

THE GUARANTORS

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Bamidbar

The Guarantors

Parashat Bemidbar, which is devoted in part to the genealogy of the Jewish People, is always read shortly before the holiday of Shavuot. A number of midrashim note that this is no coincidence. One midrash says, for example, that the Torah was given to Bnei Yisrael because of their genealogy.

R' Shmuel Güntzler z"l (1834-1911; rabbi of Oyber Visheve, Hungary) explains in light of another midrash which states: When Yisrael stood at Har Sinai, Hashem asked them, "Who will guarantee your observance of Torah?" Bnei Yisrael answered, "Our forefathers," to which Hashem responded that those were not adequate guarantors. "Our children," Bnei Yisrael then said, and Hashem responded, "Your children are certainly good guarantors." This, the midrash concludes, is the meaning of the verse (Tehilim 8:3), "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings you have established ohz / strength." "Ohz" refers to the Torah, as is written (Tehilim 29:11), "Hashem will give ohz to His nation." And, this, writes R' Güntzler, is the meaning of the midrash that the Torah was given because of our genealogy, i.e., our children.

However, this itself requires explanation. How do our children serve as guarantors of our mitzvah observance? R' Güntzler explains further:

Another midrash teaches that Hashem sent His Torah into this world only on the condition that He could reside near it, so-to-speak. This is why the Mishkan and, later, the Bet Hamikdash, were built. But what about when there is no Bet Hamikdash? The Gemara (Shabbat 119b) teaches that the world exists in the merit of the Torah study of young children. They are the "mishkan." Why is the Torah study of young children so precious? After all, a seasoned adult scholar studies on a far deeper and more meaningful level! Nevertheless, the Torah uttered by the mouths of children--mouths not yet sullied by sins such as lashon hara (because the sins of minors do not "count")--is very dear to Hashem. (Meishiv Nefesh)

"And with you shall be one ish / man from each tribe; ish / a man who is a leader of his father's household." (Bemidbar 1:4)

The word "ish" commonly denotes a person of spiritual stature. Why? R' Chaim Yehuda Meir Hager z"l (the Vishever Rebbe in Tel Aviv; died 1968) explains: The Mishnah (end of Masechet Uktzin) teaches, "Hashem is destined to reward each tzaddik with 310 worlds." Our Sages also teach that: "One hour of Torah and good deeds in this world is worth more than an entire lifetime of Olam Haba." The gematria of ish equals 311, one more than the number of worlds in the tzaddik's reward. This signifies the Torah and good deeds -- more valuable than Olam Haba -- that the man of stature performs. (Zecher Chaim)

"These were the kru'ai / ones summoned by the assembly, the leaders of their fathers' tribes, they are the heads of Israel's thousands." (Bemidbar 1:16)

The word kru'ai, which should be spelled "kuf-raish-vav-aleph-yud," is in fact spelled with an extra yud instead of the vav, as if it said kree'ai. Why?

R' Eliezer David Gruenwald z"l (1867-1928; rabbi and rosh yeshiva of Oyber Visheve and other Hungarian towns) explains: The greatest Jewish leaders have also been the most humble. The most obvious example is Moshe Rabbeinu, of whom we read (Bemidbar 12:3), "Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth." Likewise, King David was very humble and said about himself (Tehilim 22:7), "I am a worm and not a man."

At the beginning of the Book of Vaykira, the word "Vayikra" ("He called [to Moshe]") is written with a small letter aleph, as if the word really was "Vayikar" ("He happened [upon Moshe]"). Hashem allowed Moshe to write the Torah this way in deference to Moshe's humility. Similarly, here, writes R' Gruenwald, writing that the leaders of the tribes were "kree'ai" rather than "kru'ai" implies a certain degree of happenstance, in deference to their humility. (Keren L'David)

"Nadav and Avihu died before Hashem when they offered an alien fire before Hashem in the Wilderness of Sinai, and they had no children." (Bemidbar 3:4)

This verse mentions two of the reasons that our Sages give for why Nadav and Avihu died: (1) they introduced an "alien" fire onto the altar in the Mishkan, and (2) they never married.

R' Mendel Hager z"l (rabbi, rosh yeshiva, and chassidic rebbe of Oyber Visheve; died 1941) explains that these are really two sides of one coin. Why did Nadav and Avihu never marry? Because they

thought that earthly matters such as marriage have no place in the lives of people dedicated to holiness. Of course, they were wrong, as that is not the Torah's attitude. Indeed, their error may be seen in the halachah that even though G-d sends a fire from heaven to burn on the altar, man is obligated to light a fire there as well. The Torah expects earthly matters to be elevated to spirituality, not shunned entirely.

Given Nadav and Avihu's attitude, however, it was inconsistent for them to introduce an earthly fire onto the altar. That is why they were punished. (She'airit Menachem)

The Giving of the Torah

"Moshe wrote all the words of Hashem." (Shmot 24:4)

Rashi z"l writes: "From Bereishit up to the account of the Giving of the Torah. . ." Why is it necessary to highlight the fact that Moshe wrote down those chapters at the time of the Giving of the Torah? R' Shlomo Rothenberg z"l (New York; 20th century) explains:

Rashi (to Bereishit 1:1) asks why the Torah begins with the story of Creation and not with the first mitzvah. He answers, citing Tehilim (111:6), "He declared to His people the strength of His works in order to give them the heritage of the nations." By relating that G-d created the world, the Torah establishes G-d's right to give Eretz Yisrael to whichever nation He pleases.

The premise of Rashi's question is that the primary purpose of the Torah is to teach us mitzvot. If so, R' Rothenberg notes, Rashi's answer seems incomplete, for it explains why Creation is mentioned, but not why the rest of Sefer Bereishit precedes the first mitzvah.

Another question--The Mishnah (Berachot 13a) asks: Why does the parashah of "Shema" precede the parashah of "V'hayah eem shamo"? The Mishnah answers: "In order to accept the yoke of Heaven first and only thereafter to accept the yoke of mitzvot." Given Rashi's premise, R' Rothenberg asks, shouldn't accepting the practical yoke of mitzvot precede accepting the abstract yoke of Heaven?

He explains: If there is no commander, there can't be commands. Before we have accepted the yoke of Heaven, there can be no yoke of mitzvot. Likewise, if we don't know the story of how Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov discovered G-d and developed a relationship with Him, we cannot be His servants. On the other hand, if we would take to heart the lessons of Sefer Bereishit, we inevitably would become servants of Hashem. This, writes R' Rothenberg, is the meaning of the verse quoted by Rashi, "He declared to His people the strength of His works." Hashem did not just declare "His works," but also, "the strength of His works." Within the story of His works is something which impels us, which obligates us, and which necessarily will lead us to accept His yoke upon us. (B'pitchei Olam p.23)

Letters from Our Sages

Below is an excerpt from a letter written by R' Shlomo ben Aderet z"l ("Rashba"; Spain; 1235-1310). Rashba was the author of one of the most important early Talmud commentaries and also wrote more than 4,000 teshuvot / letters, mostly on topics of halachah, but also addressing hashkafah / Jewish beliefs. This letter is printed in She'eilot U'teshuvot Ha'Rashba, vol I, no. 9.

You asked about what I wrote in my commentary to the aggadah / the non-legal portion of the Talmud, that our Sages z"l hold that the world's existence will be of finite duration. . . and you requested proof.

Know, your honor, that these matters and others like them--if we would approach them with the tools of human reasoning and try to reach logical conclusions, our reasoning would indeed lead to the conclusion that the world will exist indefinitely. This is because our reasoning is based on our senses and on the laws of nature, and we observe the heavenly bodies to appear unchanging and the world to be following the same natural pattern all of the time. [Why, then, would it ever end?] But, those who assert this [i.e., that the world's existence is finite] do so based on a tradition that Yisrael possesses from our Sages based on psukim. Anything that is based on tradition or prophecy trumps reasoning, for reasoning is on a lower level than prophecy. This is clear, and no faith questions it; certainly not those who possess the true faith as our nation does, just as we have no doubt about the truth of the supernatural miracles that happened to our ancestors, such as the splitting of the Yam Suf and of the Jordan River and Yehoshua's causing the sun to stand still. Though philosophers [a term that includes all scientists] deny this, that is because they deny the words of Moshe Rabbeinu and all prophets. In truth, no one would deny any of our traditions unless he believes that anything which contradicts nature is impossible--as if anything that is beyond his understanding is impossible. I am amazed by such beliefs, for even they admit that they can't explain all natural phenomena.

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the Hamaayan page.

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