

D'var Torah for Parshat Bamidbar

By Rabbi Yosef Gewirtz

Ramban (Nachmanides) points out a puzzling statistic in the census of the Jewish People near the end of this week's parsha, Bamidbar. The tribe of Levi had the smallest number of all the tribes, 22,000. The average recorded population of the other tribes was more than 50,000, with Binyamin having the second smallest, 30,400. What makes the gap even more extreme is that all Levites above the age of one month were counted while members of the other tribes were counted only between the ages of 20 and 60.

Ramban builds a hypothesis with the following introduction. In Parshat Shmot, the Torah says that the Hebrews population growth was accelerated by their slavery, rather than inhibited by it (as Pharaoh had hoped).

“וְכַאֲשֶׁר יַעֲנֶוּ אֹתוֹ כֵּן יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ...”

“But as much as they (the Egyptians) would afflict them (the Hebrews), so did they multiply and so did they gain strength...”

The Ramban's explanation for this surprising phenomenon is,

“כִּי הָיָה הַקֶּבֶץ” אֹמֵר נִרְאָה דָבָר מִי יָקוּם מִמֶּנִּי אוֹ מֵהֶם”

“God was saying, ‘Let's see whose plan will work; mine or theirs’”.

The population explosion of the Hebrew slaves was intended by God to be an educational opportunity for the Egyptians, which if seized, could have led to an earlier release of the Hebrews and prevented their destruction by the ten plagues! The Egyptians could have seen the “Hand of God”, in a much more pleasant way.

The Ramban concludes his introduction by offering the popular Talmudic opinion that the tribe of Levi was never enslaved. (The Egyptians recognized a clergy exemption.) Therefore, the Ramban theorizes that since the tribe of Levi was not enslaved, they did not benefit from God's “I'll show them who's boss” population increase! They were not lacking in any merit and the other tribes were not more “deserving”. What was happening to them was happening because of other considerations.

When we try to understand how God influences our own lives, we tend to be ego centric. We are instructed by our Rabbinic tradition to interpret our blessings and misfortunes as probably being God's response to our own behaviors, and to allow them to influence our decisions. But we cannot make a final judgement. There are times when what happens to us, has “little to do with us”. Only God sees the entire picture.