



PARSHAS BAMIDBAR 5778

We have to read the tochocho of Bechukosai before Shavuos. When the Rambam quotes this halacha, he adds that the Shabbos right before Shavuos must be Bamidbor. But why isn't the tochocho read right before Shavuos? Why is Parshas Bamidbor put in between the tochocho and Shavuos? The answer is that Parshas Bamidbor conveys some very important themes relating to both the tochocho and Shavuos.

The tochocho is a very frightening thing; it promises great consequences for keeping or not keeping the Torah. But, it always talks about the klal. There doesn't seem to be any room left for the individual. It is all about Hashem's treatment of Klal Yisroel in broad sweeping terms. Rashi says that Hashem counts Klal Yisroel frequently as an expression of love for Klal Yisroel. When He came to take them out of Egypt, He counted them. Rashi explains that this counting is to show Hashem's affection. Klal Yisroel are like stars—Hashem takes them in and out by number and by name.

We are generally forbidden to count Jews. Chazal derive this from the haftorah of this week's parsha—Klal Yisroel cannot be given a number—not to be limited and made finite. What does that mean?

In today's world, we measure the value of all kinds of even spiritual benchmarks and institutions by quantity—by numbers. But we lose sight of the individual and his own unique contribution and qualities. In truth, each Jew has infinite value that is not quantifiable. When we count Jews we lose sight of their individuality. Only Hashem when He counts us identifies by number and name.

The first World War decimated countless communities and wiped out entire kehilos. It is not generally realized because it was overshadowed by the enormity of the Holocaust. Rav Chaim had to leave Brisk and move to Minsk because Brisk was a border town and the government didn't want Jews living there. Reports were coming to Rav Chaim about all the communities which were destroyed and he was visibly shaken. Someone tried to console Rav Chaim by suggesting that perhaps all this destruction will be worthwhile if it ultimately leads to the coming of Moshiach. Rav Chaim responded that this person lacked the sensitivity to the value of a single Jew. The neshama of one Jew has infinite value and it requires us to be mechallel Shabbos for it and to push off the Moshiach for it.

When we talk in terms of numbers, we often neglect the importance of the individual. We can't be trusted to count Klal Yisroel. But Hashem can. Rashi says that when He counted Klal Yisroel at the beginning, He counted everyone by name. Like the stars, there is a number and there are names. Only Hashem can see the totality and simultaneously see the individual without losing focus on his infinite value.

The tochocho talks about disasters to the Klal. It doesn't seem to take into account the value of the individual. We read

Bamidbor to read how Hashem counted Klal Yisroel and was able to focus on the infinite value of the individual as well as the Klal. Hashem made a bris with Klal Yisroel on two levels—the klal and the individual. We are children of Hashem and Hashem chose us. We have kedushas Yisroel because our mother had kedushas Yisroel who in turn received her kedushas Yisroel from her mother. But Hashem chooses us individually as well. This chosenness plays itself out in each person's individual life. There is a separate kedusha for each individual.

The parsha goes through the census of Klal Yisroel. Shevet Levi is left out. Shevet Levi is looked at as individuals. There are certain aspects where Klal Yisroel functions as a tzibbur, like waging war. Shevet Levi isn't part of that calculation of the Klal. Each member of Shevet Levi is given his own individual task in the avodah of the Mishkon, which no-one else is allowed to do. The gemara tells us just like a non-kohen cannot do the avodah of kohanim, a Levi who is supposed to sing the shiroh was not allowed to guard the gates. Each one has his own task in avodas Hashem. Hashem rests His Shechinah on the klal and on the individual. Shevet Levi was separated to be individuals.

The Parshah tells us about the degolim. The Shevotim surrounded the Mishkon from four sides and they formed a circle. In the middle of it was Shevet Levi and in the middle of that was the Mishkon.

The Midrash tells us that the day degolim were given to Klal Yisroel was a day of rejoicing like kabbolas haTorah. Why is this such a joyous occasion? Why is it one that is compared to the joy of kabbolas haTorah?

Shevet Levi were not given a degel for their shevet.

The answer is that degolim signify each shevet's unique derech in avodas Hashem. There is a bris with Hashem that all Jews share. But each shevet served Hashem with its unique flavor and emphasis, and each member of each shevet found his own place in that unique derech.

Hashem designated each shevet with their unique way to serve Him. People need a sense of direction and they look for a way to find what it is that they can uniquely contribute. There is a tremendous joy when a person finds out what his talents are and how he can channel them to best serve Hashem. Chazal tell us that when the shevotim carried Yaakov Ovinu's aron to Eretz Yisroel to burial, they carried it in the same formation that the shevotim traveled around the Mishkon in the midbor. The relationship between the shevotim began with the sons of Yaakov. Their descendants received their talents and direction from the founder of each shevet.

One opinion in the midrash tells us that Yaakov took 12 stones around him before he went to sleep on Har Habayis. In the morning he found that there was one. They all united into one. Yaakov saw in this a prophecy of how Klal Yisroel would be

formed. Each one of the ovos served Hashem with a unique middoh. Yaakov knew he had to take them and combine them into himself to raise the 12 shevotim. The ovos knew with ruach hakodesh that Klal Yisroel will begin as 12 sons who would express all the necessary middos that are required for the spiritual make-up of the nation. There are 12 different paths in serving Hashem. The Arizal tells us that there were 12 different nuscha'os of tefilloh—one for each shevet.

In the midbor, Klal Yisroel surrounded the Mishkon equidistantly—none were superior to the other. But inside the circle, there was a whole new dimension that each person could aspire to. Although no member could leave his shevet and join another shevet on the outer perimeter, the Rambam tells us that if a person had the requisite insight and inspiration, he could join the next level of avodas Hashem expressed by Shevet Levi. If you are on the outside, all paths are equally valid. There is no point in moving from one to the other. But one can move closer in to get next to the Shechinoh. There is a difference between Shevet Levi and Shevet Yissochor even though both shevotim were dedicated to limud haTorah. The difference is that Shevet Yissochor had an option. The posuk in Birkas Yaakov tells us that Yissochor was given a very fertile portion of Eretz Yisroel and could have lived a very pleasant and easy life. But he decided to turn away from all that wealth and independence because he made a deal with Zevulun to be supported in exchange for learning Torah. But Shevet Levi had no portion in the land and made no deals. Shevet Levi said that they would devote themselves to Hashem and trust that Hashem would take care of them. This is the difference which put Shevet Yissochor on the outside of the circle and Shevet Levi on the inside.

Before kabbolas haTorah, there are a number of fundamental ideas that we read about. The tochocho talks about brochos and kolos. It is a very simple reality. For a person to accept the Torah, he has to accept it from an understanding of what our situation in the world is and what responsibilities we have. We have the ability to be close to Hashem because we are His nation. We are the center of the universe because we are the purpose of the entire creation. But with that responsibility comes a whole purpose in life to serve Hashem. We aren't supposed to measure ourselves alongside the accomplishments of other nations. We shouldn't take pride in winning international competitions in sports or music or technology or anything else. Our pride is in being the Am Hashem.

When Zevulun went out to work, he did it as his unique way of serving Hashem because he took it upon himself to support Yissochor and be his partner in Torah. He wasn't doing it to win some status as being a world-class merchant in the business world. He was doing it because he committed himself to a partnership in Yissochor's Torah. There are many things people do for a living. But we need to ask ourselves why are we doing this? Is it to further my spiritual development and that of my family and my community?

Each one's life should be an expression of his unique way of serving Hashem. Yehudoh has malchus. But was it to stoke his ego? Or was he representing the malchus of Hashem as a derech avodah? To be a successful melech over Klal Yisroel, it can't be just about ego and power and military skill.

In the middle of the circle, there is Shevet Levi. It is available for

every individual who wants to make his own bris with Hashem and make his life into a total reflection of avodas Hashem in the world. Success in life cannot be measured by all the external benchmarks that the world is impressed by. That is the basic message of Parshas Bamidbor.

At the very end, we read how Shevet Levi was set aside to be a separate sub-community within Klal Yisroel. It is very interesting to note the contrast between how Yaakov Ovinu addresses Shimon and Levi before he dies and how Moshe Rabbeinu addressed them in Vezos Habrochah.

Yaakov was angry at Shimon and Levi because they had tremendous passion which was not kept in check. They destroyed Shechem and attempted to destroy Yosef. Yaakov cursed their anger—not them. He spread them out among Klal Yisroel and did not let them stay united. What did Levi do with that passion? He channeled it to serve Hashem.

Each one of us is given certain personality traits which we can let loose to manifest in their raw, natural state, or we can work on them and refine them to be expressed in the way which we decide for ourselves. Anger and passion can be let loose and be used negatively, or it can be channeled towards serving Hashem. At the time that Moshe Rabbeinu gave brochos to Klal Yisroel, he took note of the fact that Shevet Levi used their passion in the proper way and he blessed them.

Every one of us is given certain talents and abilities and we have the power to turn things about ourselves that are negative into positive assets in our serving Hashem.

At the end of Parshas Bamidbor, when Shevet Levi is given their unique specific tasks in the Mishkon, there is a danger. The closer you are to the Shechinoh, the more is expected of you and the easier it is to slip up and fall. The Parsha ends with a tefilloh that Shevet Levi not be cut off when they are inside this very delicate and sensitive area—not to deviate from their special path in serving Hashem. We have to know how to treat things of kedushoh even when we are always in contact with them.

If this is true about sacred objects, how much more is this true about the Torah itself. We have to understand that Torah is not just an intellectual exercise which we can engage in casually with a neutral attitude. We are given a special zechus to be involved with the word and wisdom of Hashem. We have to treat it as special—even though we are learning today in the lap of luxury and in massive numbers. It used to be rare that someone was able to devote his years to learning. Life was very difficult in Europe for generations and people struggled just to survive and not starve. It wasn't possible for Jews to learn in large numbers. We have a unique opportunity that generations of Jews did not have. But the nature of people is to take blessing for granted. This is a danger of being inside the circle. Shevet Levi was warned not to treat objects of kedushoh as mundane and ordinary because they were engaged in avodas hakodesh all the time.

The same thing is true with bochorim in Yeshivah. It is a unique opportunity. Don't take it for granted. Realize the unbelievable zechus we have to come so close inside and connect to learning Torah on such a mass scale. Use it, maximize it and do not treat it lightly.