

TRIBES & ELDERS GIVEN THE ROYAL TREATMENT AT ELIM

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Beshalach

Tribes & Elders Given The Royal Treatment At Elim

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #711 - Shlishi or Shishi? And Other Aliyah Issues. Good Shabbos!

The pasuk says, "They arrived at Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date-palms; they encamped there by the water" [Shmos 15:27]. The Ramban wonders why it was so significant for us to know that there were 12 springs and 70 palm trees in Elim. This does not seem to be a particularly impressive number of either palm trees or flowing rivers. There are places, he notes, where thousands of date palms grow in close proximity to one another. Likewise, the number of flowing streams would not seem to be so significant that the Torah should bother to emphasize these facts.

Even more troubling, the Ramban notes is that in Parshas Massei where the Torah reviews all the travels of the Jewish people in the wilderness, most of the stopovers are given very short shrift. Even the stopover at Marah, which was the site of significant events, the Torah only mentions in passing, very briefly. However, when the Torah mentions the stop at Elim in Parshas Massei, it again notes the number of springs and the number of palm trees [Bamidbar 33:9]. This surely begs for an explanation! What is so significant about this stop at Elim and the number of springs and palm trees?

The Ramban quotes a Medrash - the Mechilta of Rebi Eliezer haModai - who notes that at the time of Creation, G-d created this place with 12 springs corresponding to the 12 Tribes of Israel and 70 palm trees corresponding to the 70 Elders (of the Sanhedrin). Each tribe dwelt by its own stream and each member of the Sanhedrin sat under the shade of his own palm-tree, thanking the Almighty for preparing this respite for them in a parched wilderness, from the time of Creation.

What is the message of this Medrash? What is the Torah trying to tell us here?

Consider the following parable: Imagine guests who are attending an "out-of-town wedding." The entire wedding entourage is staying in a hotel. The hosts have prepared a hotel room for each of the

guests. In each hotel room, they prepared an elaborate package of fruits, cakes, chocolates, and drinks. Each room contains the newspaper of the home city of those guests. What does such an arrangement say to the guests? It tells the guests that they are very important. The hosts are so pleased to have the presence of each guest at their simcha that they went out of their way to cater to each one's personal needs.

This section appears prior to the Receiving of the Torah. The Almighty went "out of His way", so to speak, to impress the Jewish people -- before they received the Torah -- with their importance. Each member of the Jewish people belongs to one of the 12 tribes. G-d did not merely provide a river with enough water for everyone to drink. Rather, He provided them with the equivalent of their "home newspaper" - a personalized stream for each tribe. The message is: "You are one of the 'Select Twelve' -- part of My treasured nation, My chosen people. I treat you like My honored guests."

The other thing Klal Yisrael must know before they receive the Torah is that "Kabbalas HaTorah" cannot work without the 70 Elders. We are dependent on those who transmit Torah, that special subset of the nation who teach the Torah and tell us how to interpret the Torah. That bit of knowledge is crucial before Kabbalas HaTorah.

The awareness of these two concepts is fundamental for the nation. They must be aware of the importance of every Tribe and of the importance of the transmitters of Torah to our nation. Therefore, from the beginning of time, G-d already prepared this message, by creating the 12 streams flowing and the 70 palm trees growing in Elim, on the way between Egypt and Mt. Sinai.

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