

PARSHAS BAMIDBAR - THREE BOOKS IN ONE

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Three Books in One¹

What we call Bamidbar, Chazal^[2] called Chumash ha-Pekudim, or the chumash of countings. Indeed, one of the distinguishing features of this chumash is its inclusion of not one but two census-takings. Upon further reflection, however, we puzzle over why those countings should give this chumash its name, rather than more dramatic events, like the sending of the spies and Bilam's blessings. Bamidbar, in fact, is rich in striking narratives. Why makes the countings more prominent than all those other episodes?

The answer is that it is not the countings per se that are so important. Rather, two different sets of rules presided over all the dramatic events that befell Hashem's people between the covers of this book, and they are reflected in those two countings. The manner in which the people who left Egypt were treated differs markedly from the way those who entered the Land lived their lives. The central theme that predominates in this chumash is the transition between those two different lifestyles.

Yeshaya describes the way in which a triumphant Bnei Yisrael lived through the first chapters of their life as a nation. "Who caused His splendrous arm to go at Moshe's right side^[3]?" Simply put, this allowed Bnei Yisrael to live outside the dictates of ordinary natural law. They ate the food of the Heavens, while other needs were provided for miraculously.

Arriving in Eretz Yisrael, their lives could not have been more different. Manna no longer descended from Heaven; they had to toil to coax food from a reluctant earth. They were governed by the same restraints and requirements of all other peoples, differing from them in only one all-important regard. The success of their endeavors was assisted by special Divine providence, assuring their success, but generally in a less dramatic fashion.

The change did not take place in an instant. HKBH saw to it that they were eased into the new way of living. While still travelling through the wilderness in the last of the forty years, Hashem began to wean them away from a completely miraculous existence^[4].

The transition manifested itself in several ways. While Hashem had miraculously protected them from all enemies in the years that preceded, in the fortieth year the Bnei Yisrael were called upon to wage war - using conventional methods - against several enemies including Sichon. It can be shown

that Moshe's staff, the iconic representation of miraculous leadership, was no longer routinely taken by Moshe. He used it sparingly, only taking it in hand upon occasions of special need[5]. (This is the true meaning of Chazal's comment[6] that the "Hashem divided between the light and the darkness" refers to Sefer Bamidbar. The "light" is the life suffused with open miracles. While in the wilderness, the Bnei Yisrael basked in the radiance of Hashem's Presence, which was open and manifest. The darkness means living according to the fixity of nature. Once they entered the Land, His Presence became obscured. Only by peering very intently could one make out its contours, or catch a glimpse now and then when the night was illuminated by a brief lightning flash of His miraculous intervention.)

Within the two countings from which Chumash ha-Pekudim takes its name, we find this same contrast. Here, too, subtle differences in the way the countings took place manifest the difference between the "light" of brilliant manifestation of Hashem's Presence and the "darkness" of its hiddenness behind veils of natural law.

The early counting, at the beginning of the chumash, reflects the glory of Hashem's Presence. The shevatim travelled, according to Chazal, in a pattern and order that reflected their role as the entourage of the Shechinah. The counting follows the order of their encampment around the mishkan. Ephraim precedes Menashe, because Ephraim's spiritual contribution to a miraculous existence was greater. Leaders could only arise from within the shevet to which they belonged, reflecting the sublime spiritual nuance that distinguished one shevet from another.

The second, later, counting matches the changed circumstances of the last year of their travels through the wilderness. Some of the leaders mentioned actually came from shevatim other than the ones they presided over[7]. Menashe supplants Ephraim in the role of leader. Pragmatic considerations became more important than spiritual roots, as Klal Yisrael shifted more of its gaze to the apparent realities of a lawful and predictable world.

We can localize the precise place where the text moves us from one orientation to the other. It comes at vayehi binso'a ha-aron[8]. Immediately after this short parshah, we hear how the people complained without cause, and how swift and harsh was Hashem's reaction. The nation understood that living on miracles raised the stakes concerning their behavior. The Divine Presence that, as it were, waited upon them and supplied them with their every need was also close by to quickly move against their inadequacies and indiscretions. They came to fear such a relationship, thinking it impossible to survive such scrutiny. The decision to spy out the Land was a natural outgrowth of this attitude. Their preference for a game plan predicated upon their own activity, rather than relying entirely on Hashem's providential oversight, led to Hashem complying. He began to replace their previous mode of existence with one that was rooted firmly in the fixity of predictable natural law.

Thus, vayehi binso'a divides between the earlier mode of transcending natural law, and the events that ushered in the constraints with which we still live today. By viewing vayehi binso'a this way, we

understand its pivotal importance. The term "sefer" need not mean an entire book; even a single episode can be so important that the Torah will call it a sefer. It thus becomes clear why Chazal^[9] call Bamidbar a sefer to itself.

1. *Based on the Pesichah to Chumash Bamidbar*

2. Yoma 68B, Sotah 36B

3. Yeshaya 63:12. The reference to this pasuk comes from the R. Kuperman edition of Netziv

4. See Netziv on Bamidbar 20:5-8

5. See Netziv on Bamidbar 20:8

6. Bereishis Rabbah 3:5

7. See Ha'amek Davar, Bamidbar 1:2

8. Bamidbar 10:35

9. Shabbos 116A
