

# PARSHAS BAMIDBAR

תשפ"א

This week, as with every year before Shavuot, we read Parshas Bamidbar. There are two reasons for this.

The gemara says before Shavuot we need to read the brochos and k'loles of Torah Kohanim. Our annual schedule of public Torah reading is designed to come out that Parshas Bechukosai is read before Shavuot naturally. But this wasn't always the case for everyone. There used to be a custom in some communities to complete the Torah once in three years. These people had to interrupt their scheduled Torah reading in order to read Parshas Bechukosai in the weeks before Shavuot. Why?

Receiving Torah is a very serious matter. It isn't just to give us an exciting way of life. The entire existence of the world hangs in abeyance. It hinges on whether we accept the Torah or not. The world requires that its existence be justified and when Klal Yisroel accept the Torah the world's existence is justified.

If we keep the Torah, all the brochos are fulfilled. If we don't keep the Torah, disaster follows. Keeping the Torah has great consequences for Klal Yisroel in particular.

Reward and punishment in this world is a reality, but it is a very unpopular idea. People want freedom from all authority and from all consequences to their actions. But the Torah believes in consequences. The Torah set up a justice system and a police force. Hashem is the ultimate authority. There is justice – reward for doing good and punishment for doing evil.

Whatever the Torah commands becomes an absolute obligation – whether it is against stealing or wearing shatnez – and it comes with grave consequences. Some sins like chillul Shabbos are more serious than murder. Eating some forms of non-kosher food receives malkos. Eating blood and cheilev is liable for koreis.

If Klal Yisroel as a whole fail to keep the Torah, there is disaster on a communal level.

Before we accept the Torah we have to understand this is serious business. There are implications for each individual, for Klal Yisroel, and the world at large. This is why Bechukosai needs to be read before Shavuot.

But where does reading Parshas Bamidbar fit into this?

Some say it is to lift our spirits. After reading all the k'loles in Bechukosai one can get despondent and it may lead us to despair. We want to come into Shavuot on a more upbeat tone.

Others say the reason we read it is because of the degolim – the flags that the shevotim received when the encampment in the desert was set up. The midrash says that receiving the degolim generated a simcha as great as receiving the Torah. But what is so great about getting a flag? Why so much simcha from flags?

The answer is that Hashem gave us a vast Torah which can be used in many ways to serve Him. There are 12 darchei avodah. Each shevet represented a different derech of avodas Hashem. The Ari Hakodosh said, originally there were twelve separate nuscho'os hatefillah. Each shevet used the nusach which best expressed their own unique derech avodah.

When Klal Yisroel initially received the Torah, they were overwhelmed by the enormity of 613 mitzvos. No-one was sure which the most authentic derech avodah was for them. When they received their

degolim, they were shown that each shevet has its own well-defined path to serving Hashem.

The shevotim were all equidistant around the mishkon to teach us a very special lesson.

The gemara says some time in the future, when all the truths of history will be known to everyone, Hashem will make a circle of tzaddikim and they will be able to point to the center and say this is Hashem Whom we were serving. Why a circle and not any other shape?

The meforshim answer that there may be many different darchei avodah. In the future, we will all see that each are all equidistant to the center. Each is an equally valid and genuine expression of avodas Hashem.

So too in the desert – all the shevotim had their own derech avodah symbolized on their degel. They are all equally valid and important. This message is part of kabbolas haTorah and it is one of our great failings today.

We spoke last week about the failure of the talmidim of Rabbi Akiva to respect one another – a lesson which we have to internalize and rectify. But the problem doesn't only exist in the beis midrash among chavrusos. The problem is very real in the wider world of shomrei Torah u'mitzvos. Each group of Klal Yisroel has developed their unique derech avodah. There are many groups today. But we don't view all of them as equally valid and important. We don't appreciate their sincerity. This is a part of the failure of not respecting one another. Our generation is rife with machlokes. Each group is claiming they have a monopoly on THE proper derech avodah and everyone else's is no good.

We need to internalize that before kabbolas haTorah, all Klal Yisroel together faced the mountain – as one person with one heart.

But this is true to a point. There was one shevet who was in the center surrounding the mishkon while the rest were on the periphery. This was shevet Levi. Why shevet Levi? Let us examine the pesukim in VeZos Habrocho for the answers.

Shevet Levi overcame many tests and trials. They refused to go along with the rest of Klal Yisroel and complain to Hashem in the desert. Shevet Levi accepted everything unquestioningly as the will of Hashem. They never hesitated, never wavered in their commitment.

People are often conflicted by various competing loyalties in their lives. Some are exclusively devoted to their family. Some are exclusively devoted to their careers. Others are devoted to their country. When a person is pressed to decide what is the most important loyalty he has in his life, the answer has to be loyalty to Hashem and His Torah.

We say in Shema that we serve Hashem with both yetzorim – the yetzer tov and yetzer horo. What does that mean? In the beginning of Shacharis we ask Hashem to subject both our yetzorim to serve Hashem. Why? Because very often, our yetzer tov drives us off balance in our overall avodas Hashem. Someone can pursue chesed in an extreme fashion and it will displace the rest of his obligations. We need to keep both our good inclinations and our passions under control and channel them to the proper expression.

Levi had tremendous passion and it led him to wipe out Shechem and sell Yosef. Yaakov cursed that anger and told him how to channel it. Levi rose to this challenge and took that passion and subjected it to

avodas Hashem. He was so successful that at the time of the sin of the golden calf, shevet Levi was able to take that extreme passion and focus it in the proper direction. They were able to do this because back in Egypt, they were the only shevet who kept bris miloh and continued learning Torah without having to endure slavery.

What was the most important task for shevet Levi? Is it the avodah in the Beis Hamikdosh? No. The posuk in VeZos Habrocho says the primary job of shevet Levi is teaching Torah. Their limud haTorah defined them in Egypt. It defined them in the desert and it defined them throughout history.

If you want to move out from the periphery and move into the center, to be closer to Hashem, you must first devote your life to limud haTorah as shevet Levi did.

Every day in davening we say how we are to achieve love and fear of Hashem. We ask Hashem to open up our hearts to His Torah, and then we can move up to ahavoh and yiroh.

We say in birkas kriyas Shma that Hashem had tremendous rachmonus on us and He taught our ancestors how to really live life. We ask that Hashem teach us as well. It is chukei chayim. Teach us how to live our lives.

But even after we know how to live a proper halachic life down to the finest detail, we don't stop there. We also want to understand it. We ask for illumination and insight to deeply understand the Torah, this will allow us to become totally connected to mitzvos and be totally dedicated to love and fear of Hashem.

Yichud halev means having a single-minded focus – total dedication. How do you merit such a high level? It follows three steps – learning what to do, deep understanding and insight into Torah and being connected to the mitzvos.

This is why shevet Levi was able to be in the center. They started with limud haTorah all the way back in Egypt when Levi was the rosh yeshiva. This allowed them to be strong and steadfast and withstand all the tests and obstacles. They had a different derech avodah – through Torah.

The posuk says Torah is more precious than pearls. Chazal explain that it means limud Torah is more valuable than the Kohen Godol who goes into the kodesh hakodoshim! Just imagine how special it must be to be the holiest person in Klal Yisroel, on the holiest day of the year, going into the holiest place on Earth! Still, Shlomo Hamelech says understanding Torah is more precious than that! All the valuable real estate you might have all over the world is still not equal to one word of Torah. Why? Because this is what connects us to Hashem.

This is why shevet Levi was able to move into the center of the circle. This was their derech avodah. When the rest of Klal Yisroel were complaining in the desert about this difficulty or that hardship, they wanted meat, they wanted water, etc. – shevet Levi rose above it all. They said this is what Hashem is giving us. Everything we have is a gift. There is nothing to complain about. They saw Hashem in front of them and understood He is giving them exactly what they need. They had this attitude because of their limud haTorah.

The gemara says when Klal Yisroel received the Torah, they said 'na'aseh v'nishmah'. In Parshas Yisro, before Moshe went up to the mountain, Hashem gave Klal Yisroel a special message that they will be Hashem's special treasured nation. Klal Yisroel responded with

'na'aseh.' At the end of Parshas Mishpotim, after the entire revelation, after teaching them all the halachos included in the aseres hadibros, Klal Yisroel again just say 'na'aseh'. This is apparently not enough.

Moshe Rabbeinu wrote Sefer Bereishis and a number of mitzvos in a sefer habris. Now they have a text. Then a mizbeiach is built and korbonos are brought and they undergo a process of a geirus. They enter the bris and then they say 'na'aseh v'nishmah'. What changed?

The Beis Halevi explained that when you say na'aseh it means that you will keep all the mitzvos. This itself requires one to learn a tremendous amount of information. The Mishna Berura says in his introduction to Hilchos Shabbos, you can't really keep Shabbos properly unless you are very proficient in all the intricacies of the 39 melachos and different types of issurei derabonon, etc. It takes a lot of learning to master!

But then Moshe wrote a sefer – and now there is a brand new mitzvah of limud Torah. Now we go beyond the chukei chayim and we can get a deep understanding and illumination through limud Torah. This learning and understanding is how my mind can connect to the mind of Hashem. Now that Moshe gave us a sefer, I can appreciate the chochmoh of Hashem – the daas Elokim. This is na'aseh v'nishmah – the highest form of avodas Hashem.

The malochim were startled – who told them about this secret of limud haTorah which gives them the closest possible dveikus to Hashem? They brought down crowns of kesser Torah and put them on the heads of Klal Yisroel because they accepted this highest form of avodas Hashem. Through this type of connection to Hashem, the Torah transforms a human being and uplifts him and elevates him.

The parsha says there are degolim – one flag for each shevet. There are 12 types of darchei avodah which are equidistant from the center. They are all equally valid and important. But shevet Levi is in the center because he has total dedication to avodas Hashem without any cheshbonos. He is different than shevet Yissochor, although shevet Yissochor also devoted their lives to limud haTorah. They had received a fertile portion of Eretz Yisroel and gave that up to learn Torah. But their parnossoh was secured from shevet Zevulun, before they decided to dedicate themselves to learning. For shevet Levi, Hashem said I am your nachaloh – I will guarantee your parnossoh through Klal Yisroel giving terumos and maaseros, if you put your trust in Me alone.

This is the merging of kabbolas haTorah and Parshas Bamidbor.

I want to conclude with an idea I mentioned before. There are some incredible midrashim in this parsha. The Torah lists the names of the nosi of each shevet. It remarks that these are names of loшон hakodesh which contain the name of Hashem! It shows that Klal Yisroel preserved their core identity as a separate nation connected to Hashem even within the golus of Egypt.

Another remarkable achievement is that Hashem testified that there was no infidelity in family life among the Jewish women in Egypt. They identified themselves with Hashem's corroboration that each one was the son of his Jewish father. The nations were skeptical. How can they protect their women if they were so harshly enslaved and controlled by their masters? But in the midst of one of the most corrupt societies immersed in znus, Klal Yisroel retained their kedushoh. Because Klal Yisroel retained their identity and their kedushoh, they could have hashroas haShechinoh and all be equidistant from the center. Hashem testified to this.