endnote

* The key word here is obviously לִּי, “to Me” or “Mine,” which appears four times in the passage, more than any other word. It is the word with which G-d expresses the thought that the firstborn belong to Him and henceforth the Levites, replacing them, will belong to Him. The number of words in the passage subsequent to the superscription, that is the number of words of G-d’s proclamation, is forty, the *gematria* (numerical equivalent) of לִּי (see our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*).

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