

A BOOK OF PEOPLE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Chumash of Bamidbar is devoted to the narrative of the experiences of the people of Israel during their forty-year sojourn in the desert of Sinai. However, the Torah's narrative of any event or historical happening is never restricted to dry facts alone. In its nuanced phrasing the Torah comes to reveal to us the human factors and the psychological and spiritual import of these events.

The Torah is not intended to be a history book and to view it as such will only raise problems of text and misunderstanding of message. It is rather the book of humankind, of its achievements and foibles, its grandeur and pettiness, its great capacity to do good and to be evil. Thus the entire narrative here in Bamidbar has to be seen in this light. The Torah is going to tell us the story of people and not just of events.

Therefore the book of Bamidbar is full of character sketches and descriptions of people who by their actions changed the course of Jewish history, not only in the desert of Sinai but for all times as well. Those who complained about the manna, the overriding ambition of Korach, the selfishness and timidity of the ten spies who were sent by Moshe and the contradistinction in attitude with their colleagues, Yehoshua and Calev, the love of the Land of Israel exhibited by the five daughters of Zlafachad, all of these - the analyses of people and their attitudes and motivations - are on display here in this book of Bamidbar. It is therefore no exaggeration to state that the book of Bamidbar ranks with the Chumash Bereshith in describing and teaching us about human beings and their individual but somehow common natures.

I think that this insight into the Chumash Bamidbar explains the often discussed issue of why this Chumash should begin with names of people and of the count of the tribes and the general population of Israel. The Torah, so to speak, is preparing us for the analysis of people and human characteristics that make up the bulk of this book. People have names, are part of a larger society and are distinct individuals. Not to recognize this basic fact of human existence will prevent anyone from having any meaningful understanding of the narrative of Chumash Bamidbar.

The commentators to Chumash point out that some of the tragedies of Chumash Bamidbar were indirectly caused by Moshe's overoptimistic assessment of human beings and their behavior. The great men named in this week's parsha - the beginning of the book of Bamidbar - are in the main no longer there at the end of the book. Positions of power take their toll on their holders.

The names therefore are recorded for us as an example of the pitfalls of power and office. By

expecting people to be people and not saints and angels, great errors of judgment and policy can be avoided or at least mitigated. The desert was a harsh learning place for the Jewish people. If its lessons were truly absorbed and translated into Jewish individual and public life, then the experience will have proven to be of eternal value.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com

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