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בס"ד

Parashat Ki Tissa Part II On the King David Census

1. The Narrative

The King David census (2 Sam. 24) is a subject associated with the occurrence of a plague, which, at the king's choice, turned out to be pestilence. A number of leading commentators interpreted that narrative as linked with our *Ki Tissa* census passage (Exod. 30). We will take this opportunity to comment on the King David census and the larger narrative framework in which it is embedded and to demonstrate that in peshat there is no apparent relationship between that census and that of our *parasha*. (A variant account of the King David census appears in 1 Chronicles 21 with many significant differences, but this study will focus on the 2 Samuel account, which is contiguous with the previous narratives of Samuel.)

The episode begins with “Hashem’s anger continued to flare up against Israel.” Contrary to the standard biblical practice the text does not provide an explicit reason for this (Rashi: “I don’t know why”) and the reader is left to search for the necessary clarification. The verse continues: “so He incited David against them, saying, go and count Israel and Judah” (2 Sam. 24:1). In what way does G-d’s inciting the king against the nation connect to compelling him to take a census and how does taking a census connect to G-d’s anger? And, of course, the most basic question must be answered, why is G-d angry?

The king ordered Joab, head of the military, to take the census. Joab was extremely opposed to the idea – as were the other military leaders – and vigorously pleaded against it. It is significant that in his arguments Joab did not mention any relevant law or tradition or any concern with inducing a plague. It is evident that he did not believe such considerations to exist or to be relevant. He focused on the lack of any need for the count, asking the king for a reason, a question the king did not respond to.

The military leaders’ aversion to the enterprise seems to reflect the reality of the times – a census invariably fostered great apprehension among the populace. At that time in Israel only the military was capable of carrying out such an undertaking, and since those counted would be men of military age, a census was thought of as a possible prelude to war, which it often was. And war, besides bringing the sword, often brought destruction and sieges that caused famine and pestilence. This was often enough the case that there was a common notion throughout the ancient Near East that census-taking led to plagues. When a census was not for war it generally was employed for taxing purposes or to draft long-term laborers for governmental projects, disrupting domestic life and causing widespread hardship. There are records of rebellions that were triggered by census taking. Tribal loyalties, competing with the central government, were still strong in Israel and a census might stoke them. So although Joab knew this census was not for the purpose of war or taxes he felt it wrong to aggravate the public for trivial reasons.

Although he did not provide a reason, the king insisted, pressing Joab and the military leaders – וַיִּקְרָא אֶל יוֹאָב וְאֶל כָּל שָׂרֵי הַחַיִּל (“The king’s word was strong to Joab and upon the officers of the military” [v. 4]) – and of course they obeyed. After more than nine months the results came in: Israel was found to have 800,000 men and Judah 500,000 men, for a total of 1.3 million men. As decimal multiples of eight and thirteen, these numbers appear to be symbolic of the covenant and monotheism, as Rabbi S. D. Sassoon has demonstrated.* Perhaps it is an indication that at the end of David’s reign the national rank and file was religiously in order for the most part, despite the fact that there was a significant group with whom G-d was angry. We will address the difficulty later in the study.

Subsequently, before any mention of a plague, David felt conscience-stricken for what he had done. He

confessed to G-d: “I have grievously sinned in what I have done, please remove the iniquity of Your servant, for I have acted foolishly” (v. 10). But the precise nature of his sin is not provided. Meanwhile, G-d grants the prophet Gad a message for the king. The next morning, without any mention of linkage to the census, the prophet presents David three possible scenarios of punishment with the instruction to choose one. Either the land would be subject to seven years of famine (some variants read three), he would have to be in flight from his adversaries for three months or there would be three days of pestilence (דָּבָר) in the land. The king chose the latter because the people would then be totally in the hands of Hashem whose mercies are great, while the other options would place the people in the hands of man (a famine is often the result of a siege).

As the plague raged, 70,000 in Israel fell. This decimal multiple of seven also appears to be a symbolic number, probably indicating elimination of the remnant of those refusing to accept covenantal standards, the “old guard,” at whom Hashem was angry.* At that point, apparently on the first day of the plague, Hashem intervened. While the angel was poised to strike Jerusalem, at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite – the site that eventually became the location of the Temple – G-d had compassion and stopped the angel from continuing.

In the following verse the king protested to G-d that it was he who had sinned and retribution should be directed to him and his family; why were the people being struck? Although G-d’s decision to end the plague had already been made, David had not yet been aware of that fact and it was important that his statement be recorded, for it manifested a tremendous step forward on his part. These verses cannot be explained as an instance of sequence reversal as G-d’s decision is embedded in the previous context. It does appear that the 70,000 fallen played a role in G-d’s renunciation of further retribution.

Gad instructed the king to establish an altar at the site. The king purchased the site for fifty *shekalim*, made sacrifices, and the last words of the book are: וַיַּעַתֵּר ה' לְאַרְצָא וַתַּעֲצֹר הַמִּגַּפָּה מֵעַל יִשְׂרָאֵל (“Hashem responded to the land and the plague was terminated from upon Israel”).**

2. The Previous Narrative

The only other explicit instance of G-d’s anger against Israel manifest during David’s reign was in relation to King Saul’s bloody treatment of the Gibeonites (2 Sam. 21), a subject narrated shortly before our account. Indeed, the census episode – which closes the book – appears to have been intended as a direct continuation of the Gibeonite story. Virtually all the subject matters dealt with in the two and one-third intervening chapters are presented as summary vignettes, celebrations and concluding items to the book that are not part of the narrative flow. They include short accounts of unusual exploits, David’s song and his declaration of inspiration, the heroes associated with him and examples of their heroics. It seems possible that these particulars were placed where they are to allow the census story with its comforting ending to close the book. In any event, the careful reader expects to find a close connection between the Gibeonite narrative and the census story, especially as the latter began with the statement that “Hashem’s anger continued to flare up against Israel.”

Clearly, we should look for the cause of the further divine anger in sinful behavior manifest in that preceding narrative.

There we read that during David’s reign Hashem brought a famine to the land for three consecutive years. Upon seeking word from Hashem as to its cause, the king was informed – perhaps through the Urim and Thummim – that it was “because of Saul and the house of bloodguilt, for he had killed the Gibeonites” (2 Sam. 21:1). In his zealotry for Israel, Saul had sought to exterminate this last remnant of the Amorites, violating the oath Israel had sworn to them that guaranteed them that they may live among Israel (Josh. 9). The widespread retribution for Saul’s transgression was probably due to the widespread support he was given for his policy of eliminating the Gibeonites. Although a king may ultimately determine a nation’s policy, his decision invariably reflects the position of the national leadership, which generally nurtures as well as represents the disposition of the public. This is especially the case in a matter such as the campaign against the Gibeonites. G-d’s delay in imposing the retribution on the Israelites was probably attributable to His patience, giving the transgressors time to reconsider their ways.

In any event, David understood that G-d's termination of the famine was dependant on coming to terms with the Gibeonites. Accordingly, he asked the Gibeonites how Israel might atone for the sinful treatment that had been meted out to them. They responded that they had no interest in material compensation but they did have one demand. They requested that seven of Saul's descendants be "given" to them for public execution by impalement at the former king's ruling center (2 Sam. 21:6). The number seven was probably chosen as symbolic of a full measure, in accordance with contemporary norms.

David consented, apparently promptly. The narrative does not record any protest or attempt to negotiate a more moral resolution. He handed over two sons and five grandsons of Saul to the Gibeonites, who executed them by public impalement. (The cynical may have thought that David readily agreed because he thus performed – in what might technically be construed to be a "legal" manner – the deadly practice of other kings, which he had previously foregone. This action would almost certainly preclude the possibility of a previous king's heirs reclaiming the kingdom.)

Many months later the king was informed that the impaled individuals had not been buried and were being protected from scavengers by Saul's concubine, the mother of his two executed sons. David had the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son, as well as the seven impaled, respectably interred in their ancestral tomb. The last words of the passage state, וַיַּעֲתֶר אֶל־קִיָּם, לְאָרְצָן אַחֲרָיִם כִּן ("G-d responded to the plea of the land afterwards"), words similar to those employed at the end of the census narrative (2 Sam. 24:25), if slightly less comprehensive.

David's behavior is most difficult to understand. A human court is prohibited from putting to death children for the sins of their father and of course of their grandfather or of anybody else (Deut. 24:16), and a king is likewise so restricted (2 Kgs. 14:6). Some commentators conjecture that those put to death were active in Saul's administration and may have participated in the smiting of the Gibeonites. But the grandchildren must have been very young at the time and that consideration could not have played a role. Moreover, David spared Mephibosheth, son of Jonathan, because of his own personal commitment to Jonathan. Mephibosheth – lame in both legs (2 Sam.

9:13) – was five years old when Saul and Jonathan died (4:4) and surely did not participate in the atrocities. He would not have needed to be spared if those put to death had participated in the smiting of the Gibeonites.

In the Talmud (*b. Yebam. 79a*), it is assumed that David tried to appease the Gibeonites but they insisted on the executions. He then received directives via the Urim and Thummim concerning each of the seven to comply with the Gibeonite request. Of course, the absence of any mention of such a critically important explanation in the biblical text indicates it was not proffered as peshat.

Regarding the question as to how children were put to death for their father's sin, in that talmudic passage Rabbi Hiya the son of Abba stated in the name of Rabbi Johanan: "It is preferable that an item (אִוֶּת אֶחָת) be uprooted from the Torah than that the name of Heaven be desecrated in public." The nation's chieftains had made a sacred oath by Hashem's name to the Gibeonites that they would be allowed to live within Israel and they violated the oath! However, this extreme explanation is an aggadic statement, part of a larger aggadic passage, which runs counter to the plain meaning of the text. Perhaps we may explain it as follows. Since by talmudic times there no longer was fear that innocent children would be put to death for the sins of their fathers, Rabbi Hiya may have used the question and textual opportunity to formulate a powerful statement to reinforce the importance of fulfilling one's oath. It often was necessary to strengthen people's commitments to their pledges in the face of difficulties to do so. But as אֵין מִקְרָא יוֹצֵא מִיָּדֵי פְּשׁוּטוֹ ("Scripture does not depart from its straightforward meaning"), we must assume that David himself made the decision to put the seven to death, as stated (2 Sam. 21:6).

3. In Answer to the Question

Why was G-d still angry at Israel? Why did He incite David against them? Some commentators conjecture that even after satisfaction of the Gibeonites' request a significant portion of the Israelite populace did not internalize the message and may still have identified with Saul's campaign of "ethnic cleansing." But such an explanation has no basis in the text. Moreover, in stating that G-d incited David against them, the text implies that David also had sinned.

The Gibeonite narrative points to two major failings besides Saul's transgression: David's decision to accede to the request to put innocent people to death and the lack of protest from the leaders. When it came to the matter of the census, Joab and the military leaders protested vigorously, but regarding the gathering of seven of Saul's innocent descendants and delivering them to the Gibeonites for execution the leaders had been silent. David should have refused the Gibeonites' request, insisting that lives of human beings are sacrosanct and cannot be taken for the sins of their father, and some other means of atonement would have to be found. He knew how to stand firm when he wanted to as illustrated in the census narrative.

After the executions G-d responded to the land and terminated the famine despite His extreme dissatisfaction with the behavior of the king and the leaders. After all, Saul's sin was no longer hanging over the nation, unrequited. The innocent Gibeonite blood was "atoned" for, the Gibeonites no longer had a claim against Israel, and the land was redeemed from that transgression. The famine ended, but a new sin was now on the scene and G-d remained angry at Israel.

4. General Discussion

The Ralbag asked: If G-d incited David against the nation to take a census, how could Scripture later state that He punished David for it – the king was not responsible, as he was not acting with free will! His first answer is that we should not take "Hashem incited David against them" as describing the proximate cause of the king's behavior. It is to be understood in a general sense, based on the fact that G-d is the prime cause of all that exists, with no need to postulate that G-d compelled the king to act as he did.

But why should such an expression be employed just here? Some explain that David's persistence against the passionate and unanimous advice of his senior leaders for what obviously must have been trivial, personal reasons to take the census (not even mentioned in the text), was so inexplicable that it was attributed to G-d having incited him. It is the Torah's way to describe a decision deemed bizarre by normal standards. Some interpret the phenomenon of G-d hardening Pharaoh's heart in the face of all that was going on with the plagues in this manner.

Another formulation views the matter as follows: Under the peacetime circumstances that then prevailed, a national census would not normally have been undertaken. Not only the leaders, but David himself would have opposed it. Hashem put in David's heart a strong desire for a census to counteract the overwhelming indications against it, in this way restoring his free will.

The Ralbag's preferred answer is that there is an ellipsis in the verse and the statement should be assumed to be, "David's heart incited him," telling him to take the census. Not that his heart incited him to intentionally seek Israel's harm, but that it moved him to do something for whatever reason that would be negative for the people.

However, considering that the chapter begins with the assertion of Hashem being angry at Israel and immediately follows with an apparent consequence, namely, that He incited David at Israel, the above answers appear inadequate and strained. The simple reading is that G-d incited David because He was still angry. Furthermore, the words in the text, "so He incited David against them, saying, go and count Israel and Judah" (2 Sam. 24:1) are too full and detailed for the other explanations and indicate a straightforward interpretation: G-d manipulated David's heart, thus assuring that he would take the census.

Was the plague a result of taking the census? Joab's articulation of his opposition to the census as well as the king's subsequent expressions of regret make no mention of a law or custom against it. Neither is there any hint of a necessary atonement rite that was supposed to have accompanied it. When Gad announced the coming plague, as well as when it arrived, there was not any mention of it being related to the census. Had there been any violation of a law, either Gad or the other prophet who often interacted with the king, Nathan, would have been expected to caution him or reprimand him. And Gad conversed with the king extensively during the course of the plague. Saadia Gaon's conclusion that the plague did not result from taking the census is surely solidly based in the text.

That the king's conscience troubled him after the census and that he sincerely beseeched Hashem to forgive him does not prove that the census or the

manner in which it was carried out was sinful. As the king thought about it afterwards he concluded that he had sinned. As Saadia maintains, the king may very well have been mistaken in his interpretation, for even prophets are fallible when expressing themselves on what is not specifically a received prophecy. Just as he was wrong the first time, he may have been wrong the second time. Saadia cites in this regard the prophet Samuel mistakenly thinking that Eliab was Hashem's choice to be anointed king (1 Sam. 16:6), and Nathan responding favorably to David's desire to build a temple, only to be reversed by a prophecy that night (1 Chr. 17:2).

Although the king did not violate any specific law concerning taking a census, it is likely that what he did – when done by one acting in accordance with his free will – would be sinful. He subjected the populace to the extended fears and anxieties fostered by a national census that was unnecessary (see *Num. Rab.* 2:17). As the king did not respond to Joab's questioning, and as he was subsequently remorseful without learning of any specific law that he transgressed, deeming what he did "foolish," one may assume that his purposes bordered on vainglorious or haughty desires. In any event, his motives were of a nature that he later found totally unjustifiable.

G-d undoubtedly placed the "foolish" desire into the king's heart only for as long as necessary for the king to have seen the project through to completion. Afterwards, he reverted to his normal character. At that point he could not understand why he did what he had done. He would pray and beg for forgiveness, but would never necessarily discover that his free will had been suspended. We know this only from the prophetic account that had access to G-d's elucidation of His intervention.

Since G-d was angry at Israel and was going to visit a plague upon them, and the plague that ensued was brought directly by Him, why did He compel David to undertake a census? Taking a census does not bring a plague in and of itself. The answer appears to be that it was a method designed to bring several important benefits to bear.

First, in the census case the king taught all the leaders, as well as once again proving to himself, that when he wanted something badly he was able to insist and get

it. That is how he should have been in defending the innocent lives of Saul's descendants against the Gibeonites. And the leaders, as they remonstrated in the census case, should have so done on behalf of those innocents. Introductory to the plague, the census brought out important details that made G-d's anger understandable.

In addition, as explained previously, ancient societies interpreted a census as a sign that a plague may be forthcoming and for good reason. The census often was introductory to war, which brought plagues in its wake. One of the effects a census had on the public – particularly a basically religious public – was to stir movement to national introspection and repentance. G-d did not want to bring the plague without giving the nation a warning, in effect an opportunity to think seriously about its behavior. Thus, immediately upon deciding to act on His anger – that is, to impose retribution – He compelled David to take the census.

It may be that the numbers brought in by the count, decimal multiples of eight and thirteen, symbols of the covenant and basic monotheism,* are indications that G-d's strategy worked. When the 70,000 died in the plague, symbolizing those who remained committed to the "old system," perhaps backers of Saul's "ethnic cleansing" policy or those who considered the Gibeonites justified in their demands, G-d terminated the plague. He did so independently of David's prayer, as the verse sequence teaches. But David's prayer is evidence of his acknowledging both his transgression as well as his leading role in the public's transgression, critical steps in repentance.

Endnotes

* See our study *Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*

** It is noteworthy that the last words are almost identical with the words attested at the plague's termination in the Phinehas episode, וַתַּעֲצֵר הַמַּגֵּפָה מֵעַל וַתִּשְׁרָאֵל (Num. 25:8). That plague was also associated with a census, albeit there they appear in reverse sequence, linked with the words וַיְהִי אֶתְרֵי הַמַּגֵּפָה (26:1), a subject for another study.