



Parshas Bamidbar

For the week ending 2 Sivan 5757
6 & 7 June 1997

Overview

The book of *Bamidbar* ('In the desert') begins with Hashem commanding Moshe to take a census of all the men over the age of twenty – old enough for service. The count reveals just over 600,000. The *Levi'im* are counted separately later, because their service will be unique. They will be responsible for transporting the *Mishkan* and its furnishings and putting them together when the nation encamps. The Tribes of Israel, each with its banner, are arranged around the *Mishkan* in four sections: to the East, South, West and North. Since Levi is singled out, Yosef is split into Efraim and Menashe so there will be four groups of three. When the nation travels, they march in a formation similar to the way they camp. A formal exchange is made between the first born and the *Levi'im*, whereby the *Levi'im* take over the role the firstborn would have had serving in the *Mishkan* before the sin of the golden calf. The exchange is made using all the 22,000 surveyed *Levi'im* from one month old and up, even though only *Levi'im* between 30 and 50 will work in the *Mishkan*. The remaining firstborn sons are redeemed with silver, similar to the way we redeem our firstborn today. The sons of Levi are divided in three main families, Gershon, Kehas and Merari (besides the *Kohanim* – the special division from Kehas' family). The sons of Kehas had to carry the *Menorah*, the Table, the Altar and the Holy Ark. Because of their utmost sanctity, the Ark and the Altar are covered only by Aaron and his sons, before the *Levi'im* prepared them for travel.

Insights

THE TORAH CENTER

“And the Tent of Meeting journeyed in the camp of Levi in the midst of the camps...” (2:17)

Go into any *shul*. Where is the *bima* — the large reading lectern on which the Torah is read? In the middle. Why isn't it at one end?

When the Children of Israel journeyed through the desert, the Tent of Meeting traveled within the camp of Levi, which was right in the middle of the camp. The Tent of Meeting was right in the middle because within the Tent of Meeting was the *Aron* — the Holy Ark in which the Torah was kept.

The Torah has to be in the center. It is not closer to one person, nor further from another. Every Jew can be as close to the Torah as any other.

Similarly, the Tree of Life was planted in the middle of the Garden of Eden. The Torah is called the Tree of Life to those who grasp it. The handles by which we lift it up are called '*Eitz Hachaim*' — the Tree of Life. The handles are in the center of each of the scrolls just as the Tree of Life was at the center of the Garden. And similarly, the Torah is the center of the life of the Jew. If he moves it to one side and relegates it to a weekend activity, his life becomes distorted and unbalanced. Materialism rushes to fill the void that he has left by putting the Torah 'to one side.'

The Torah requires concentration. We must *concentrate* it at the center of our lives. For it is the heart of our faith. Just as from the heart flows life itself, and thus its place is in the center of the body, thus the Torah was at the center of the camps of Israel.

The heart pumps the blood to all the extremities of the body equally, without discrimination, and every limb is sustained by it. The Holy Torah pumps the life-force of Judaism to all limbs of the Jewish People, without discrimination, regardless of whom they are.

ZEIDE'S COAT-TAILS

“And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai” (1:1)

The Janowska Road camp was just another way to kill Jews. The Nazis were building a road across Poland, but no one knew its primary purpose — to finish off the road, or to finish off the Jews. At any rate, the latter purpose was certainly moving at a quicker pace.

One night the Allies bombed the road. The emaciated Jews huddled in their bunks as hundreds of tons of TNT exploded all around them.

Miraculously, the air-raid injured nobody. The road, however, was a different story. It looked more like the surface of the moon, with craters the size of pock-marks all the way up to a giant yawning abyss.

The Nazis wanted to have a little 'fun.' Shouting and screaming, they ordered all the Jews out of the hut. In the freezing Polish winter, they made them run on the double in bare feet down to the road, to the biggest crater.

Continued

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Parshas **Bamidbar** — 2 Sivan 5757, 6 & 7 June 1997

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"You Jews need some exercise! You pitiful specimens! One by one you will jump across this bomb crater. If you make it, you can go back to your beds; but if you fall into the crater, you will be machine-gunned to death before you can crawl out. I'm sure you'll agree that this should make for an interesting evening's entertainment."

The stillness of the night was punctuated by the brittle crackle of machine-gun fire and the last cries of a holy Jew taking his leave of this world.

In that silent queue of destiny, stood a giant of the soul — the Bluzhever Rebbe, *zatza*. And behind him, there was a young fellow who had lost his faith through the torment of war.

The young man said to the Bluzhever "Why should we entertain these sadist pigs. When it's my turn, I'm not going to jump. Let them shoot me where I stand. I'm not going to entertain them. I'm not going to perform for them like a dog!"

Quietly, the Bluzhever replied: "My friend. What a precious gift the Creator has given to us! We have been given the ultimate gift — the gift of life. However, He gave it to us on a condition: That we should not send it back to Him. Rather, He Himself will come and take it back from us.

"Every second of our life is precious. While it is still in our power to carry on living, we must hold on to life with all our might. If we jump and we make it to the other side, we will have honored the gift that He gave us. And if we jump and we fail, we will arrive in the next world just a few short seconds later than if we had refused to jump."

The moment of truth had arrived. The Bluzhever stood on the mouth of the abyss. Summoning what little strength was left in his frail body, he closed his eyes. It seemed to the young man that a smile came over the Bluzhever's angelic face — as though he had recognized an old long-lost friend. The Bluzhever took a few steps back and then leapt into the darkness.

The Bluzhever opened his eyes. He was on the other side. Seconds later, the young man landed next to him.

"How did you possibly have the strength to make it across?" said the young man.

"Just before I jumped," said the Bluzhever, "I saw a vision of my *zeide*. In front of him was his father and his *zeide* and all the holy Jews through the ages back to Moshe Rabbeinu, to Avraham Avinu. All those Jews who kept our holy Torah even when it cost them their lives.

I saw my *zeide* jumping across the crater in front of me. I stretched out my hands and grabbed onto his coat-tails. And he pulled me across."

The two remained in silence for some moments. Finally, the Bluzhever said. "May I ask you a question?" The young man

nodded. "I understand how I made it across. But how did you manage to jump so far?"

The young man paused before he replied. "I was hanging on to *your* coat-tails" he said.

From where does this power to hang on to the coat-tails of our forefathers come?

The Torah was given in Fire, in Water, and in the Desert.

Through Avraham Avinu we received the Torah in Fire. Avraham went through the fiery furnace of Ur Kasdim rather than deny Hashem. He is the father of the Jewish People. The progenitor.

At the Reed Sea, the Jewish People as a nation passed an ordeal by Water. The Egyptians army was poised to drive them into the sea. At God's command the entire nation jumped into the water, and the sea parted.

And if you'll say that this was merely a moment of bravado, then look at a third event that sealed their capacity for self-sacrifice: They followed Moshe into the vastness of the wilderness, without food, without water, with nothing more than the promise of miracle food from Above, and no more companionship than snakes and scorpions.

It was these three ordeals, in Fire, in Water and in the Desert, which anchored in the spiritual genes of the Jewish People the capacity for self-sacrifice and the love of the Torah which, to this day, has allowed us to reach out and hang on to our holy Torah and our faith. By hanging on to the coat-tails of our *zeides*.

Haftorah: Hoshea 2:1-22

GHETTO FLOWER

"And it shall be in the place where it will be said of them 'You are not My people,' it will be said to them 'The children of the living G-d.'" (2:1)

The history of the Jewish People shows that it is specifically in those lands in which they have been oppressed and separated into ghettos, that Jewish Life has flourished.

Ironically, where they have experienced acceptance and dwelled in comfort with equal rights, the scourge of assimilation and the disappearing Jew have taken root.

This spiritual holocaust has caused a hemorrhage which has ravaged whole limbs of the body of the Jewish People.

The prophet Hoshea teaches us here that "*It shall be in the place that it will be said to them 'you are not My people'*" — i.e., specifically in those places where the Jews will be rejected and scorned as being inferior — "*it will be said to you 'children of the living G-d.'*" — i.e., there it will also be that you will guard well your source, the Torah, until it will become apparent and clear that you are the "*children of the living G-d.*"

Sources:

The Torah Center - Chafetz Chaim

Zeide's Coat-Tails - Midrash Rabbah; Rabbi Meir Shapiro in Mayana Shel Torah; Rabbi Mendel Weinbach

Ghetto Flower - Bikurei Aviv

Fatherly Advice - tidbits from the Ethics of the Fathers traditionally studied on Summer Sabbaths

"Envy, passion and honor take a person out of this world."

Rabbi Eliezer Hakapar (Avos 4:2)

This warning about self-destructive elements parallels the one issued by Rabbi Yehoshua (Avos 2:11) that "an evil eye, evil inclination and hatred of people take a person out of this world." Envy of others is the product of an evil eye which is not content with what it has, while passion is the instrument of the evil inclination. But what is the symmetry between the lust for honor and the hatred of people?

One explanation is that nothing is so hateful to people as one who seeks honor, and even if they openly flatter him they hate him in their hearts. Another approach is that the pursuit of honor inevitably leads a person to hate others as a response to their failure to accord him the honor he feels is due to him.

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