

Parshas Bamidbar

For the week ending 29 Iyar 5756
17 & 18 May 1996

Summary

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.

Commentaries

"In The Desert..." (1:1)

DESERT SONG - 1

Just as a lover is obsessed with his beloved, so must the true student of the Torah be obsessed with his 'beloved' - the Torah. It must occupy his thoughts all the time, and nothing else can be as important to him. He must feel that only the Torah gives meaning to his life, that for the Torah he is prepared to forgo all the material comforts of this world, to make himself like a desert - void and ownerless. He must make himself like a virgin canvas for the Torah to paint its landscape on his soul.

The Torah was given to us in the desert. To imbibe the Torah deeply, for it to 'water' our soul, we must thirst for its living waters like a man thirsting for water in a desert.

We must be as humble as the desert, lowly and abandoned, forsaking our preconceived ideas, prepared to relinquish our material desires and the distorting effects of passion. For only when we let the Torah mold our thought processes will Hashem open our eyes to the real world.

DESERT SONG - 2

The desolation of the desert stands eternally as the antithesis of life and activity. The symbol of civilization, of the flow and vitality of life is *the city*. A city is comprised of houses, and the houses, of stones. The words of a sentence are like stones. Just as each stone by itself is devoid of life, but when combined together into a house, they form the setting of life and vitality, so too are the letters of a word. When left by themselves they radiate no light or life. They are merely lifeless stones. But when they are built into words and sentences, sayings and utterances, they radiate the light of intellect that infuses life into man, that leads him and guides him.

"With the word of Hashem, the heavens were made." The entire world was created with the combination of the letters of the Hebrew *aleph-beis*. The letters and the words are spread out and dispersed over the whole face of the earth. If, through them, we recognize and see the thread of Godliness pervading the world, if they are like beads of a necklace, revealing the Godly thread that weaves the world into one, then the world is no longer a desert of desolation, but a populous city vibrant with life and purpose. However, if we fail to comprehend the writing of the Divine Hand, if we make no effort to assemble the letters of existence into words and sentences, then the world remains a desolate wilderness.

It's like two people reading the same book. One reads with insight and understanding, and the other spews forth a jumble of letters and words without grasp or comprehension. The first reader kindles the light of wisdom that is in the words, he brings them to life. The second is left with a collection of dead stones. The world is a large book. Fortunate is he who knows how to read and understand it.

(Adapted from Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin - Torah U'Moadim)

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DESERT SONG -3

Every year on the festival of Shavuos, the Jewish people again receive the Torah. On the Shabbos before Shavuos we prepare for this event. Historically, Shabbos was given to the Jewish People *before* the giving of the Torah, and it was the power of Shabbos that brought us to Sinai: For Shabbos creates unity in the Jewish People. And unity among the Jewish People is a pre-requisite for receiving the Torah. When we sit together as brothers, like one family at the Shabbos table, we re-create that same unity which was necessary for receiving the Torah at Sinai. If the unity that Shabbos creates is one way we prepare for receiving the Torah, another way is the self-abnegation of Shabbos: Instead of being 'full with ourselves,' we make ourselves like the desert, void of all concerns except the desire to do Hashem's will. Every Jew has this capability of self-abnegation which expresses itself each Shabbos when we refrain from doing *melacha* (creative work). Thus Shabbos is a necessary prelude for the receiving the Torah. As it says in the Haggada of Pesach: "*And He gave us the Shabbos and He brought us close to Mount Sinai.*"

(Sfas Emes)

Haftorah: Hoshea 2:1-22

"And it shall be in the place where it will 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 specifically in those lands in which we have been oppressed and separated into ghettos, Jewish Life has flourished. However, where we have experienced acceptance and dwelled in comfort with equal rights, the scourge of assimilation and the disappearing Jew has 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*" - 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.*" 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.*"

(Bikurei Aviv)



Insights into the Zemiros sung at the Shabbos table throughout the generations.

Yom Zeh Mechubad - scfn vz ohr
"This day is honored..."

"This day is honored above all other days for on it rested The Rock (or Molder) of the Universe."

יום זה מכבד מכל ימים כי בו שבת צור עולמים

Yom zeh mechubad mikol yomim, ki vo shavas tzur olamim

The term "*Tzur*" used in the refrain of this song is generally translated as "Rock," referring to Hashem's power and stability.

But when Chana, the mother of Shmuel Hanavi, offered thanks to Hashem for blessing her with a child (Shmuel I 2:2) she said "there is no **Tzur** like our G-d," which our Sages interpret as meaning that there is no "*tzayar*" - molder - like Hashem. A human artist, they point out, can only mold a figure on a wall but cannot instill it with life and a soul, but the Divine Molder molds a form within a form and instills it with life and soul.

It is in this sense, that Hashem is the all-powerful Creator of the universe and the Supreme Molder of everything in it, that we sing this song of praise on the day when He rested from this effort.

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