

# BAMIDBAR BEFORE SHAVUOS

*by Shlomo Katz*

## Parshas Bamidbar

**Hamaayan / The Torah Spring**  
**Edited by Shlomo Katz**

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**Today's Learning:**  
**Mikvaot 6:4-5**  
**O.C. 199:6-8**  
**Daf Yomi (Bavli): Chullin 120**  
**Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Sotah 35**

It is a longstanding custom to read Parashat Bemidbar on the Shabbat preceding Shavuot. The reason for this is as follows:

The Gemara (Megillah 31b) states that Parashat Bechukotai (last week's parashah) should be read before Shavuot because Shavuot is a New Year's Day and day of judgment - on Shavuot G-d determines the success of the year's fruit harvest. Accordingly, we wish to "dispense with the year's curses as the year ends." (Parashat Bechukotai contains curses on those who abandon the mitzvot.) However, in order not to enter Shavuot with the curses on our minds, we separate them by one week by reading Bemidbar. (Tosfot Megillah 31b.)

Why is Shavuot the day when Hashem determines the fruit harvest? R' Tzadok Hakohen z"l (died 1900) explains that before Adam sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, he was surrounded by abundant fruit trees that had been planted by G-d's own "hands." After his sin, he was cursed that he would have to work the ground to earn his food. However, when Bnei Yisrael received the Torah, they (temporarily) returned to the spiritual level that Adam had before his sin, and thus Shavuot is a propitious time to judge the fruit harvest favorably. (Pri Tzaddik: Vayikra p.209)

R' Moshe of Kobrin z"l (late 18th century) offers another explanation: The Torah (Devarim 20:19) refers to man as a "tree of the field." Man is judged for the fruit harvest on Shavuot based on how he accepts the Torah on this holiday. (Torat Avot)

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*"From twenty years of age and up -- everyone who goes out to the legion among Yisrael -- you shall count them according to their legions." (1:3)*

Many have wondered at the incredible fact that every single tribe had a population that was divisible by ten. R' Meir Simcha Cohen of Dvinsk z"l (died 1926) suggests the following explanation for this phenomenon: As our verse indicates, the purpose of counting the Jewish people was to organize them for war. We learn from several verses in Tanach and from the Talmud Yerushalmi that each brigade in the army of Yisrael had either one hundred men or ten men. Thus, if any tribe had a number of soldiers that was not a multiple of ten, the remaining were not counted because there was no place for them in the army.

(Meshech Chochmah)

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"Bnei Yisrael shall encamp, each man by his banner according to the signs of their fathers' household . . ." (2:2)

Rashi explains that "according to the signs" means: "By the signs which their father Yaakov gave them when they were to carry him out from Egypt, as it is said (Bereishit 50:12), 'His sons did for him exactly as he had commanded them,' for he had commanded that Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun should carry him, having their position at the east side of the bier, Reuven, Shimon, and Gad at the south side, etc."

The Midrash Rabbah elaborates: When Hashem told Moshe to divide the Jewish People into camps, Moshe said, "Now there will be dissension. I will tell Yehuda to be in the east, and he will say, 'I want to be in the south,' and so on with Reuven and Ephraim etc."

Hashem responded, the Midrash continues, "It will not be necessary [for you to persuade them]. They already know their places based on their positions around Yaakov's bier."

R' Moshe Soloveitchik z"l (Switzerland) asks: What is the connection between Yaakov's funeral procession and Bnei Yisrael's travels in the desert? In the former case, each tribe was represented by just one person, and it was a journey of just a few days or weeks. How could that experience

lessen the tribes' desire to choose their own places in the 40-year journey through the desert?

R' Soloveitchik answers: A fundamental lesson in chinuch habanim / education is hidden within the above Rashi and Midrash. Young children (the young Jewish nation represented by Yaakov's twelve sons) face relatively small challenges (what each son's position would be in Yaakov's funeral procession). Some parents are tempted to brush these early challenges aside as too insignificant to address. The reality is, however, that only if we force our young children to face the minor challenges of childhood will we prepare them to face the larger challenges of adulthood. Because the young Jewish nation overcame the yetzer hara to wrangle for a better place in line, therefore their descendants were able to accept their positions in the encampment hundreds of years later.

(Quoted in Otzrotaihem Shel Tzaddikim)

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## Pirkei Avot

*"Torah is acquired by means of 48 qualities, which are: ... (27) knowing one's place ..."*

(Chapter 6)

R' Yehoshua Heschel Rabinowitz z"l (the Manestricher Rebbe; early 20th century) writes: In nearly every year, Parashat Bemidbar is read on the Shabbat preceding Shavuot. The primary lesson of this parashah is: Know your place! (Much of the parashah is about the process of assigning a place in the encampment to each tribe and family.) This is a fitting prelude to Shavuot because, as our Mishnah teaches, knowing one's place - i.e., knowing one's role and one's limitations - is also a prerequisite to acquiring Torah.

R' Rabinowitz adds: Another prerequisite to success in Torah study is prayer. This is also alluded to in our parashah, for it states (2:2), "Each man by his banner according to the signs of their fathers' household." How can one raise his banner, i.e., stake out his own place among those who study Torah? By the sign of his fathers! This is an allusion to prayer, which was innovated by the Patriarchs.

(Erchei Yehoshua: Erech Degalim)

R' Mattisyahu Solomon shlita (Mashgiach of the Lakewood Yeshiva) takes a different approach to the role of prayer in acquiring proficiency in Torah. He asks: Why is prayer not listed among the 48 qualities set forth in our Mishnah? He answers:

Another Mishnah (Avot 1:2) teaches: "The world stands on three things - Torah, Avodah (i.e., prayer) and acts of kindness." This teaches that prayer is an end in itself, just as Torah study is a separate

end in itself. Our Sages teach that G-d causes us to have needs in order to give us reasons to pray. Some people's needs are children, money, etc. Other people feel a need to succeed in Torah study. The way to achieve that success is to develop as many as possible of the 48 qualities in our Mishnah. Prayer, however, is not a means to achieve proficiency in Torah; to the contrary, G-d has caused them to feel a need for Torah greatness in order to give them something for which to pray. Thus, prayer is not one of the 48 qualities.

No matter what a person prays for, he should realize that G-d views prayer as an end in itself. This is equally true when one prays for success in his studies.

(Matnat Chaim: Kinyanim p. 9)

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## Letters from Our Sages

This following letter was written by R' Samson Raphael Hirsch z"l (1808- 1888) to Dr. Isaac Leeser z"l (1806-1868). The writer was the rabbi of Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany and one of the leading warriors for Torah-true Judaism in 19th century Germany. The letter's recipient, a layman, was the spiritual leader of the Orthodox Jewish community in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was also the founder and editor of the monthly, The Occident, the first English language Orthodox periodical in the United States. The letter is reprinted in Shemesh Marpeh, page 231, letter 29.

To Dr. Isaac Leeser, United States B"H, Frankfurt a.M., Wednesday night of Parashat Ki Tetze 5618 [August 18, 1858] Ketivah va'chatimah tovah, peace, and all good things!

His honor:

We suffer from insufficient time, and therefore I must ask your forgiveness that I am answering your pleasing letter only now. When I returned from a long journey, I found your letter together with a great deal of work which forced me to delay answering letters for some time. Today I have some time, and I am using the time to clear away that which is pressing and important.

Honored sir! Do not let your spirit fall. Things are improving here in Germany too. True, progress is slow, but we hope that it touches the fundamentals. Our greatest sorrow is not the treachery of the traitors, but the indifference of the religious. However, this apathy is slowly diminishing, and it is our obligation to not falter but rather to awaken our compatriots - so long as our voice can reach them - and to warn them to come to Hashem's aid against the mighty [see Shoftim 5:23], to protect and save our holy ones. If we do what is expected of us, the Holy One Blessed Is He will do His own when He is ready.

[The rest of the letter addresses two halachic questions sent by Dr. Leiser. One question relates to the status of the child of intermarriage. The other question involves the disinterment of a woman's body in order to bury her in her husband's family plot.]

*The small one, Samson, son of my father and master Raphael Hirsch Frankfurter zatzal*

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page. Text archives from 1990 through the present may be retrieved from <http://www.acoast.com/~sehc/hamaayan/>.

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