

# TRANSITION POINTS IN JEWISH HISTORY

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape #13 is: Yerushalayim in Halacha. Good Shabbos!*

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## Netziv: Two Countings Mark Transition Points in Jewish History:

Sefer Bamidbar begins with a counting of Klal Yisrael. In classical Jewish works, Bamidbar is referred to as Sefer Hapekudim (the Book of Countings, or as it is called in English -- "The Book of Numbers"). When one thinks about it, that seems like a strange name to give the book of Bamidbar. We can understand calling it Bamidbar, because the entire book deals with the trials and tribulations that the Jewish people underwent during their wanderings in the desert. But, why should the entire book be called Numbers, just because the book begins with a census that took place during the beginning of their sojourn in the desert?

In his introduction to Sefer Bamidbar points, the Netziv writes that this is not the only census that we have in Sefer Bamidbar. There is the census mentioned in this week's parsha, during the second year of their wanderings in the wilderness, and then there is a second census that was done at the end of the 40 years in the desert. But still why is this so important? The Netziv says that these two censuses mark a distinct transition in the history of the Jewish people. The first census was not done chronologically. Tribes were not counted based on age. They were counted by the "Degalim" (flags) -- based on the way they traveled in the desert. Each tribe traveled in a certain position and that's how they were counted. This traveling based on the "Degalim" was corresponding -- according to Chazal -- to the Heavenly Chariot. The way they appeared down here on earth; is the way the Heavenly Chariot travels, as it were. The counting at the end of Sefer Bamidbar, however, was done chronologically. The Netziv says that the first counting took place when the Jewish people's existence was manifested on a supernatural level (L'maale min haTeva) -- they had Manna from Heaven, water from the Well, etc. That was their existence in the Wilderness.

At the end of Sefer Bamidbar, they entered a different type of life -- a normal type of existence; that second counting marked a transition in the history of Klal Yisroel. The Jewish people went from

being a nation which lived on Bread from Heaven and became a nation that had to live based on the Laws of Nature. These points in time were marked by the two countings. The first counting, done based on the Degalim, was reminiscent of the Shechina and reminiscent of a supernatural -- Lemaaleh min haTeva -- lifestyle; the second counting was done in a natural way. And that, says the Netziv, was why the book is called the Book of Countings, because these countings mark the transition of Klal Yisroel from a supernatural to what, at least on the surface, appears to be a natural existence.

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### **Reb Yaakov: Travel Assignments Delayed Until After Mishkan Inauguration**

Reb Yaakov Kaminetzky in his sefer, makes a very interesting observation: This counting happened in the second year, the second month; what happened before that time, queries Reb Yaakov. This counting, based on the position of the tribes in their travel formation took place a year and fifteen days after they left Egypt. Why wasn't it done immediately? Since the Jewish people had to travel right away, it makes sense that they should have set up a travel order right away as well.

We see from Chazal, says Reb Yaakov, that when Moshe Rabbeinu made up this travel plan, he was afraid that the Jewish people would have complaints. One tribe would say "How come I'm in front of the Mishkan and they're in back?" or "How come we're in back and they're in front". Moshe Rabbeinu had a legitimate fear that Klal Yisroel would have complaints. Indeed, we see from Chazal that the assigned travel positions related not only to how they would move in the desert, but they related to the positions the respective Tribes would take in the life of the nation, as well. That's why, says Reb Yaakov, this had to happen in the second year. What was the difference between the first year and the second year? The difference was the Mishkan. In the first year there was no Mishkan. "Bashana haShenis..." this was now a month after they inaugurated the Mishkan. Now there was a Mishkan in the center. The difference was... as long as there was no Mishkan in the center, as long as there was no unifying purpose, as long as there is no commonality of purpose... that is a situation that is rife for dissension and machlokes. But when the Jewish people know that there is a Mishkan in the middle, that there is a mission in life, to spread the Shem Shamayim, to Sanctify the Name of Heaven... then and only then can one start assigning jobs.

The first year when there was no unifying force of the Mishkan, Moshe Rabbeinu would have in fact have had problems ... " Why should I do this? Why is he better than me?... But when one can infuse a people with a higher purpose when one can put a Mishkan in their midst, that they know they're all pulling for a common goal, then one can mitigate, if not totally eradicate, any dissension . When the Klal realizes that they are all working for something bigger than any one individual, then and only then can there be a unity and completeness in the Jewish people.

### **Chasam Sofer: Children as a Motivator to Character Improvement**

A Gemara in Yevamos (64) illuminates a verse in this week's Parsha. The Gemara states: Whoever does not occupy himself with the precept of procreation is deserving of death. How do we know this? Rabbi Eliezer states that it is derived from the verse "And Nadav and Avihu died and they did not have any children." The implication from this is: Had they had children they wouldn't have died. The commentaries are all bothered by this Chazal: We know from the previous parshios that the sin of Nadav and Avihu was that they brought a "strange fire before Hashem". The pasuk seems to indicate that there was something wrong with the Korban that they brought. One Chazal says they were somewhat intoxicated when they brought it, and another Chazal says they did not consult with their Master before bringing it, but the common denominator of both of these opinions is some type of lack of Derech Eretz (proper etiquette). And here Rabbi Eliezer introduces a totally new concept -- they died because they didn't occupy themselves in procreation. Why suddenly attribute their death to a "new" sin?

The Chasam Sofer introduces a very interesting thought: Elu v'eludivrei Elokim Chayim: Both opinions are included in this teaching of Rabbi Eliezer. As mentioned, both opinions attributed the sin of Nadav and Avihu to a lack of proper respect. The Chasam Sofer asks: Do you know what the greatest motivation to make a person into a Baal Midos is? Do you know the greatest motivator into improving one's own Derech Eretz? It is having children. When you have children and you see that they treat you without Derech Eretz, then you know that something is lacking with you.

Rav Wolbe writes in his Sefer Alei Shor: "There is no greater factor in improving one's midos than having children." Because even if one can live with one's own poor midos, to see that in one's own children with improper character traits, forces the individual to clean up his own act and improve his own midos. This is what Chazal may mean when they say Nadav and Avihu died because they did not have children. Chas v'sholem, we can not say they did not have proper manners, since we're talking about Gedolei Olam. However, according to their level, there was a lack in their Derech Eretz. Had they had children, the Chasam Sofer says, they would have been much improved in their own Derech Eretz.

What this is in effect saying is that the responsibility for having children entails within it a responsibility for a person's own behavior. Since a person knows that how he acts is going to affect his own children, this itself can become a powerful motivation to improve his own character.

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### **Mechilta on Yisro: Ten Commandments Can be Read Across as well as Down**

Relating to Shavuot and continuing with the same theme, there's an interesting Mechilta on Parshas Yisro. The Mechilta states: "The 10 Commandments were given 5 on one tablet and 5 on the other tablet". The implication, the Mechilta says, is that not only can the commandments be read down the tablets... 1,2,3,4,5, but they can also be read across. And the Mechilta goes out of its way to show a connection between the parallel commandments on the two tablets 1 and 6, 2 and 7, etc.

For instance, the Mechilta says the First Command is "I am the L-rd your G-d" and the parallel sixth command is "Thou shalt not kill". This implies, the Medrash says, that one who commits murder is not only sinning against his fellow man, but he is -- as it were -- diminishing the Divine Image, for man was created in the Divine Image. The Medrash continues: "Thou Shalt Have no other Gods" is parallel to "Thou Shalt not commit adultery". This teaches that one who displays infidelity to G-d is comparable to one who displays infidelity to his own wife. The Medrash goes on through all the commandments... It is written "Remember the Sabbath Day" opposite it is written "Do Not Bear False Testimony against your Neighbor" to teach that one who does not keep the Shabbos is as if he gave false testimony that the Ribbono Shel Olam did not create the world.

All of the examples of the Medrash seem to make sense... until the last one. It is written "Honor Your Father and Mother" The parallel commandment is "Thou Shalt Not Covet". The Medrash continues... "Any person who is jealous will ultimately give birth to a child who will curse his own father and he will give respect to someone who is not his own father". What is the connection that the Medrash is trying to tell us? If you think about it, the connection of the Medrash is obvious. When we are jealous of our friends -- whether it be their wealth or their position in life or their position in the community -- what message are we telling our children? The message we are getting across is that "the other one has better". If you are constantly jealous of your neighbor's house, car, honor, etc. what you are saying and teaching is that what I have is never good enough, is never sufficient. What this Medrash is teaching us is that in addition to this attitude which is inherently wrong, we also have a corrosive effect on our children. A child will be taught to not be happy with what he has. What does a child really have? A child has a father. The child will eventually learn from his father that what he has is never good enough and someone else always has better; the result will be a child that won't be happy or satisfied either... he therefore, won't be satisfied with his own father and will find a neighbor whose father seems better and nicer and he will curse his own father and honor someone who is not his father. This is again what the Chasam Sofer said: If there were no other reason for a person to improve his own character traits, having children would suffice. What you are is what your children will become and therefore there is no greater motivator to correct character traits than having children!

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## Glossary

**Midos** -- Character Traits

**Derech Eretz** -- Proper Etiquette

**Chas V'Sholom** -- Heaven forbid

**Chaza"l** -- Our Sages of Blessed Memory

**Mechilta** -- Medrash on the Book of Exodus

**Mishkan** -- Portable Sanctuary

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## Personalities & Sources:

**Netziv** -- R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1817-1893) Rosh Yeshiva of Volozhin Yeshiva; Lithuania.

**Chasam Sofer** -- (1762-1839) Rabbi of Pressburg, leader of Hungarian Jewry Rav Yakov Kaminetzky -  
- (1891-1986) Rosh Yeshiva of Mesivta Torah Vodaath; New York.

**Rav Shlomo Wolbe** -- Leading contemporary Israeli Mussar personality.

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Transcribed by [David Twersky](#) assistance by [Dovid Hoffman](#).

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (#13). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: #13 is: Yerushalayim in Halacha. The other halachic portions for Parshas Bamidbar from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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