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ד"ס

Parashat Pekudeh Part I

1. Regarding Identical Census Numbers

The beginning of *Parashat Pekudeh* (Exod. 35:21 ff.) provides an accounting of the gold, silver and copper (very likely, bronze) used in Tabernacle construction. Besides the amounts received, it details other information concerning these items, several particulars of which we will discuss in this and the following sections. Regarding the silver, it states that the source of all the silver used in construction was from the half-shekel of silver that each man of twenty years of age and over was required to give in association with the census. It specifies the uses of the silver: for casting the one hundred foundation sockets for the sanctuary wallboards and *parokhet* beams, for hooks for the beams that are placed around the courtyard's perimeter upon which linen drapes were hung, for the overlay around the tops of those beams and for the decorative bands around them. The total silver received was "a half-shekel by sanctuary weight for each man...for the 603,550" (Exod. 38:26).

As the Tabernacle assembly date was the first day of the first month of the second year from the Exodus (40:17), a question arises. At the beginning of the book of Numbers, on the first day of the second month of the second year, G-d instructed Moses to conduct a census of Israelite men twenty years of age and over. Moses conducted that census with the help of the tribal chieftains and the grand total there was also 603,550 (Num. 1:46). As the latter count was at the minimum more than one month (probably many months) after the census that was based on the half-shekel payments, are these two distinct counts with an identical total? * Excerpts from various commentators' attempts at reconciliation follow.

Rashi (Exod. 30:16): "There were two counts. One was at the beginning of the contributions after Yom Kippur [in the seventh month, immediately following

the traditional date for Moses' final descent from Mount Sinai] and one in Iyar [second month] of the second year, after the Tabernacle was established. If you ask, 'Is it possible that in both counts Israel was the same number...since it is impossible that there were not some nineteen-year-olds who became twenty by the time of the second count?' the answer is that relative to people's age both counts were in the same year...for regarding matters associated with the Exodus, the year begins with Nissan [first month]...but people's age are counted in accordance with years of the world, from Tishri [seventh month]." (See *Num. Rab.* 1:8.)

Ramban: "I am astonished [at Rashi]. How is it possible that in such a large assembly there were not hundreds, even thousands, of deaths? According to him, in about seven months [seventh month of the first year to second month of the second year] nobody died. But it states that there were men impure from contact with the dead (in the first month of the second year [Num. 9:8])! Also, we count people's age from the day of birth...It would be more correct to say...many died in the seven months while many turned twenty during that time and it happened that those who became twenty exactly equaled those who died. However, in my opinion [the answer is]...in the first census the tribe of Levi was counted as they had not yet been selected whereas in the second census they were not counted...and those who became twenty during the time between the two censuses were about twenty thousand...[exactly equaling those who died plus the Levites.]"

Rosh: "We may be astonished at him [Ramban]. What is his correction, for the question remains: How is it that the numbers are exactly identical?"

Ibn Ezra (Short Commentary): "It is surprising that the numbers in the second year were identical with

those of the first year. But it is so. For after thirty-nine years [comparing the totals of the fortieth year census in Numbers 26 to those of the first year census] the difference between the two totals is only 1,820 [603,550 – 601,730].”**

As far as the Levites are concerned (see Ramban’s statement above), Ibn Ezra holds that they were not counted even in the first census. He bases his opinion on the verse: “At that time Hashem separated the tribe of Levi to carry the ark” (Deut. 10:8, a reference to their praiseworthy behavior associated with the golden calf episode; see Exod. 32:26-29). As a tribe designated to be servitors to Hashem, Ibn Ezra assumes that they were already exempt from the military muster and excluded from inheritance of the land from the time of the golden calf and therefore were not included in the first census. It was only their formal initiation ceremony that was not performed until later.

Regarding Ibn Ezra’s “evidence” from the relatively small difference of only 1,820 less individuals after thirty-nine years, it should be borne in mind that the later census followed the decree that all twenty-year-olds and over were to die during the forty years. Thus, the two census numbers embrace very different age spans. In the first, the count included the men over sixty years of age – there was no directive to exclude them, no reason to do so and it would be difficult to imagine excluding them from receiving a portion in the land. Even if those over sixty were not counted (a distinction found in the “valuations” table of Lev. 27:3), the difference of 1,820 in a group of more than 600,000 only indicates a basically stable population. But it does not prove that the probability for identical totals in two counts half a year apart is less than remote and the question we are addressing is only based on the improbability of identical totals.

Cassuto: Only one actual census was taken. Before the Tabernacle was constructed, only a raw count was kept; the names of the half-shekel donors were recorded on tablets together with their family-clan and tribal affiliations. In the book of Numbers count, however, the information that had been collected was categorized and subtotaled according to tribes and family clans. Since the size of allotments in the promised land required accurate population details – a matter then expected to be imminently relevant – the

later collation was done in the presence of tribal chieftains.

However, from the tenor of the census passage in the book of Numbers it does not appear that the counting was of previously recorded written records but rather of actual individuals. The command begins with, “Count the heads of the whole Israelite assembly according to family clans.” Subsequently it states: “and they assembled the whole ‘*edah*’ on the first day of the second month מִשְׁפָּחָתָם (‘‘and they organized themselves in birth order according to families’’ [Num. 1:18]). Clearly, the people were formally organized and the census was one of counting actual individuals. Moreover, in Exodus, there is no mention of taking tribal and clan information. And would not the chieftains desire to be present at the counting that “counts” in order to ensure that there was no error in the recording of the information on the tablets if that information was expected to be used for land distribution? The half-shekel count is not described with any such formality.

But why was it necessary to conduct two national censuses within a few months of each other, given that changes occur daily? In any event, an accurate census is only a good approximation of the population during a particular period of time; when a census of a large population is completed, it is possible that the total does not correspond exactly to the population of any particular day. The Numbers census was required to obtain the subtotals by tribe and clan for division of the land, a matter the nation was not focused on in the time frame following the golden calf episode and before construction of the Tabernacle that is the setting of the book of Exodus count. The priorities then were construction of the Tabernacle and the full restoration of the covenant with the proper relationship with Hashem. The count at that time was associated with knowing the amount of silver that was available to the artisans to allocate according to its uses.

Thus, it is possible that there was only one official census in that period of time. The Numbers count, which was an all-out, major administrative endeavor for a purpose that required the most accurate numbers possible to assure fairness in land allocation, provided the official authoritative count for that period of time. The half-shekel payments, which were given by each

man individually, undoubtedly over a period of time and apparently without classification and cross-checking, was not thought to provide the official national population number. When the time came to incorporate the accounting totals in the Torah, the meticulously detailed figures from the Numbers census had already become official for that time frame. As they were not much different from whatever the count of half-shekels was, the official figures were used for the earlier Exodus count as well as for recording the artisan allocations.

2. The Census as Part of the Atonement Process for the Golden Calf

There are variations in how the particulars of the gold, silver and copper are recorded (Exod. 38:24-29). The text speaks of, “All the gold prepared for the work, for all sanctuary work: the elevation offering of gold amounted to...” and “the elevation offering of copper was...” But as regards the silver – described between the gold and copper – the Torah mentions only the mandatory half-shekels, omitting “elevation offerings.” In a context of enthusiastic and generous giving of all types of materials as the Tabernacle case was, surely some silver other than that of the half-shekels was donated. It may have come from people who were not counted, namely, women and men under twenty years of age, as well as from men who chose to give silver items separately from the mandatory half-shekel. Indeed, following the verses describing gifts of gold jewelry and yarns, the Torah explicitly states, “All who chose to make gifts of silver or copper brought them” (35:24), clearly indicating that silver was received above and beyond the half-shekels. Why was that silver omitted in the accounting?

Some explain that the accounting referred only to what was used for construction, not to what was received, although all that was donated was specifically for the Tabernacle. This is supported by the fact that the accounting is provided after all the Tabernacle articles were completed. Regardless, the next question is, how is it that the silver from the half-shekel payments turned out to be precisely the amount required for the various uses of silver?

It appears that G-d’s intention was that only the silver of the half-shekels was to be used for the silver needs

of Tabernacle construction, regardless of the quantity of silver that would be received, and that all the silver of the half-shekel payments should be so used. The half-shekel total would be divided among the required silver uses; the amount allocated to each item would be determined according to the item’s requirement and the total available.

Such a policy concerning the half-shekels supports the view that the atonement payment it constituted was not a generic tactic designed to prevent a plague that would be associated with the taking of a census in and of itself. It would then have been the very fact of making the payment that represented the individual that would have been essential. Rather, the objective of the half-shekel payments constituted a special atonement procedure for the particular situation that then obtained. It was a specific requirement that each individual be equally involved in setting the foundation of the Tabernacle and that the foundation should be established only with the atonement payments. Such a designation is consistent with the concept of the payment being a corrective for the national failing of the golden calf transgression (see our study *Parashat Ki Tissa Part I*) and that “it shall be for the Israelites a remembrance before Hashem to atone for your lives” (30:16).

This understanding may be the reason why in discussing the gold, the accounting of which immediately preceded that of the silver, only the amount received is given, but no mention is made of its use. Usage is introduced with the silver (38:27), as with that element it is a critical factor. (Once introduced, usage is also provided for the copper.)

The atonement payment was not set in gold since that would have been beyond the means of many. A half-shekel of silver, however, although certainly significant (excavations have discovered its weight to be about six grams), was a feasible amount for all to pay, and when combined would be a substantial quantity that could achieve a most worthy objective.

3. “As Hashem Had Commanded Moses”

The accounting of the gold, silver and copper concluded the discussion of the construction of the Tabernacle furnishings. Verse 39:1 is a transition to a description of the fashioning of the priestly vestments.

Beginning with that verse until the end of the book of Exodus, there are a great many attestations of the formula *כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת מֹשֶׁה* (“in accordance with what Hashem had commanded Moses”) attached to the details of fulfilling G-d’s instructions concerning the Tabernacle. Prior to that verse, in the earlier phases of fulfilling Tabernacle instructions, this formula is not attested and neither is any similar explicit acknowledgement that the Israelites abided by Hashem’s instructions. The fact that this commendation did not begin until the work was well under way seems to coincide with Moses’ subdued disposition concerning the Israelites after the golden calf; it teaches that they continually demonstrated that they were sincerely committed to restoration of the covenant and at a point their commitment became convincing.

In the section regarding the priestly vestments (39:1-32), which, as the text points out, brings the construction of the sanctuary and production of all items associated with it to a close (v. 32), this formula of faithfulness is attested eight times. The eighth instance, and only that instance, includes the word “all” – *כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת מֹשֶׁה* (“in accordance with *all* that Hashem had commanded Moses”) – as appropriate to a concluding verse. Once again, the Torah employs the covenant-signifying number eight in the textual backdrop to reflect the commitment to the covenant in what the narrative is describing.

The section that describes the assembly of the Tabernacle (40:17-33) comprises eight distinct subsections (all separated by paragraph breaks in the Masoretic Text). Each of the first seven of these subsections also concludes with *כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת מֹשֶׁה* (“in accordance with what Hashem had commanded Moses”). In accordance with the section’s subject matter and rhythm, the reader anticipates appearance of this formula at the conclusion of the eighth subsection as well (v. 33); it is surprising that it is not repeated there. That passage ends with, “And Moses

concluded the work.” However, the unfulfilled expectation of the standard formula primes the reader for a more actual indication of compliance with the divine will. The following verse states, “And the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and Hashem’s glory filled the Tabernacle.” Rather than merely state that the work proceeded in accordance with what G-d commanded Moses, the Torah informs us that the work was concluded and the Israelites’ efforts at rapprochement with G-d were successful. G-d ratified the covenant renewal and He began to dwell in the midst of the nation.

It should be noted that in the verses that speak of anointing and sanctifying the Tabernacle, its vessels and the priests (40:9-16), the two roots of *מִשְׁחָה* (anoint) and *קִדְּשׁוּ* (sanctify), which are key to the purpose of the overall enterprise, appear eight times each.

Endnotes

* In the deeper intention of the Torah these numbers appear symbolic, and it is difficult not to so take them. (See our study on Numbers 1 where much evidence is marshaled toward understanding the Torah’s intention to be such, and our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*.) Nevertheless, it remains important to also interpret the plain-sense meaning.

** The decrease of 1,820, itself a multiple of seventy (70 x 26), and which results in large part from two tribes having a diminished count of exactly 8,000 each, is very likely also symbolic. (In addition, 1,820 is also the number of times the Tetragrammaton appears in the Torah.) See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*.