

PARSHA

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WHATEVER IS NUMBERED CANNOT BE ANNULLED

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers' household" (Bamidbar 1:2).

This week's parsha goes into great detail concerning the census of the Children of Israel as it describes their numbers. Since we are aware that the Torah as a whole exists only to guide our steps and show us the path to follow, we need to learn the lessons contained in the census of the Children of Israel and understand why the Torah counts each tribe separately, not mentioning the number of all the tribes combined. Clearly, G-d counted the Children of Israel in order to bestow importance upon each of them, to express His love for them, and to make all of them realize that each person is deeply loved by Hashem as His cherished child, as the verse states: "Israel is My firstborn son" (Shemot 4:22). The Children of Israel are extremely precious to G-d, Who considers them His children, as it is written: "You are the children of Hashem your G-d" (Devarim 14:1). It is therefore out of love that Hashem counted them. Thus He counted the members of each tribe separately to demonstrate that He considers each of them as His only son, as if it were the only tribe that exists and there were no others. As mentioned in the laws regarding permitted and forbidden, "Whatever is numbered... cannot be annulled" [see Zevachim 73a], for it consists of something precious and important. Likewise G-d counted the Children of Israel because He loves and cherishes them.

Hence this is the lesson we derive from the census of the Children of Israel: Just as Hashem showers His children with love by numbering them, likewise we must learn to love others with all our soul and all our strength. The Torah commands, "You shall love your fellow as yourself" (Vayikra 19:18), meaning that we must be concerned with the needs of others and be very careful not to harm them, as it is said: "Let the honor of your fellow be as dear to you as your own" (Pirkei Avoth 2:10). G-d cherishes us, and we must emulate Him by valuing and respecting others.

To the question, "How can I reach such a high spiritual level?" the answer is: Bamidbar ("In the desert"). By considering ourselves as a desert – a place trampled on by the feet of everyone – and by fleeing from pride, we can more easily honor and respect others. We have already mentioned the fact that whoever yearns for Torah must make himself like a desert, just as our Sages teach concerning the verse, "From the desert to Mattanah" (Bamidbar 21:18): "If a man allows himself to be treated as a desert, upon which everybody treads, the Torah is given to him as a gift" (Eruvin 54a). This means that the Torah will be given as a gift (mattanah) to anyone who considers himself as a desert. The same applies here: In order to adopt an exemplary approach in our relationship with others, we must consider ourselves as a desert and act with humility. Indeed, how can an arrogant person – someone who thinks that the world was created just for him – possibly be conciliatory and also give to others? On the other hand, a person who

likens himself to a desert and acts with modesty will clearly be mindful of others, and consequently he will respect, honor, and value them.

This is why the census of the Children of Israel is mentioned in Parsha Bamidbar. It teaches us that to attain this degree of love for others, and to fulfill the commandment to love every Jew as ourselves, we are obligated to consider ourselves as a desert, meaning something abandoned, and we must adopt the traits of humility and simplicity. In regards to Joab the son of Zeruiah, of whom it is written, "So Benaiah son of Jehoiada went up and struck [Joab] and killed him, and [Joab] was buried in his house, in the desert" (I Kings 2:34), our Sages say: "Was his house a desert? ... It was like a desert, for just as a desert is free to all, so was Joab's house free to all" (Sanhedrin 49a). Such behavior demonstrates a true love for others, namely to leave one's home open to all by fulfilling the teaching of the Sages: "Let the poor be members of your household" (Pirkei Avoth 1:5), meaning that we must feed and shelter those in need. Our Sages have also affirmed that Yom Kippur rectifies the sins that we have committed toward G-d, but not the sins that we have committed toward others unless they have forgiven us first. This demonstrates the importance that Hashem attributes to respecting others.

One day a wealthy Jew from Brazil told me that every year a national celebration was held in his country. During festivities lasting a week, everyone would gather to sing and dance, and they would rejoice as they ate and drank in a wild celebration. Now it is known that Brazil harbors some of the largest criminal organizations in the world, groups that kidnap the wealthy and hold them hostage for enormous sums of money. I asked him if he wasn't afraid of being kidnapped during these festivities, to which he replied that out of respect for the nation, these organizations have promised not to harm anyone during that entire week. All criminal organizations agree not to disrupt the joy that fills the nation during this time.

I then thought to myself: If they understand the need to be united for the sake of a national holiday so as not to disrupt a repugnant celebration – which only consists of debauchery and drunkenness – how much more should we strive to live in peace with our fellow for the sake of our Creator! We must be careful not to hamper G-d's joy and to love each person with all our heart, and not only for a week. In fact we must be concerned with the mitzvah, "You shall love your fellow as yourself" throughout our lives.

Our Sages have affirmed that "G-d, the Torah, and Israel are one." The term used for "one" is not echad, but chad, which has a numerical value of 12 – an allusion to the 12 tribes of Israel. It is only when all the tribes without exception are united and connected together that G-d, the Torah, and Israel are one. This is the only condition that allows Hashem to connect the Torah and Israel and to make them one. Furthermore, the Torah itself constitutes an allusion to the unity of Israel, since all the letters in the Torah correspond to the souls of the Jewish people. This means that the Torah unites with us only when we are completely united as one.

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Honor

It is written, “The charge of Elazar, the son of Aaron the kohen: Oil for lighting, the incense of spices, the continual meal-offering, and the anointing oil” (Bamidbar 4:16).

In the Midrash our Sages cite Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi in stating: “Elazar was chief commander, prince of the princes, as it says: ‘Elazar the son of Aaron the kohen being prince of the princes of the Levites...’ [Bamidbar 3:32]. See what rank he held! Yet do you think that because he was a great man, he gave others the task of carrying the vessels that he was appointed to carry? No! He himself carried them, as it says: ‘The charge of Elazar, the son of Aaron the kohen: Oil for lighting, the incense of spices, the continual meal-offering, and the anointing oil’” (Bamidbar Rabba 4:20).

The Midrash continues: “How could he carry all this? Our Rabbis explain that he carried them in this manner: The oil for lighting in his right hand, the incense of spices in his left, and the continual meal-offering hung from his arm. And where was the anointing oil placed? Rabbi Aha said in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: A sort of small flask was suspended from his belt, for he had a belt around his loins like a servant before his master. This is to inform you that pride has no place with G-d” (ibid.).

One of the greatest Torah scholars, the Ramban, describes in his commentary the heavy load carried by the prince of princes, Elazar the son of Aaron. He even calculates the exact weight of the oil for lighting, the incense of spices, the continual meal-offering, and the anointing oil. He writes the following:

“But according to the opinion of the Yerushalmi mentioned in the commentaries of Rashi, that he [Elazar himself] carried them, it would be a heavy load! For the incense consisted of 368 maneh, and our teacher Moshe would not have prepared [only] half of the required quantity, and the oil of lighting for a whole year was a large amount, namely 183 logs. As for the continual meal-offering, we do not know how many days’ supply he carried!”

The Ramban concludes by responding to a question arising from this description, namely how Elazar could have possibly carried such a heavy load of sacred things. The Ramban’s answer: “Elazar was very strong and powerful, as was our Patriarch Jacob, as were our teacher Moshe and his brother Aaron, and ‘those who hope in Hashem will have renewed strength’ [Isaiah 40:31]” (Ramban on Bamidbar 4:16).

I Honor Those Who Honor Me

Yet why did Elazar – who served as the “commander-in-chief” of the Levites – assume the task of carrying this large load himself, since he could have simply ensured that it was transported by the kohanim? He could have simply carried a single vessel from the Sanctuary, a vessel that didn’t require such a massive effort.

The Midrash responds briefly: “This is to inform you that pride has no place with G-d.”

It is obvious that carrying a heavy load was somewhat dishonorable for the prince of the princes of the kohanim: 368 maneh of incense, the oil for lighting, and the continual meal-offering! It goes without saying that it was not fitting for a person of his rank to transport any load, especially the load carried by Elazar. However our Sages interpret this in his favor, as a path to follow in the service of G-d: “This is to inform you that pride has no place with G-d.” The Midrash also tells us: “Elijah says, ‘When a man thinks much of the glory of Heaven and little of his own glory, both the glory of Heaven and his own glory are magnified. However if one

thinks little of the glory of Heaven and much of his own glory, the glory of Heaven remains unimpaired while his own glory wanes’” (Bamidbar Rabba 4:20).

The Midrash describes the following event to prove this:

“An incident is related of a man who was standing in synagogue with his son beside him. Everyone said Hallelukah after the reader, but his son uttered some flippant words. They said to him, ‘Look, your son is uttering flippant words!’ He replied, ‘What can I do? He’s only a child. Let him amuse himself.’ On the following day the same thing happened, all the people responding: Amen, Hallelukah. Yet the son made flippant responses. ‘Look,’ they said to him, ‘Your son is uttering flippant words.’ He said to them, ‘What can I do? He’s only a child. Let him amuse himself.’

“During all eight days of that festival, his son uttered flippant words, but he did not say anything to him. In the course of that year and the following [year] and the following [year after that]...that man, his wife, his son, and his grandson all died, so that 15 souls died in his household and only a pair was left – one was lame and blind, the other was insane and wicked” (Bamidbar Rabba ibid.).

Why Did You Raise Your Voice?

Furthermore, our Sages affirm that whoever increases the glory of Heaven will witness Heaven increasing his own glory:

“Another incident is related of a man who regretted not having read Torah or studied Mishnah. He was once standing in synagogue, and when the reader reached the sanctification of the Divine Name, he raised his voice and cried out: Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh Hashem Tzevakot. They asked him: ‘What compelled you to raise your voice?’ He said to them: ‘I was never privileged to read Torah or study Mishnah, and now that I have an opportunity, shall I not raise my voice so that my mind may be at rest?’

“In the course of that year and the second and the third [good things happened to him]. The man went up from Babylon to the land of Israel, where he was made chief of the emperor’s army and appointed head of all the castles in Israel. They also assigned to him a place where he built a city named Koloni, where he and his children and his grandchildren settled for all time.”

The Midrash concludes as follows:

“From here you learn that a man should not act with pride before the Omnipresent, for whoever displays pride in His presence suffers disgrace. Thus it says, ‘For I honor those who honor Me, and those who scorn Me will be accursed’ [I Samuel 2:30]” (Bamidbar Rabba ibid.).

Guard Your Tongue

A Segula for Earning a Good Living

It is quite natural for us to be tempted to seek out segulot (auspicious omens) and blessings from tzaddikim in order to earn a good living. Yet what good will this do if we are habitually slandering people and gossiping, a subject for which the Torah explicitly states: “Accursed is one who strikes his fellow stealthily” [Devarim 27:24]. Our Sages point out that the term “accursed” includes the curse itself and excommunication. These words were not just uttered by a single person, but with the consent of all Israel, including the kohanim and Levites! Would people listen to me, I would advise them to specifically avoid these sins, which will be the most effective source of wealth, more than any other segulot. As we know, all the curses began with a blessing, as it is written: “Blessed is the one who does not strike his fellow stealthily” – to which all the Children of Israel responded “Amen.” Such a blessing will obviously be fulfilled.

– Shmirat HaLashon

For Fear of Division

It is written, “The Children of Israel shall encamp, each man by his banner according to the insignias of their fathers’ household; at a distance surrounding the Tent of Meeting shall they encamp” (Bamidbar 2:2).

As we know, this week’s parsha was said “on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from Egypt” (Bamidbar 1:1). In that case, why was the arrangement of these banners delayed for an entire year while the Children of Israel were in the desert? Furthermore, did they not receive this order as soon as they left Egypt by their hosts? Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky explains that at first glance, these banners were liable to sow division because each banner represented a given tribe’s specific aspirations and goals, which set it apart from the other tribes. As a result, these banners could have easily provoked a conflict between tribes. Yet as soon as everyone had a central point in common – namely the Sanctuary, around which they were all encamped together – there was no longer any risk of the tribes becoming completely divided. Instead, each tribe focused on what was specific to itself within the larger group.

Therefore as long as the Sanctuary had not been built, and as long as a unifying center had not yet been established, the tribes were not organized by banners because it was liable to lead to division. It was only now, when the Sanctuary was set up, that the order was given for “the Children of Israel [to] encamp, each man by his banner according to the insignias....”

Mine Forever

It is written, “The Levites shall be Mine; I am Hashem” (Bamidbar 3:45).

This verse ends with “I am Hashem,” writes the Ohr HaChaim, in order to teach us that although the Sages have said, “The service of the Temple shall revert to the firstborn,” nevertheless the Levites will not cease being holy to Hashem.

This is why the Torah says by allusion, “The Levites shall be Mine; I am Hashem” – i.e., just as My Name will last forever, the Levites shall be Mine forever.

By Shabbat Standards

It is written, “Everyone who comes to the legion to perform melacha [work] in the Tent of Meeting” (Bamidbar 4:3).

In regards to the sons of Kohath, some ask why the term melacha (“work”) is used, since this term is not used for the sons of Gershon and Merari. The author of Meshech Chochma explains by saying that the sons of Gershon and Merari transported the components of the Sanctuary in carts that were drawn by oxen, and as a result such activity in the desert did not constitute work on their part by Shabbat standards of “work.”

Yet in regards to the sons of Kohath, they carried the vessels of the Sanctuary on their shoulders, which is considered melacha by Shabbat standards, namely that of hotzaa (carrying an object into the public domain). Hence the verse states, in regards to the work of the sons of Kohath, that it was melacha.

Those Who Carry and Support

It is written, “Then the sons of Kohath shall come to carry, so that they not touch the Sanctuary and die” (Bamidbar 4:15).

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin said that in our time, yeshivot represent the holy Ark, while the heads and directors of yeshivot – who carry the financial burden of these institutions – represent those who carry it. This teaches us that even if a person’s financial situation is tight, and supporting the financial needs of a yeshiva seems above his abilities, in the end it is the Ark that carries those who carry it, and it is the yeshiva that supports those who support it.

Preparing for the Giving of the Torah

For the reading of the Torah’s parshiot, it has been established that Parsha Bamidbar is always read before Shavuot (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 428:4). We need to understand why the Sages took this decision, and what the connection is between Parsha Bamidbar and Shavuot.

I would like to explain the verse, “Hashem spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai” (Bamidbar 1:1) according to a statement in the Midrash: “Our Sages have inferred from this that the Torah was given to the accompaniment of three things: Fire, water, and the desert” (Bamidbar Rabba 1:7). It is possible that the Sages wanted to teach us that Torah study can only endure before the evil inclination (which seeks to defeat us each day) because of the Torah, which possesses these three characteristics.

In fact the Sages have said, “I created the evil inclination, but I created the Torah as its antidote. If you occupy yourselves with Torah, you will not be delivered into its hand.... But if you do not occupy yourselves with Torah, you shall be delivered into its hand” (Kiddushin 30b). We also read in the Midrash that King David said, “Do not allow my feet to go where they wish, but [only] towards Your Torah all day long, towards the Beit HaMidrash” (Midrash Tehillim 119), for the evil inclination does not enter the Beit HaMidrash. It accompanies a person throughout his journey, but when he reaches the Beit HaMidrash, it does not have the right to enter. And since the evil inclination is made of fire – as it is written, “[He makes] the flaming fire His attendants” (Tehillim 104:5) – a person cannot defeat it unless he possesses the power of Torah, which itself is compared to fire, as it is written: “My word is like fire – the word of Hashem” (Jeremiah 23:29). The evil inclination is a small fire that can be easily extinguished, while the Torah is a raging fire that can never be extinguished, as it is written: “Its coals are coals of fire, which has a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love” (Shir HaShirim 8:6-7). What does a person do when faced with a small fire, but he has no water to extinguish it and is afraid that it will spread? He puts it in a raging fire, where it will be negated. Thus the fire of the evil inclination is negated before the fire of Torah.

For a person not to grow proud, pushed by the fire of Torah, he should humble himself and become like water. Thus just as water is never found at an elevated place, but descends to the lowest place possible (Ta’avit 7a), likewise a talmid chacham must conduct himself with humility. Now the Torah only endures with someone who is humble, who is like water, and as a result the evil inclination will be hindered. The Torah encourages a person to devote himself entirely to serving Hashem, as if he himself were but a desert, just as Moshe did when he separated himself from his wife because the Shechinah could speak to him at any moment (Tanchuma 96:13). Furthermore, Moshe never occupied himself with his own concerns, but only with the concerns of the Jewish people.

When we devote ourselves entirely to words of Torah and we make ourselves into a desert, we never dispute G-d’s decisions.

This is the meaning of the Sages’ teaching that we must say a blessing over evil just as we say a blessing over good, even if we must give up our lives (Berachot 54a). King David wrote, “All my bones will say, ‘Hashem, who is like You?’” (Tehillim 35:10). This teaches us that every bone in his body was devoted to serving Hashem, to doing everything that He commanded. Hence the Sages instituted that Parsha Bamidbar is read near the giving of the Torah, in order to remind us that Torah only endures with a person when he makes himself into a desert in fulfilling G-d’s will, when he devotes himself entirely to Him and does everything He commands.

In the Footsteps of our Fathers

The Tree in the Middle of the Garden

In this week's parsha, the Baal HaTurim examines a slight variation in the description of the numbering of the tribes of Israel. In fact for all the tribes, the conjunctive vav ("and") begins the description U'matei bnei ("And for the tribe"), except for the tribe of Zebulun (Bamidbar 2:7). He explains this difference as follows: "Zebulun supported the needs of Issachar, and I've seen in Midrash Tanchuma that Zebulun engaged in commerce and nourished Issachar, which is why the Torah did not want to give him a secondary position in regards to his brother. This teaches us that the reward of each was equivalent, as it is written: 'It is a tree of life to those who grasp it, and happy are those who support it' [Mishlei 3:18]. It is also written, 'In the shadow of wisdom... in the shadow of money' [Kohelet 7:12]. Hence they were considered as one and the same tribe. The text can therefore be read as follows: 'Issachar, tribe of Zebulun.'"

The Chatam Sofer explains that everyone who supports Torah students shares in their merits, according to the agreement between Issachar and Zebulun. As a result, even if a person has never studied, he attains the Torah knowledge acquired by Issachar.

This assertion is based on the verse, "I was a youth and also aged, but I have never seen a righteous man forsaken or his children begging for bread" (Tehillim 37:25), which he interprets in the following way: "I was a youth [na'ar]" – although I was devoid [meno'ar] of Torah study; "and also aged" – I have merited a knowledge of Torah as an aged man who has acquired wisdom. Why? Because "I have never seen a righteous man forsaken" – for I always supported him with my money.

Our teacher Rabbi David Pinto explains this fundamental message each time he attends dinner fundraisers for Torah institutions. Perhaps when he asks donors to support students in other institutions – whereas he himself runs global Torah and charity organizations whose financial situation is not better than others – he is motivated by a love for the Jewish people and Torah, a love that makes him disregard all other considerations. The honor of Torah and that of our teacher (Rabbi Pinto) moves every eye that sees him and every ear that hears him.

A Message for Artzik

With the Communist Revolution in Russia, difficult days arrived for the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. Large and renowned yeshivot greatly suffered, having literally nothing to feed their students.

One day the Chafetz Chaim met the commissar of the region, a man by the name of Artzik, who had studied in his yeshiva and was very familiar with him.

After speaking to him about various things, the Chafetz Chaim suddenly made a suggestion: "Perhaps you want to hear a dvar Torah?" The commissar responded sarcastically, "That's the only thing I need! I'm already as far from Torah as east is from west!" However the Chafetz Chaim did not give up. In fact he added, "Perhaps you can, despite everything, listen to a brief dvar Torah? Just one!"

Artzik accepted out of respect for the man who had once been his teacher. The Chafetz Chaim then took hold of the collar of Artzik's

jacket, looked him in the eye, and said: "In the account of the creation of the world, it is said that G-d planted a garden, and in the middle of it He placed the Tree of Life. Why did He place it in the middle, rather than in a corner of the garden? So that everyone could reach it easily and quickly, according to his abilities and means. Some reach it by diligent study, others by a fear of G-d, and good men such as yourself reach the Tree of Life by performing good deeds."

In passing, the Chafetz Chaim added, "You know, hundreds of yeshiva students from this town are literally dying of hunger now. You can attain your future world by selling a little food to these precious youngsters so they can survive."

When the Chafetz Chaim left, Artzik remained troubled and immersed in thought. On the following day, toward evening, a cart loaded with bags of flour and other basic food stopped at the entrance of the yeshiva. All of it was for the students of the Chafetz Chaim's yeshiva, and it was all free of charge.

The Faithful Ones - Accounts from the Tzaddikim of the Pinto Family

One Mitzvah Leads to Another

Discord began to brew in the home of a prominent Jew from Mogador, who eventually decided to leave his wife. After the divorce was finalized, the man went to see Rabbi Haim Pinto for a blessing.

The Rav greeted him warmly and said, "Thank G-d, you have had the merit of fulfilling the mitzvah of divorce, which is also mentioned in the Torah. Happy are you! Nevertheless, our Sages have clearly said that one mitzvah leads to another. I'm therefore certain that you will soon return to your wife and your children. You will remarry your wife and reestablish your home!" Rabbi Haim then added, "There was already a tzaadik before you who said to his wife, 'Let's fulfill the mitzvah of divorce,' after which he remarried her."

Upon hearing these words, the man was very disturbed. He had just divorced his wife, and now the Rav was clearly telling him that he would return to her! He didn't understand what was happening. Nevertheless, the Rav continued to engage the man in a heart-to-heart discussion, praising the virtues that everyone must develop and explaining that we must distance ourselves from the evil inclination, which tries to bring us down to the abyss. Little by little, these words made their way into the heart of this prominent man, who began to realize that he had made an error. He realized that living with his wife was possible and indeed preferable.

Then and there, standing before the table of the tzaddik, he understood that he had to demonstrate good judgment, that he could be more patient and less angry than he had been up to now. At that point he burst into tears and announced his decision to remarry his wife. A few weeks later, he was standing beneath the chuppah with the woman whom he had previously rejected. From then on, their home became a harbor of peace.