

The Path To Follow

Bamidbar

493

A Hevrat Pinto Publication

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Sivan 2nd, 5773

May 11th, 2013

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Hashem's Love for Israel

It is written, "Hashem spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt, saying: 'Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers' household, by number of the names, every male according to their head count'" (Bamidbar 1:1-2).

These verses open Sefer Bamidbar, which begins with a description of the journeys of the Children of Israel during their 40 years in the desert. We need to understand why the above passage specifies that the Creator's revelation to Moshe took place in the desert of Sinai. After all, it is obvious that Hashem revealed Himself there! Furthermore, what does the text mean by specifying that this revelation took place in the Tent of Meeting?

Our Sages have examined these questions in the Midrash, where they say: "Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains [Tehillim 36:7]. The righteousness which You bestow upon the world is as visible as the mountains. Your judgments are like the great deep [ibid.]. That is, the judgments which You execute within the world are like the great deep: Just as the deep is concealed, likewise the judgment which You bring upon men is concealed. How so? The destruction of Jerusalem actually took place on the 9th of Av, but to Ezekiel it was shown as being on the 20th of the month. Why so? In order not to make the actual day of destruction widely known. However when He is about to make Israel great, He explicitly states the place, the day, the month, the year, the era, namely: After their exodus from the land of Egypt, saying..." (Bamidbar Rabba 1:1).

He Counted Them Out of Love

Yet what greatness was there here, such that the passage had to describe it in such a detailed way?

To understand this, we must turn to Rashi: "Because they were precious to Him, He counted them often. When they left Egypt, He counted them. When [many] fell because of the golden calf, He counted them to know the number of the survivors. When He caused His Shechinah to rest among them, He counted them."

This means that the act of counting them, even if there is a reason for it (such as to record how many of them remained) is proof of G-d's great love for them. We must add that when they left Egypt, when He counted them for the first time, it is possible that there was a reason for it, namely to record how many of them had left Egypt. Likewise after the sin of the golden calf, when He counted them, it is possible that there was a reason for it as well, namely to record how many of them remained. Yet here, when He counted them, what reason could there have been for it?

As a result, it was only due to Hashem's love for Israel that He counted them each time. Thus the census that took place after the exodus from Egypt, as well as the census that occurred after the sin of the golden calf, took place for no reason other than Hashem's love for them. This is similar to a situation in which a person greatly cherishes an object, and looks for a reason to examine it, to use it and show it to everyone. Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to count the Children of Israel out of His love for them, which is why He sought every opportunity to do so.

Furthermore, because of Hashem's love for them, the census is described in great detail.

The World was Created for Me

In the Midrash, the Sages explain that the goal of the census was to declare that for Hashem, every Jew is a world unto himself. It is like a man who has diamonds and goes about counting them. Imagine someone telling him, "You have so many diamonds! Perhaps you would like to give me one?" This would be a foolish request, for although he indeed possesses many diamonds, each of them is worth a fortune. If such is the case for simple jewels, how much more does it apply to the Jewish people! Although they number 600,000, each of them is worthy of having had the world created for his sake. Each Jew can maintain its existence by the breath of his mouth. Despite being numerous, each of them is very special!

This is the love that G-d has for Israel. "You are the children of Hashem your G-d." Each of them is as important as a son is to his father. Even if

a man has ten sons, each of them is dear to him, and he will suffer when any son suffers and rejoice when any son rejoices, as if he were his only son.

We know what the Sages have said, namely: "Whoever destroys a single Jewish soul, Scripture considers him to have destroyed an entire world, and whoever preserves a single Jewish soul, Scripture considers him to have saved an entire world. ... Therefore every single person is obliged to say: 'The world was created for me'" (Sanhedrin 37a).

This means that every Jew is a world unto himself, a miniature universe. This is something that he must realize and that he must say: The world was created for me! This obligation is incumbent upon everyone!

The War Against the Evil Inclination

Above all, we must add that in the census which the Children of Israel were ordered to undertake, only those above the age of 20 years were counted: "From 20 years old and up, all who are able to go forth to war in Israel." We may explain the reason as being that, as we know, a person is not liable for punishment until the age of 20 years, as it is written concerning Sarah: "At the age of 100, she was as a woman of 20 in regards to sin" (Rashi on Bereshith 23:1).

As a result, the only men counted were those who were liable for punishment. This is what constitutes "all who are able to go forth to war" – he who goes out to wage war against the evil inclination. He can emerge victorious from this war by dominating the evil inclination, and he can even acquire great spoils, an enormous and wonderful reward in the World to Come. On the other hand, he risks falling and being punished.

This can be understood according to what we have said, which is that the main reason for the census was to demonstrate Hashem's love for the Children of Israel, since it was for their sake that the world was created. When is this love primarily demonstrated? When we do His will, for that leads to His love, and we thereby fulfill the lofty goal for which we were created. It is for this reason that the Children of Israel were counted precisely starting from the age of 20, the time when they begin to serve the King, when they do His will by fighting against the evil inclination, which is the Satan, the

Angel of Death that seeks to make them stumble.

Since we are now at the time just before the giving of the Torah, the most fitting moment during the counting of the Omer – the time when we prepare to receive the Torah – we must possess this understanding, which will change our entire acceptance of the Torah. From now on, it is not an acceptance solely as part of the community, but a personal acceptance as well.

Each of us truly merits for the world to have been created for ourselves. Hence each of us, when standing at the time of the giving of the Torah, is a world unto himself. Each of us is one, unique and special, whom the Creator sent into this world because He believes in our ability to fulfill mitzvot and carry out His will. There can be no greater demonstration of love than this.

Furthermore, if we are intelligent enough to understand that others are at the same elevated level as ourselves, since they too are worthy for the entire world to have been created for them, we must also demonstrate respect for others and take their advice into consideration, since they are the sons of the King, created in the image of G-d. In this way, we will succeed in rectifying the sin of Rabbi Akiva's disciples, who lacked respect for one another, and in this way will hasten the arrival of Mashiach, who as we know will only come as a result of baseless love.

The Greatness of Nadav and Avihu

The verse states, "Nadav and Avihu died before Hashem when they offered an alien fire before Hashem in the desert of Sinai, and they had no children. And Elazar and Itamar ministered during the lifetime of Aaron their father" (Bamidbar 3:4).

This verse mentions two things in regards to Nadav and Avihu, one being that they died because they brought an alien fire, and the other being that they had no children. We must explain why these two things are juxtaposed.

Sforno explains, quite simply, that they died for not having had children, which is why Elazar and Itamar received the priesthood. If they would have had sons, the latter would have become kohanim after their deaths. Thus the verse is speaking about one and the same thing.

To me, the verse seems to be teaching us about the greatness of Nadav and Avihu. They were so great that the priesthood was given to them as a heritage, and they could have transmitted it to their sons after them, not to Elazar and Itamar. Nevertheless, since they offered an alien fire, they died before Hashem and the priesthood was taken from them, the reason being that "I shall be sanctified among the Children of Israel" (Vayikra 22:32). As Moshe said to Aaron, "By those who are near Me will I be sanctified" (Bamidbar 10:3), because the Holy One, blessed be He, is stringent with the tzaddikim, holding them to account for the slightest error.

Real Life Stories

The Value of Torah

Reb Moshe and Reb Zimmel were two very wealthy men, as well as talmidei chachamim who were well-respected in the city of Vilna. Friends for a long time, they had each made their fortune in construction. One day they had a disagreement over a sizeable amount of money. So as not to harm their friendship, they decided to address their issue to a rav who was great in Torah, one who ruled on cases discreetly and quickly. They chose the gaon Rabbi Moshe Zeev Wolf of Bialystok (the author of Marot Hatzvot on agunot), known for his great insight and understanding of Torah.

Reb Moshe and Reb Zimmel therefore traveled to Bialystok, where they knocked at the door of Rabbi Moshe Zeev. When the shamash discovered who they were, he ran to the Rav and told him that two wealthy men from Vilna wanted to be seen. Rabbi Moshe Zeev chilled the shamash's enthusiasm by telling him to go back and ask the men what they wanted.

Not long afterwards, the shamash returned to Rabbi Moshe Zeev and said, "They want a din Torah."

The Rav replied, "Well, they'll have to wait," which left the shamash puzzled.

At first Reb Moshe and Reb Zimmel thought that there was someone in the Rav's office who was delaying him. Yet when they realized that he was alone in his office, they were surprised that they were being made to wait.

The minutes passed, and the call to enter his office still did not come. The face of Reb Moshe, who by nature was composed, was relaxed and calm, but Reb Zimmel, who possessed a hotter temperament, began to lose his patience.

After a long wait, they were brought in to meet the Rav. Rabbi Moshe Zeev was sitting in his office, enveloped in a tallit that completely covered his forehead and partially covered his eyes. He did not get up to greet them, nor did he extend his hand to them. "Tell me your names and who is the plaintiff and who is the defendant," he said tersely by going straight to the point.

When they complied, the Rav turned to Reb Moshe and said: "Since you're the plaintiff, state your case Moshe." Reb Moshe wasn't used to being addressed like this, without any sign of respect, and he was surprised and even upset by it. However he controlled himself and presented his case.

"Now, answer him Zimmel," the Rav said to the defendant once Reb Moshe was finished.

As we said, Reb Zimmel had a hotter temperament by nature, and he had trouble handling the lack of respect shown to him, as well as to his friend. He was forced to summon every ounce of patience so as not to protest, and to respond to the claims made by his friend.

Once they had both finished, Rabbi Moshe Zeev summed up their arguments aloud. "Therefore, Moshe, the plaintiff has said such-and-such, and Zimmel, the defendant, responded by such-and-such." He continued to analyze their points and counterpoints, examining each of them in light of the Shulchan Aruch and its commentators. Little by little, the whole picture became more lucid, until it was completely clear. He then issued a decision

that was so obvious that there was no way to contest it.

"Do you willingly and wholeheartedly accept this psak din?" the Rav asked the two litigants standing before him. Both of them were stunned by the brilliant way in which the Rav had examined their arguments, and they both enthusiastically nodded their head in agreement.

Rabbi Moshe Zeev then lifted the tallit from off his eyes, stood up, and extended his hand to them: "Shalom Aleichem, esteemed gentlemen, Reb Moshe and Reb Zimmel," he said to them with a smile. He immediately asked his shamash to bring them some chairs, and he began to speak to them with warmth and wisdom.

At that point, Reb Zimmel could no longer contain himself, for he wanted to understand why the Rav had greeted them so coldly, but now had radically changed. "It's very simple," said Rabbi Moshe Zeev with a smile.

"In the Mishnah, our Sages have enjoined us: 'When the litigants stand before you, regard them both as evildoers. Yet when they leave, having accepted the verdict, regard them both as innocent' [Pirkei Avot 1:8]. When you came to see me, I treated you as 'evildoers.' Now evildoers must wait, and we do not shake their hand, for 'There is no peace for the wicked, says Hashem' [Isaiah 48:22]. Evildoers are not given honorifics either. However when the verdict was given and you wholeheartedly accepted it, you become 'innocent.' From then on, you could be shown respect for your Torah, for your wealth, and for your generosity."

Their astonishment was now much greater than before. Reb Moshe and Reb Zimmel immediately began speaking to the Rav, and each of them took out 1,000 rubles and wanted to leave it as a sechar batala (compensation for lost time). "Thank G-d, I have enough money to live on, and I don't need it," said Rabbi Moshe Zeev in refusing the money.

When Reb Moshe and Reb Zimmel insisted that he accept it, the Rav summoned his shamash and said to him: "There are various tzedakah funds in town. Mention them to these men, and suggest that they donate their money for a useful goal."

During the return trip to Vilna, Reb Zimmel sat in silence for the whole time. Even when they reached town, he continued to keep to himself. When Reb Moshe asked him why he was so quiet, he shared his thoughts with him: "I travel throughout the country and engage in complex ventures, sizeable business deals, and I feel like I have the world in my pocket. Yet here's a brilliant Jew who studies Torah in peace and contentment, and he lacks nothing. In fact 2,000 rubles mean nothing to him. I'm asking myself what all my business and wealth is good for, since I don't even come close to the World to Come of Rabbi Moshe Zeev, and even his life in this world is better than mine!"

At that point, Reb Zimmel decided to put one million rubles aside for his son, so he could devote himself entirely to learning Torah when he grew older. And that's precisely what he did.

– From Na'aseh VeNishma

East, South, West, North

It is written, "Each man by his banner according to the insignias" (Bamidbar 2:2).

In the Midrash our Sages say, "Now in the same way that the Holy One, blessed be He, created the four cardinal directions of the world, likewise did He set the four chayot around His throne, with the Throne of Glory above them. ... [Hashem said to Moshe]:

"The East – from where light goes forth into the world – shall be Judah, from whom royalty emerges. ... Next to him the tribe of Issachar, who was the custodian of the Torah.... Next to him Zebulun, who was the possessor of wealth.

"The South – from where dew and rain go forth, which bring blessing into the world – therefore let the tribe of Reuben be stationed there, for he was penitent, and penitence is a good thing, and the compassion of the Holy One, blessed be He, goes out to mankind when they show penitence. ... Next to him Gad, who commands many troops.... Thus Reuben with his penitence, and Gad with his strength, had Simeon between them in order to make atonement for him.... 'They shall journey second' [Bamidbar 2:16], for penitence is next to Torah.

"The West – where there are storehouses of snow and hail, of cold and heat – on that side shall be Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh. ... Also, the Shechinah is always in the West, in the territory of Benjamin.... 'They shall journey third' [Bamidbar 2:24], a suitable companion to Torah and penitence being strength, for a person should exert his strength in acquiring Torah and mastering his desires.

"The North – the region from where darkness goes forth into the world – shall be the tribe of Dan. Why? For it was that tribe which darkened the world with idolatry, when Jeroboam made the two golden calves. ... Next to him the tribe of Asher, lighting up the darkness.... Next to him Naphtali, with the blessing of ample sustenance.... This teaches that all who worship idols go backwards, not forwards" (Bamidbar Rabba 2:10).

Moshe's Offspring

It is written, "These are the offspring of Aaron and Moshe, on the day Hashem spoke with Moshe" (Bamidbar 3:1).

According to Rashi's interpretation, "Only the sons of Aaron are mentioned, and they are called the offspring of Moshe because he taught them Torah. This teaches us that one who teaches another's son Torah is considered as having fathered him." The Kli Yakar raises an objection, for according to this interpretation all the Children of Israel should be considered Moshe's offspring, since he taught the Torah to all Israel!

He explains this in accordance with what is said about Aaron in the passage concerning the golden calf: "Hashem became very angry with Aaron lehashmido [to destroy him]" (Devarim 9:20). Now the term shamad (to destroy) always signifies the loss of children. However Moshe's prayer was partially successful, since only two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, died.

Hence the two children saved by Moshe's prayer (Elazar and Itamar) were considered to have been fathered by him, and they became his offspring "on the day Hashem spoke with Moshe." What did He speak to him about? "Go, descend – for your people... have become corrupt" (Shemot 32:7). At that point Moshe prayed for Aaron, and Hashem answered him and accepted his prayer.

Smaller in Number

It is written, "All the numbered of the Levites, whom Moshe and Aaron counted by the word of Hashem according to their families..." (Bamidbar 3:39).

Various responses have been proposed to explain the small size of the tribe of Levi, which numbered only 22,000 males, a number that surprised the Ramban. What follows are a few of these responses:

In commenting on Parsha Vayeitzei (Bereshith 29:34), Rashi explains the small number of the tribe of Levi by the fact that they were responsible for transporting the Holy Ark, which caused numerous deaths among them.

The Rambam himself explains the increase in the number of the Children of Israel

as being a supernatural phenomenon, just as Hashem had said: "As they [the Egyptians] afflicted them, so they multiplied and so they grew" (Shemot 1:12). Hence the tribe of Levi, which was not enslaved in Egypt, did not grow in a supernatural way.

In his book Tzror HaMor, Rabbi Avraham Saba explains that while still in Egypt, the tribe of Levi primarily occupied themselves with Hashem's Torah. This total immersion in Torah weakened them physically, and as a result they reproduced in a limited manner.

According to the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh, when Amram separated from his wife for a long period of time because Pharaoh decreed that all newborn males were to be thrown into the river, all the other Levites followed suit by also separating from their wives, which is why they were smaller in number.

In Ha'amek Davar, the Netziv Zatzal states that there is a well-known principle which states that everything which is beautiful and refined takes longer to grow and mature. Therefore the tribe of Levi, which was the most noble among the tribes, grew more slowly until they arrived in Eretz Israel.

The Way of Our Fathers

The Value of Torah

The Sages say, "Torah is greater than the kehuna [priesthood]" (Pirkei Avot 6:6).

We are familiar with the statement in the Gemara: "It happened that as a Kohen Gadol emerged from the Sanctuary, all the people followed him. Yet when they saw Shemaya and Abtalyon, they forsook him and followed [them]" (Yoma 71b).

In regards to tzeddakah we read, "If a mamzer is a talmid chacham and a Kohen Gadol is an ignoramus, the scholarly mamzer has precedence over the ignorant Kohen Gadol" (Horayot 13a). This applies despite the fact that it is a positive Torah mitzvah to respect the kohen, as it is written: "You shall sanctify him" (Vayikra 21:8). The Sages explain this to mean that the kohen is to be the first "to start [reading from the Torah], the first to recite the blessing [for meals], and the first to receive a good portion" (Nedarim 62ab). Nevertheless, if the kohen is an ignoramus, the talmid chacham has precedence over him.

We see that the Torah procures atonement even when the kehuna and offerings no longer exist, as the Gemara says: "Whoever occupies himself with the study of Torah, it is as if he offered a burnt-offering, a meal-offering, a sin-offering, and a guilt-offering" (Menachot 110a).

The Torah is also greater than kingship. Concerning King David, we find that he did not sit upon cushions as he studied before his teacher. Instead, he folded his arms and legs and sat on the ground (Moed Katan 16b), for when he studied Torah he humbled himself before it, despite being king.

It is a positive mitzvah for the king to write a Sefer Torah, and to take it with him wherever he goes, as it is written: "He shall read from it all the days of his life, so that he will learn to fear Hashem his G-d, to observe all the words of this Torah" (Devarim 17:19). The Sages have said, "When he goes out to war, he must take it with him. Upon returning, he brings it back with him. When he sits in judgment, it shall be with him, and when he sits down to eat, [it shall be] before him" (Sanhedrin 21b). This is in order for all his deeds to conform to the Torah, which is greater than kingship, and to whose laws the king must completely submit.

My father told me that the tzaddik Rabbi Haim Benvenisti once came to Morocco and paid a visit to Rabbi Yehuda Pinto, the father of Rabbi Haim Pinto, to whom he showed great respect. Upon returning to Jerusalem, Rabbi Haim Benvenisti sent him some money. One day his disciples asked him, "Why do you show such respect to the tzaddik Rabbi Yehuda Pinto? You also possess the merit of your fathers, so why do you humble yourself so greatly before Rabbi Yehudah Pinto?"

The tzaddik replied, "Only one who possesses the merit of the fathers can truly appreciate what this means, and since Rabbi Yehudah Pinto possesses it, I recognize and respect it. That is why I humble myself before him."

The Crown of Royalty

One day we descended towards the underground passage. We entered through a small opening, and there we saw a large menorah on which was written: “Tombs of the kings of the house of David” – “Tombs” above and “kings of the house of David” below. We then descended and found a cave, and inside was something like a palace. At the entrance we saw a curtain upon which something was written in square writing with gilded letters. However it was so high that we could only read the bottommost line, which stated: “How awesome is this place. Holy, holy.” We were stunned, and we hesitated to enter.

We eventually decided to enter, though fearful and trembling, and there we saw a large house. We were terrified, for we saw a great light before us that was shining like fire, and there we remained for about an hour. Next, we took heart and went inside, and in the middle of the house we saw four marble columns, the top of which was covered in gold, the bottom in silver, and in the middle was marble. Between two columns was a copper-wire fence, like a sieve. In the middle of the room, we saw something resembling a gold bed, upon which there was a cabinet covered in gold. When we came closer to the cabinet, inside we saw a crown of gold set with precious stones. This is what had seemed to be shining to us with such great intensity. On one side of the cabinet we saw the words, “David Ben Yishai,” and on the other side, “David Ben Yishai Melech Israel.” We immediately prostrated ourselves and recited some psalms. We also saw, within this writing, like a kind of rod that went from one end of the crown to the other. We were astonished, for how could he place it upon his head? We also saw a kind of marble table upon which was a long sword, about 2½ meters long, and next to it was a kind of scepter, the head of which was inset with a brilliant jewel.

The Crown of their King

This description, which fills the heart with excitement, is drawn from a letter written by the gaon Rabbi Chaim Yitzchak Rappaport Zatzal. He recorded the testimony of two young Jews, whom the Turkish Sultan had ordered to descend into and explore the tombs of the kings of the house of David.

The crown of King David (who, as we know, died on Shavuot) was exceptional due to its size and beauty. There is a remarkable story told in Scripture in regards to this crown: “David gathered together all the people and he went to Rabba; he battled it and captured it. He removed the king’s crown from his head – it weighed a talent of gold and had a precious stone – and it remained over David’s head” (II Samuel 12:29-30).

The royal crown reached King David by his capture of the royal palace in Rabba of the Ammonites. When this immense crown, which was located in the royal palace, was discovered, it was taken as spoils of war. The Sages reveal to us, however, that prior to David’s capture of the palace, this crown had been placed on the head of a statue which was worshipped by the Ammonites as a god. When King David discovered this crown, he wanted to burn it as an accessory to idolatry. In fact “it is a positive mitzvah to destroy idols and their accessories, and all that is done for them.” However Ittai the Gittite (who was close to King David) annulled it before he converted, thereby allowing King David to use this crown according to the Halachah: “An idol belong-

ing to a gentile, and whose status [as an idol] has been revoked by an idolater before coming into the possession of a Jew, is permitted for benefit” (Rambam, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 8:8). It was only after this crown was “cleansed” that King David agreed to take it and place it on his head, as it is written: “it remained over David’s head.”

The Hollow in His Head

When the crown was taken as spoils of war, it seemed that its main importance lay in its monetary value. However it soon became clear that it had another characteristic, one that was very special: It would not fit on the head of just anyone, but only on one who was worthy of royalty. In an ordinary crown, the inside cavity is completely empty, so that the head of the wearer can completely fill this cavity. However in the crown taken by David, “the king’s crown,” there was something like a strap in this cavity. It was shaped like a golden rod, and it extended from one wall of the crown to the other.

It turned out that this crown, with its special restrictions, fit King David’s head perfectly. Why? One explanation found in the Gemara (Avodah Zarah 44a) states that the hollow that exists in the skull (where “a baby’s head is soft”), which is the place for the tefillin, was so deep that the “rod of the crown” could fit inside. In fact the crown fit perfectly on David’s head, for King David had a deep hollow in this area, which is why the crown fit him perfectly.

Commenting on Sanhedrin 21b, Rashi explains that a golden rod passed through the cavity of the crown, from one end to the other, which fitted into a hollow in the skull, a mark peculiar to some among the house of David. Only he whom the crown fitted was deemed worthy of being king.

With time, when Adonijah the son of Haggit claimed David’s throne and attempted to place this crown upon his head, it did not fit him, thereby ending his attempt to reign over Israel.

The Family of the House of David

The tremendous weight of this crown (over 60 pounds) obviously raises the question of how King David was able to wear such a heavy weight on his head. A certain number of explanations are given in the Gemara, although the Zohar states that there was a supernatural component to it: A celestial law states that the crown can only be worn by one who is worthy of it. Only a member of the house of David who merited this crown, be it a day-old baby, could wear it upon his head!

The crown of King David, who was the first in his dynasty to reign as king, will quickly be found with the arrival of Mashiach the son of David. At that point, we will all merit to see with our own eyes the fulfillment of the prophesy, “You place a crown of pure gold on his head” (Tehillim 21:4).

Guard Your Tongue

Protecting Yourself from Harm

Although believing Lashon Harah is forbidden by the Torah, the Sages say that we should still be cautious about it. The explanation is that we should accept it only as a suspicion, meaning only in order to protect ourselves so as not to be harmed by the person in question.

– Chafetz Chaim