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Parshat Bamidbar

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**A CUT AMONGST THE REST**

*By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky*

This week's portion begins Sefer Bamidbar, telling the story of the major events that occurred during the forty year trek through the Midbar towards the land of Israel. In secular terms the book is called Numbers, probably because of the first command in this third Book of the Pentateuch, "count the Jewish people," thus the name Numbers.

The Hebrew words for count are either s'ooch, which also means lift up, and p'kod, which can also mean appoint. Thus, when the Torah commands, "s'ooch es rosh kol adas Yisrael, count the heads all the assembly of Israel (Numbers 1:2), it is telling Moshe to uplift them as well. It was not merely a matter of numbers, explains Rebbe Rav Shmuel of Sochatchov: counting the nation was not only a means of enumerating them, but also of appointing a special dignity to each and every one who was counted. Every individual was important, there were no communal estimates, and the appointment actually lifted them.

But one of the tribes was not counted with the rest. Regarding the tribe of Levi, which was designated as the spiritual leader of the Jewish people, Moshe was told, "But you shall not count (p'kod) the tribe of Levi; and their heads you shall not lift (v'es rosham lo sisah) among the Children of Israel" (Numbers 1:49).

The questions are simple. Why is there a double expression prohibiting a count "do not count and do not lift their heads"? In addition, why does the Torah add the words, "amongst the children of Israel"? True, they were counted separately, and so the Torah should rather state, "And the tribe of Levi shall be enumerated separately." Can there be a deeper intonation with the expression, "Do not lift their head amongst the Children of Israel"?

*Rav Eliyahu Chaim Meisels, the Rav of Lodz, would raise money for the poor widows and orphans of his city. During one particularly freezing winter, he went to visit one of the prominent members of his community, Reb Isaac, a banker who served as the president of the community council. Bundled in a coat and scarf, the Rabbi approached the banker's mansion and knocked on the door. The valet who answered the door was shocked to see the great Rabbi Meisels standing outside in the bitter cold. He immediately asked him to enter the home where he said there would be a hot tea waiting. Rabbi Meisels refused. "It is not necessary. Please tell Reb Isaac to see me by the door." The banker heard that the Rav was waiting near the portal and rushed in his evening jacket to greet him. Upon seeing the Rabbi standing in the frigid weather, he exclaimed. "Rebbe, please step inside. I have the fireplace raging, and my butler will prepare a hot tea for you! There is no need for you to wait outside!" "That's alright," countered Reb Eliyahu Chaim. "It won't be long, and all I need could be accomplished by talking right here. I'm sure you won't mind. Anyway, why should I dirty your home with my snow-covered boots?" By this time, Reb Isaac was in a dilemma. The frigid air was blowing into his house. He did not want to close the door and talk outside in the cold, and yet the Rabbi did not want to enter! "Please, Rabbi, I don't know about you, but I am freezing," cried the banker. "I don't mind if your boots are wet! Just come on in!" But the Rabbi did not budge. He began talking about the plight of some of the unfortunate members of the community as the banker's teeth chattered in response. "Please, Rebbe, just tell me what you need! I'll give anything you want, just come inside!" With that, Reb Elya Chaim relented. He entered the man's home and followed him to the den, where a blazing fire heated the room. Then he began: "I need firewood for 50 families this winter." The banker smiled. "No problem, I commit to supplying the wood. Just one question. You know I give tzedaka, so why did you make me stand outside?" "Reb Isaac," smiled Reb Eliyahu Chaim. "I know you give, but I wanted to make sure you understood what these poor people are going through. I knew that five minutes in the freezing cold would give you a different perspective than my initial asking while basking in the warmth of your fireplace."*

The Chasam Sofer explains that because Levi was a special tribe of teachers and leaders it could be possible they would be aloof. Thus, though they were counted separately, they could not be above the crowd. Therefore, the Torah's command was stated in clear terms, "their heads you shall not lift (v'es rosham lo sisah) among the Children of Israel". Leadership may put you in a class by yourself, but remember, says the Torah, you must not feel that you are above the folk. You cannot bask in warmth while you are oblivious to those who suffer in the cold. Your head can not be "lifted" from among the children of Israel.

## It's About People

By Rabbi Berel Wein

This week's reading as well as the entire book of Bamidbar is replete with the numbers of the populations of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai. Slightly more than 600,000 male Jews over the age of twenty comprise the population of the Jewish people under the leadership of Moshe. Extrapolating the old, the young, infirmed, the women and the multitudes of people of other nations that left Egypt together with the Jewish people, most Rabbinic authorities estimate a Jewish population of between two and three million souls.

As important as it may be for us to be aware of the population numbers, the question arises: why does the Torah spend so many verses and details in enumerating the population of the Jewish people at that time? What is the religious, spiritual, or historical perspective necessary for us to understand this listing? Regarding this question, there are many proposed ideas and answers, but it is almost universally accepted by all commentaries that this is one of the areas of the Torah where mystery prevails over mere human understanding and logical reasoning.

In short, whatever answers we may give to this problem of why the population numbers seem so important, and occupy such prominence in the book itself, is difficult for us mere mortals to comprehend its true message and meaning. Apparently, the greater the detail, the greater the mystery that it engenders. Since the words of the Torah are eternal accounts of the Jewish people and its population, this indicates that, somehow, this remains a source of inspiration and spiritual holiness for all generations.

One of the interesting facets of the detailed counting is the fact that the Torah lists the names of the leaders of the individual tribes who participated at arriving at this census of the people. As difficult as it is for us to understand the count itself, it is doubly difficult for us to understand the prominence given the names of the leaders of the tribes. This is true because we are aware that none of these people would survive the 40-year sojourn in the desert, and all of them would be replaced with new leaders of their respective tribes, before the entry of the Jewish people into the land of Israel after the death of Moshe.

One understanding of this difficulty is that the Torah wants to constantly remind us that it is a book about people and their behavior, and not about cold facts, events, trends, and esoteric knowledge. The Torah wishes us to remember that people are not merely ciphers or numbers but, rather, flesh and blood individuals, personalities, all different one from another.

The words of the Talmud are that we are all cast from one mold, but no two of us are alike. Since the Torah expends so much detail, both in the count of the people, as well as the specific names of who counted them emphasizes that we are talking about actual people, and not only about numbers per se. This is a fundamental lesson in Judaism, and it is also why the Torah calls itself the book of the generations of humankind.

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## The Hidden Message Telegraphed by the Word "Se'oo"

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

In the beginning of Parshas Bamidbar, *Klal Yisrael* received the mitzvah of counting the nation. That is why the Book of Bamidbar is called "*Chomesh HaPekudim*" – the "Book of Numbers", because it both begins (Parshas Bamidbar) and ends (Parshas Pinchas) with a census of *Bnei Yisrael*. The terminology used by the Torah regarding taking the census taking is "*Se'oo es rosh kol adas Bnei Yisrael...*" [Bamidbar 1:2] (Count (literally – "lift up") the heads of the entire congregation of the Children of Israel...).

The Ramban quotes the Medrash in Bamidbar Rabbah which questions the implication of the expression *Se'oo*. The Torah does not say "*Romemu es rosh*," or "*Gadlu es rosh*" which are essentially similar verbs. Rather, it uses the term "*Se'oo es rosh*". This implies, the Medrash says, that if *Klal Yisrael* behaves properly, they will be on top of the world as it says (in Yosef's interpreting the dream of the Wine Butler) "*Yisa Pharaoh es roshecha...*" (Pharaoh will 'lift your head') and return you to your original position [Bereshis 40:13]. This verb also implies that if *Lo Yis'oo* – if *Klal Yisrael* does not keep themitzvos, they will all die. This too is implied by the expression used when Yosef interpreted the dream of the Baker – "*Yisa Pharaoh es roshcha...*" (Pharaoh will 'lift your head') and will hang you on the tree. [Bereshis 40:19]

In other words, the word *Se'oo* can mean the highest of the high or the lowest of the low. Just like the same verb used in conjunction with the Wine Butler and the Baker had diametrically opposite meanings, so too—the Medrash says—the *Ribono shel Olam* is hinting to Moshe Rabbeinu: Moshe, you should understand that by *Klal Yisrael* it is "either/or". There is an expression in Yiddish which is not readily translatable: "*Odder gor; odder gornisht*". It means either "gor" (wow!) or "gornisht" (nothing). This is the trajectory of the Jewish people. If we do what we are supposed to do, then our fate will be to receive unimaginable blessing; but on the other hand, if we do not, we fall – literally – to the bottom.

A famous Gemara [Kesubos 66] relates an incident with Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai riding on a donkey on the outskirts of Jerusalem. His students were walking behind him. He saw a young Jewish girl who was gathering undigested barley kernels from amongst cattle dung. She was so desperate because of the famine ravishing the city that she was forced to seek a small bit of food in this extremely degrading fashion.

When she saw Rav Yochanan approach, she begged him to provide her with a handout. He asked her “My daughter – who is your father?” She identified herself as the daughter of Nakdimen ben Gurion. Nakdimen ben Gurion was (*l’havidil*) the Warren Buffet of his generation. He was extremely wealthy. Rabbi Yochanan asked her “My daughter, what happened to the wealth of your father?” She told him “This is what they say in Yerushalayim: ‘If you do not make proper use of your money, your money will be taken away from you.’” Rav Yochanan (knowing she had a wealthy father-in-law as well) asked “What happened to your father-in-law’s money?” She responded, “He too lost it all.” She commented, “Rebbi, do you remember when you signed my *Kesuba* document? Do you remember how much money the document recorded that I was bringing into the marriage?” Rav Yochanan turned to his students and said, “I remember that her marriage contract said she was bringing in thousands and thousands of gold *dinarim* from her father’s house, besides the wealth of her (rich) father-in-law.” At that point Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai broke down and cried: “Happy are you O Israel – when you do the Will of the Almighty, no nation can touch you; and when you do not keep *themitzvos* and you do not act properly, you are handed over into the hands of a lowly nation – and not only into the hands of a lowly nation, but to the hands of the animals of a lowly nation.”

The question is, why did he preface his remark with “Happy are you O Israel” (*Ashreichem Yisrael*)? The Maharsha explains: We get our success or failure **directly** from the *Ribono shel Olam*. When the *Ribono shel Olam* is in charge, He can put us on the top of the world when we are doing what we are supposed to be doing. We are not under a ‘Sar’ (Officer) or some kind of a *Malach* (Angel) like the Nations of the World. We get what we get directly from the Hand of the *Ribono shel Olam*. When we do what we are supposed to do, the Almighty takes care of us like no human being can. But, when we don’t, then – oh boy! – This is what happens to *Klal Yisrael*.

This succinctly is a history of the Jewish people. We have had periods of extreme success and extreme wealth. We have had periods, unfortunately, when the opposite has been true. This is what the Ramban means when he quotes the Medrash “*Se’oo es rosh kol adas Benei Yisrael*.” The Almighty was hinting to Moshe – let them know: *Odder gor; odder gornisht!* They can be wildly successful, as in “*Yissa Pharaoh es roshecha*” of the Wine Butler. But, if they don’t, then that which happens in the *Tochacha* of last week’s parsha and the *Tochacha* of Parshas Ki Savo is what will happen to them as well.

#### *A Subtle Name Change Hints at a Reward for Keeping Silent*

The Chida, in his *sefer* Chomas Anach, comments on the name of the Prince of the Tribe of Gad: *Elyasaf ben Re’u’el* [Bamidbar 2:14]. You may notice that the first time his name is mentioned in the parsha [Bamidbar 1:14] he is referred to as *Elyasaf ben De’u’el* (with a *daled* rather than a *reish*). Why the change? Did his father have an alias? Was his name *De’u’el* or *Re’u’el*?

The Chida brings an interesting idea in the name of the *sefer* Imrei Noam. His name was *De’u’el*, and that is how he is referred to originally. The reason he is later called *Re’u’el* is because the Tribe of Gad could have had a complaint to the *Ribono shel Olam*: Why am I not the head of the Camp? (There were four “camps” consisting of three tribes each, positioned in the four directions around the middle camp which included the *Levi’im* and the *Mishkan*. Each camp had a “leader” from one of the three tribes encamped in that direction. The Tribe of Gad encamped in the southern side and was subordinate to the Tribe of Reuven, whose Prince was the chief leader of that camp.)

Gad’s argument was as follows: I realize I am not Reuven (who was the camp leader at the southern side) and I realize I am not Yehudah (who was the leader of the camps on the eastern side) and I am not Ephraim (who was leader of the western camp). But who is Dan that he should be leader of the camps on the northern side? Dan was merely the first born of Bilhah, one of the hand-maidens? I, too, am first born of Zilpah, also one of the hand-maidens! Why give Dan the honor of being the head of an entire camp? Why not give that honor to me?

He **could** have put forth that objection, but he did not say anything. As a reward for accepting this lack of honor – Gad received a reward that no other tribe received: Moshe Rabbeinu is buried in the portion of land inherited by the Tribe of Gad. Who is Moshe Rabbeinu? He is the friend of the *Ribono shel Olam*. He is *Reah* (friend) *Kel* (of G-d). Thus, the name *De’u’el* was changed to *Re’u’el* (alluding to ‘friend of G-d’).

The Tribe of Gad stifled whatever resentment they might have had for not being given the honor of leading one of the Camp configurations. They had a justifiable claim to advance, but they kept quiet about it. The *Ribono shel Olam* rewards such behavior. The Prince of the Tribe of Gad is referred to as *Elyasaf* son of *Re’u’el*, which hints at this reward: “You will merit to have the burial location of Moshe Rabbeinu, the ‘friend of G-d’ within your territory.”

**“Take the sum of all the congregation of the Children of Israel, by families following their fathers' houses; a head count of every male according to the number of their names” (1:2)**

Hashem commanded Moshe to count the people with the word **שאו**, literally “lift up.” The counting uplifted every single individual and helped him recognize his worth. When a person realized that Moshe counted as one, Aharon counted as one and he counted as one just the same as them, he felt good about himself because he recognized that he too could reach great levels as they had. The Torah compares the Jewish people to the stars. Though a star looks small from a distance, it really is quite large, a world in its own right. Every one of us is an integral part of Hashem's world. Our actions affect the whole world. The Rambam says that a person should envision the world as having an equal amount of merit and guilt, which means that his next choice of a mitzvah or aveira will tilt the scale of the entire world. Additionally, just as every star spreads light, it is our job to share our light with those around us. We are all capable of having an impact on others and we should embrace that opportunity and responsibility.

**“From twenty years old and upwards, all who are fit to go out to the army in Yisrael, you shall count them by their legions you and Aharon” (1:3)**

Why was 20 chosen as the age from which the Jewish people were counted? The age of 20 represents a certain level of maturity, a stage when a young person can be expected to assume more responsibility. That is why a person only begins to be subject to heavenly punishment for his sins beginning at age 20. The people who were counted as a part of the Jewish nation were those who could be counted on to contribute to society. Only those who took responsibility for their actions and to look out for others could be counted as full-fledged members of Bnei Yisrael.

**“With you there shall be a man from each tribe, one who is head of his father's house.” (1:4)**

Why were the leaders of the shevatim described as “a man from each tribe” instead of being given the proper honorary titles? The Torah teaches us that to be a leader, one has to first be a simple man. He must be humble, a man of the people, not someone high and mighty who lords himself over others. That is what defines a true leader. Only such a person, who can relate to his people and understand them, will be able to guide them well.

**“Then Moshe and Aharon took these men, who were indicated by names” (1:17)**

In many places in the Torah, Chazal teach that when a person is the subject of the verb “to take,” it does not mean that they were physically taken and forced to move. Objects can be taken, but not people. Instead, it means that someone persuaded them with their words to do something. In our posuk, we are told that Moshe and Aharon “took” the leaders of the shevatim because they had to convince them that they were the right people for the task and talk them into accepting a position of leadership. This teaches us that when someone is called upon to do something great, we should explain the importance of their task and not expect them to understand it on their own. We should get them to be enthusiastic and excited about their responsibilities so that their heart will be in it. This is how we should teach others about Torah and about the importance of taking active leadership roles in the community.

**“And they assembled all the congregation on the first day of the second month, and they declared their pedigrees according to their families according to their fathers' houses; according to the number of names, a head count of every male from twenty years old and upward” (1:18)**

Why does the Torah repeat the date of the census in this posuk? Ramban writes that the Torah is stressing how Moshe and Aharon carried out Hashem's command immediately, on that very same day. Diligence is a mark of greatness. We find a similar idea in Megillas Rus, which we will read of Shavuot. When Rus told Naomi that Boaz had promised to help resolve her status, Naomi told her not to worry for Boaz would surely not rest until he had taken care of the matter. Indeed, Boaz convened a court to deal with the issue the next morning. Great people take care of important things right away. We should learn from the examples of Moshe and Boaz and not procrastinate mitzvos and other critical responsibilities that we have.

*By Rabbi Mayer Friedman*

## **From Moshe to Moshe, But Don't Forget Avraham**

*By Sheldon Stern*

Lubavitchers routinely referred to their Rebbe as the Moshe Rabbeinu Hador. This implies that every generation has an individual with the sublime characteristics of our indomitable leader, and that of course, is beyond preposterous. In fact, throughout our history only one sage has ever been mentioned in the same breath as Moshe Rabbeinu and that's the redoubtable Rambam. Let's see what made him worthy of entering that hallowed pantheon.

Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch noted that the Torah was given in a Midbar as opposed to a "civilized" location so that it wouldn't be superimposed on an existing set of laws and mores. He argued that had Moshe taught the people Hilchos Geneivah, for example, their reaction would've been along these lines, "Oh this is just like the Egyptian rules except that we also have the "din" of Kefel. But there's another element to a wilderness, it's Hefker. Lost your wallet? Good luck trying to post a sign. But Hefkeirus means something more; one isn't married to pre-existing beliefs. That's what the great leader of German Jewry was alluding to. If someone has a set of beliefs and ideas, he's not likely to allow a new system to supplant it and this wasn't what Hashem wanted. Rather, our ancestors were expected to hear every word and nuance of the Torah as if it was totally fresh and new.

With this, we can understand the greatness of Avraham Avinu. Chazal tell us that he was called the Ivri because he stood alone against the idolaters who populated the other side of the world. But that's difficult to comprehend. There were luminaries in that period like Shem and Ever who certainly recognized Hashem. Yes, but our Patriarch was unique because he took his cues solely from G-d and so his monotheism was absolutely unsullied. The yeshiva of Shem and Ever was obviously a great place to study, as evidenced by the fact that Yaakov Avinu spent fourteen years there but any institution has values and principles that were passed down from its earlier icons. It's well-nigh impossible that someone studying in such a place won't be influenced by some, or all of its concepts.

The advantage of Avraham's lone - wolf attitude is that he didn't feel beholden to anyone. He was able to look for truth without any concern that feathers will be ruffled if he advances a notion at odds with the conventional wisdom. At this point we can answer a question that should have crossed the minds of some of the readers, "What's the connection between our Patriarch and Parshas Bamidbar?" Avraham has the same Gematria as Bamidbar and, as we've said, each exemplified Hefkeirus. For Avraham it was mental and the desert physical. But how does Maimonides fit into the equation? I don't know the exact quote but our foremost Halachic decisor said, "I have a particular way to understand the Torah, but if it was proven to me that this Mehalech is incorrect I'll scrap it in favor of another. The Kabbalists teach that Moshe personified the Middah of truth and a willingness to forego one's life's work when it's challenged, certainly qualifies Rambam as a worthy successor to the greatest man who ever lived.

But let's return to Avraham, my favorite Biblical figure. The Chafetz Chain "boasted" that he never spoke a word of Loshon Hora. Given that he wrote the book on that subject, such a claim has credence. One might think that he was a recluse who locked himself in a room and spent all day and night learning and writing. That's definitely not true. The Gadol of pre-war Jewry was both affable and sociable but LH was a line that he simply wouldn't cross. As we've noted, Avraham spent his life on an island, figuratively, but this didn't prevent him from having close relationships with Aner, Eshkol and Mamre. And let's not forget Eliezer, in whom he had complete trust. But this didn't deter him from living with a mission to discern absolute truth and so all extraneous voices had to be blocked. That our people are still standing today is a testament to how well he succeeded.

## Judah and Issachar

*by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen*

The Torah Portion devotes considerable time to describing the formations of the tribes. They were arranged in groups of three. The commentaries point out that they were deliberately placed in such a position so as to be able to exert influence on each other. The first formation was that of Judah, Issachar and Zevulun. Judah was directly next to Issachar. Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz writes that Yehuda's distinguishing characteristic was the ability to take responsibility, both for himself, and for others. He exercised this trait when he took responsibility for the incident with Tamar, when he accepted the consequences of bringing Benjamin down to Egypt and when Nachshon ben Aminadav, the Prince of Judah, was the first person to step into the sea at the Sea of Reeds before it had even split. Issachar is known to represent Torah; he devoted himself to Torah study whilst his brother Zevulun provided for his physical needs, furthermore, many of the leading members of the Sanhedrin were from Issachar. In this article we will focus on how Judah was intended to exert a positive influence on Issachar.

In Vayigash, the Torah describes how the Jewish people left the land of Israel to live in Egypt. We are told that Jacob sent Judah ahead of him to prepare the way in Goshen. Rashi explains that he was sent to open a yeshiva. This set a precedent for all Jewish history that the first priority of a Jewish community should be Torah education. However, it is difficult to understand why Judah was sent to establish the yeshiva - would not Issachar have been a more appropriate choice, given that his main strength is learning Torah? The Tiferet Shlomo answers that Judah was the first person to take responsibility for another to the extent that he was willing to give up his own life. We see this when Judah guaranteed to Yaakov that he would protect Benjamin from any danger in Egypt. This was an act of incredible self-sacrifice emanating from Judah's deep feeling of responsibility for others. Consequently, the reason that Jacob sent Judah to open the yeshiva was so that its guiding principle would be a sense of responsibility for the well-being of one's fellow Jew.

This idea can help us explain why Judah was placed next to Issachar in the tribe formation - it is not sufficient merely to learn Torah for one's own spiritual benefit, rather one must have the attitude that he is learning Torah so that he can pass it on to others. Moreover, the greater one's ability to learn and understand Torah, the greater the obligation is upon him to positively influence others. Rav Yisroel Salanter epitomized such an attitude. "After resolving a difficulty in Rambam, R. Yisroel fainted. "If I have such talent," he explained upon coming to, "I have a tremendous responsibility. The Heavenly Court will demand of me, "Why didn't you get the whole world to repent."

How significant a part of our Talmud Torah is the necessity to pass it on to others? The Mishna in Pirkei Avot states: "If you have learnt much Torah, *'al tachzik tova'* - do not hold good to yourself, because that is why you were created." The simple understanding of this Mishna is that a person should not be proud of his achievements in Talmud Torah because learning Torah is his purpose in life. However, many commentaries suggest a different explanation. They explain the Mishna to mean that if a person has learned much Torah he should not keep its goodness for himself, rather he should teach it to others. Why? Because his purpose in creation is to learn and teach. It is clear from this explanation of the Mishna that passing on Torah is not merely an aspect of one's Talmud Torah, rather it is part of the very foundation of one's learning.

If a person does bear this sense of responsibility then he receives a reward over and above the normal reward for Talmud Torah. The Mishna in Pirkei Avot states that one who benefits the many is saved from sin and he receives reward for every mitzvah that he caused to be done. The Manchester Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Zev Segal would say that if one's years of learning are a preparation for his disseminating Torah in the years to come, the Torah student is already considered to be one who benefits the many, during his years of learning. Since his learning is done with the intention of enabling him to pass on more to others, then the learning itself provides him with the inestimable merit of one who helps many. God intended for Judah to influence Issachar to learn Torah in order to share it with others. So too we must learn this lesson and approach our own learning with a great sense of responsibility for our fellow Jew, if we do so, then the benefits for ourselves and the Jewish people are endless.