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## Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Bamidbar



## Averting The Return To PRE-EXISTENCE

### **The Innateness of the Jew That Has Relevance to G-d**

*Torah:* “Hashem spoke to Moshe ..., saying ‘Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families...’”

*Torah:* “They gathered together the entire assembly on the first day of the second month, and they established their genealogy according to their families, according to their fathers’ household, by number of the names...”

*Rashi citing Chazal:* “Each tribe established and proved their genealogy by presenting their documents of pedigree.”

*Midrash:* After the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai, the nations of the world came to G-d with a claim, “Why did You give the *Torah* to the Jewish people and not to us?” G-d responded, “Can you establish your pedigree as My children have established theirs?” The nations

of the world could not respond. They understood that due to their promiscuous behavior, which included forbidden sexual relationships, their progeny were illegitimate. Thus, they did not have the purity that was necessary to have a relationship with G-d.

This is the reason the *Torah* presents the pedigree of the Jewish people after they had received the *Torah* at Sinai. When the nations of the world became aware of the purity of the Jewish people, they were astounded and began singing the praises of the Jewish people.

*Proverbs:* “*Kamu vaneha vayashruha* – her children had risen and praised her.” Why was the purity of pedigree a necessary prerequisite for receiving the *Torah* and having a special relationship with G-d?

*Gemara:* It was only those who had a special pedigree that were qualified to be conscripted into the army of King David. This is because the one with a pure pedigree will merit the needed Divine Assistance to

be successful in battle. Had it not been for this unique qualification, the army of King David would have been only a physical army that functioned within physical limits and not worthy of G-d's Protection.

When *Bilaam*, the evil prophet of the nations advised *Balak*, the King of *Midian* to undermine the existence of the Jewish people he had said, "The G-d of Israel despises promiscuity." *Bilaam* understood that if he would cause the Jewish people to sin in this area, they would evoke Divine Retribution upon them, and thus be destroyed.

*Torah*: The Jewish people did in fact sin with the incident of *Baal Peor* and the Moabite women. As a result of the Attribute of Justice 24,000 of the Jewish people died in a plague.

*Chazal*: If promiscuity is not controlled, destruction comes upon the world.

*Ramban*: During the Second Temple period, although it was not an era of revealed miracles the miracle of the *sotah* water (suspected adulteress) remained. If the suspected adulteress was in fact guilty of adultery, she would die a horrible death as a result of her drinking the *sotah* water. If in fact she was not guilty, it would affect her in the most positive manner. Her health would advance and thrive in a miraculous manner.

Although the Jewish people were no longer worthy of revealed miracles, this miracle remained in place because of the importance of maintaining the purity of the Jewish people regarding their pedigree. Why is the purity of the Jewish people a prerequisite to a special relationship with G-d?

G-d created man so that he should exist within a context of free choice. By making the correct choices, he could advance himself spiritually. In contrast, making the wrong choices brings about spiritual diminishment. Because man, as a physical being in a physical world has a natural inclination to gravitate to his physicality, any decision that has relevance to one's spirituality confronted with the inclination to resist.

When one chooses to refrain from the wrong or perform the positive that is the Will of G-d, he is going against his natural inclination to do the opposite, which stems from his physicality.

*Ramban*: The mitzvah to love of G-d is greater than the *mitzvah* to fear Him. When is proactive in the performance of a *mitzvah*, he is demonstrating his love for G-d. In order for one to be proactive, one must be motivated. However, when one refrains from doing the wrong, fear/reverence is sufficient. A spiritual being is defined as one who goes against his natural inclination.

*Maharal* of Prague in *Gevuras Hashem*: The characteristic of a spiritual being is to affect and not be affected. G-d Himself is a Being that affects all that exists and is not affected whatsoever. Because the Jewish people were able to suppress and control their inclination in the area of forbidden sexual relations, they had demonstrated that their essence was spiritual, which remains untainted. Despite the fact that the Jewish people were slaves in Egypt for 210 years they maintained their legitimacy despite the influences of the Egyptian culture. Unlike the nations of the world who failed in this area.

*Ramban*: The Positive Commandment of "*Kedoshim t'heu* (You shall be holy)" means, "One should wear himself (sanctify) even from something that is permitted to him." Although the *Torah* permits many physical engagements and endeavors, limiting one's physical indulgence allows one to reflect G-d Himself, thus enabling one to have a greater acuteness for spirituality. The more one is immersed in the physical, although it is permitted, one causes a distance and "unlikeness" to G-d. The Jew in order to cleave to G-d not only needs to remove himself from that which is forbidden, he must also wear himself from the physical to achieve holiness.

## **The Uniqueness of the Tribe of Zevulun**

*Torah*: The Jewish people traveled in the desert as four camps, each comprised of three tribes. The camps were positioned in a specific formation and situated in the east, west, north or south. They would travel and camp in this formation. The camp of *Yehudah* was comprised of the tribes of *Yehudah*, *Yissachar* and *Zevulun*. They were the first in the formation to travel. The camp of *Yehudah* was the first to travel because *Yehudah* represents the kingship of the Jewish people. The camps of *Yissachar* and *Zevulun*, who represent the study of *Torah* and its supporters

were included in the first camp to travel because the Divine Protection afforded to the Jewish people emanates from them.

*Midrash Tanchuma* in *Vayechi*: The Tribe of *Yissachar* had an exceptional level of clarity because of they were fully immersed in their *Torah* study without any degree of distraction. All of their material needs and amenities were provided by *Zevulun* to the degree that no initiative whatsoever was needed to be taken by *Yissachar*. *Zevulun* was committed and dedicated to guarantee that the immersion of *Yissachar* in *Torah* should be absolute. *Moshe* had blessed the tribe of *Zevulun* by saying, “*Zevulun* rejoice in your going out and *Yissachar* in his tent of *Torah*.”

*Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh*: “How is it possible for *Zevulun* to rejoice when embarking on a sea voyage with the hope to succeed to be able to fulfill his obligation to *Yissachar* if in fact material success is not guaranteed? When one is fully dedicated to support *Torah* for its own sake, he will surely merit the Divine Assistance that will guarantee his success.” Thus, *Yissachar* was able to rejoice upon his embarkation on a material endeavor for the sake of *Yissachar*.

When the *Torah* describes the camps of Israel and the tribes contained within them it always states: “and that tribe”; however when the *Torah* mentions the tribe of *Zevulun* after the tribe of *Yissachar* it omits the word “and” which is represented in Hebrew with the letter “vav.” It states “camp of *Yissachar* camp of *Zevulun*.”

*Baal HaTurim*: The reason the *Torah* presents the tribes of *Yissachar* and *Zevulun* in this manner which is not similar to the other tribes is because the tribe of *Zevulun* was responsible for the full material support of the tribe of *Yissachar*, who were fully dedicated to *Torah* study. The *Torah* did not want to mention *Zevulun* as a secondary tribe to *Yissachar*. In addition, he cites the *Midrash Tanchuma* that tells us that the dedication of *Zevulun*, who were the benefactors of *Yissachar*, was to the point that they “placed sustenance in the mouth of *Yissachar*.”

*Midrash*: Although *Yissachar* was the tribe that studied *Torah*, regarding reward, *Zevulun* is no less deserving than *Yissachar* because without their support the *Torah* study of *Yissachar* could not have been. *Baal HaTurim* concludes that it is as if the verse states, “*Yissachar*, the Tribe of *Zevulun*.” They are the equivalent of one tribe.

In addition, one can say, *Yissachar* and *Zevulun* are seen as one tribe because of the level that *Zevulun* esteemed and valued *Yissachar*’s *Torah* study. He had selflessly dedicated himself for this objective. *Zevulun* had no interest other than *Yissachar* succeeding in his growth in *Torah*. By emitting the letter “vav” the *Torah* is revealing the greatness of *Zevulun*. He had conducted himself in a manner that he did not exist independent of *Yissachar*.

*Yaakov*, our Patriarch had blessed his sons his passing. *Yaakov* blessed each of his children based on his understanding of their spiritual make up and potential. He understood that *Yissachar* was to be dedicate his life to the study of *Torah*. *Yaakov* equally understood and recognized the special spirituality of *Zevulun* to be able to esteem and revere the *Torah* of *Yissachar* to the point of negating his own existence for that purpose. This was the basis for establishing this unique partnership between them.

## **Perceiving the Jewish People for What They Are**

*Torah*: Regarding the counting of the Jewish people, “From twenty years of age and above – everyone who goes out to the legion in Israel – you shall count them according to their legions...”

*Ramban*: Regarding the counting of the Jewish people, the should not be directly counted but rather through a medium, which is the half-silver coin (*machtzis hashekel*), which was given by every male from the age of twenty and above. The half-silver coin was used to purchase communal offerings, which brought about atonement for the Jewish people.

*Ramban*: “King David wanted to take a census of the Jewish people to know the extent of his reign. As a result of his census a plague came upon them. How is it possible that King David did not know what is explicit in the *Torah*, regarding the counting of the people? One could say that perhaps King David made the mistake of counting the Jewish people directly and not through the half-silver coin. This is difficult to say that King David was not aware of the law. He did in fact conduct the census through the half-silver coin. If so, what was King David’s transgression that caused such a severe reaction from G-d?”

*Ramban* citing *Chazal*: One is only permitted to count the Jewish people out of necessity. If one needs to know the number of men qualified to be conscripted to the army in order to engage in war, only then is one permitted to conduct a census through the half-silver coin. However, for any other reason it is not permitted. King David's objective in knowing the number of Jewish people was to understand the extent of his kingdom.

*Ramban*: It is possible to say that King David counted the males from the age of thirteen and above, which is not permitted under any circumstance. One is only permitted to count those who are above the age of twenty. He did so only to know the extent of his subjects.

*Ramban*: "G-d does not want the Jewish people to be quantified. As G-d had said to *Avraham*, our Patriarch, 'Your children shall be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. They shall not be counted because of their numerousness...'" The consequence of counting the Jewish people results in plague.

*Mishna* in *Sanhedrin*: "If one saves the life of a Jew it is the equivalent of saving the entire world." How is it possible to equate the life of one individual to billions of people? It is something which is difficult to fathom. The innate value of the Jew is beyond quantification because his innateness is based on his dimension of spirituality.

The value of the Jewish people is not based their number, which is quantitative, it is based on the fact that they are G-d's people. Their relevance and being is rooted to the infinite, which is G-d Himself. If they are to be counted to quantify them, it is a distortion of reality. The reason plague is a consequence of the counting of the Jewish people, when it is not for the sake of conscription, is to confirm that the number of Jewish people is irrelevant. Their power and effectiveness is only based in the fact that they are the nation of G-d.

*Torah*: If the Jewish people follow the statutes and commandments of the *Torah*, then G-d will provide unlimited bounty. Meaning, if the Jew pursues and dedicates himself to spirituality, the material will come in abundance. However, if he chooses to focus on the material and establishes it as primary, then the blessing will be removed and a curse will ensue. The material only exists to facilitate spirituality. If

one inverts the priorities, the consequence will be catastrophic. If the material were to be used for a spiritual end, then it has relevance to the infinite, thus causing an infinite result.

## **Revering and Internalizing Torah for What it is**

*Torah*: "Hashem spoke with Moshe in the Desert of Sinai, in the Tent of the Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt..." The verse identifies the location where G-d had initially spoken to *Moshe* in a general and broad manner, namely, "Desert of Sinai," and then it refers to the more specific location within that vast area, namely, "the Tent of the Meeting." Regarding the time when G-d had spoken to *Moshe*, the verse initially states the specific moment namely, "the first day of the second month" and then it states the more general period of time, "the second year after their exodus."

*Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh*: The *Torah* usually expresses itself in a consistent and deliberate manner. For example if a verse first presents a concept in a general sense and then is more specific, the information in the second half of the verse is presented in a similar context. However, in this instance it seems that the *Torah* is not consistent in its presentation. How do we understand this?

*Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh*: The verse is in fact consistent in its presentation. First it presents the specific and then the more general. One may think that since the "Desert of Sinai" is vast location as compared to the "Tent of the Meeting" the verse is presenting the more general to the specific. This is not so. The Desert of Sinai, while it may be physically larger, it is only a vast wilderness with no innate value. In addition, even if it had value, as compared to the Tent of the Meeting, which was the location of the Divine Presence, it would still have no value. The blessing for all existence emanated from that location. Therefore, the beginning of the verse is consistent in its manner of presentation with the conclusion of the verse.

*Gemara* in Tractate *Shabbos*: The Holy Temple had seven names. One of those names was "the sustaining rock." All the sustenance for the world emanates from the location of the Temple, despite it being a relatively

small location. The *Chofetz Chaim* lived in Radin and was revered as the most devoutly pious individual of the generation. The city of Radin, in which he lived, was a mere village with unpaved roads and hovels.

A *Torah Sage* once said regarding the city of Radin, that if one looked at a map of Europe he would see large black circles, which identified the cities of Paris, London and Berlin. However, if one would attempt to locate the village of Radin on the map, one would need a magnifying glass. This *Torah* personality had said that this may be true of the earthly map; however, on the heavenly map, the circle, which identifies the city of Radin, occupies most of the map of Europe while its prominent cities do not even appear. This highlights the fact that the value and prominence of a location is not based on its physical size but rather on its innate spiritual significance.

The *Chazon Ishe* only left Europe to move to Israel after the *Chofetz Chaim* had passed away because he said that while the *Chofetz Chaim* was alive, Europe had the same status as the Land of Israel because of his holy presence. If one had a perfect diamond, albeit small, it would be more valuable than a warehouse full of iron. How is it possible that such a small entity could be worth so much more than something that so great in size? One needs to understand and appreciate the value of a diamond in order to comprehend the disparity of value.

*Chazal*: One should not take lightly even the minor *mitzvah* because we do not have the capacity to fathom the innate worth of any *mitzvah*. *Chazal* tell us that the study of *Torah* is the equivalent of all of the *mitzvos* combined, "*talmid Torah keneged kulom*." Meaning, the value of studying even one word of *Torah* has infinite ramifications.

*Yirmiyahu*: "If not for My Covenant, that is in effect day and night, the laws of heaven and earth would not be put in place."

*Gemara* in Tractate *Nidarim*: "The Covenant" mentioned by the Prophet is referring to the study of *Torah*. The study of the *Torah* itself is the basis for existence to continue. The world itself was only created for that purpose and thus its continuous existence is dependent on it.

## Ensuring the Accuracy of Transmission

*Gemara*: *Rebbe Akiva* had 24,000 students who were the *Torah* sages of that generation. During the period between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*, all 24,000 of his students passed away. There is a discussion among the commentators as to when the students began dying and when they stopped. However, everyone concurs that they died over a 33-day period.

*Gemara*: After the 24,000 students passed away, the world was considered desolate.

*Gemara*: The reason the students of *Rebbe Akiva* passed away in such a short period was that "They did not conduct themselves with proper respect towards one another." Since the students of *Rebbe Akiva* were the most advanced *Torah* sages of that time, it is not possible to even consider that the *Gemara* could be understood literally – that they acted with disrespect towards one another. In addition, had *Rebbe Akiva* noticed any inappropriate behavior among his students he would have rebuked them. Evidently, the failing must have been so subtle that even *Rebbe Akiva* did not notice their spiritual flaw. If so, how do we understand their failing?

The students of *Rebbe Akiva* were most certainly respectful to one another. However, there was a subtle aspect to which they were not sufficiently sensitive. All of his students had a special dimension of *Torah* scholarship; however, there were slight shades of differences between each of them.

When one accords respect and reverence to a *Torah* sage, it must be appropriate to that individual's level of *Torah*. The students of *Rebbe Akiva* did not address or acknowledge the subtle differences of greatness between them. They treated each other as colleagues, with the same level of respect, which was not sufficient. They should have accorded one another the appropriate level of reverence commensurate with each individual's uniqueness in *Torah*. Why did G-d react in such a stringent manner in such and take them over such a short period of time?

*Gemara* in Tractate *Yevamos*: After the students of *Rebbe Akiva* died the world was dark and devoid of *Torah*.

*Rav Aaron Kotler z'tl*: The students of *Rebbe Akiva* were the sages who would be responsible for the

transmission of *Torah* to the future generations. They had the responsibility of communicating the *Torah* in its most accurate and authentic form. However, because they did not have sufficient sensitivity to evaluate the nuances between their various levels of *Torah*, to revere and esteem one another, they were not qualified for this quintessential task.

Since they did not have the sensitivity to recognize the subtleties between themselves, it was an indication that they did not have the necessary level of discernment to transmit *Torah* with the accuracy that was necessary. Their passing was not related to their level of *Torah* knowledge, rather it was because they did not qualify to be the transmitters of *Torah*. Had they not died, the *Torah* that they would have communicated would have been deficient. It would not be in its most accurate form.

One could be a *Torah* scholar and possess an enormous amount of knowledge, but may not necessarily qualify as a *Torah* Sage (*Gadol b'Torah*). A *Torah* sage is another dimension of person. He has the sensitivity and ability to weigh and evaluate all situations and see the far-reaching consequences that will evolve into the future. He can perceive with clarity how his decisions will impact on the Jewish people. This is the difference between a *Torah* scholar and a *Torah* Sage.



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