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 ways we redeem our firstborn today.

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)
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)

Parshas Bamidbar

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