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Ramban's Introduction to the Book of Numbers

Rabbi David Horwitz

In his introduction to Sefer Ba-Midbar, Ramban develops the idea that the Tent of Meeting (Ohel Mo'ed) can be seen as a continuation of Mount Sinai. He writes:

Ba-Midbar Sinai (in the Wilderness of Sinai): After having explained the laws of the offerings in the third book, He [God] now began to set forth in this book the commandments which they [the children of Israel] were told with reference to the Tent of Meeting. Now, He had already given a warning for all times about [the prohibition of] impurity relating to the Sanctuary and its holy things. Here he defined the boundaries of the Tabernacle while it was in the wilderness, just as He had set bounds for Mount Sinai when the [Divine] Glory was there (Exodus 19:12), and He commanded that the common man that approaches shall be put to death (Numbers 1:51), just as He had said there no hand shall touch him [i.e., Mount Sinai], but he shall surely be stoned (Exodus 19:13). He also commanded [here], and they shall not go in to see the holy things as they are being covered, lest they die (Numbers 4:20), just as He warned there [at Sinai], lest they break through unto the Eternal to gaze, and many of them perish (Exodus 19:21). He commanded here And you shall keep the charge of the holy things and the charge of the altar [that there be wrath no more upon the children of Israel (Numbers 18:5), just as He said there, (Exodus 19:22) And let the priests also, that come near to the Eternal, sanctify themselves, lest the Eternal break forth upon them, and let not the priests and people break through to come up unto the Eternal, lest he break forth upon them. (Exodus 19:24). Thus He commanded [here] how the Tabernacle and its vessels are to be guarded, and how they [the people] are to pitch round about it and how the people are to stand afar off, and how the priests that come near the Eternal are to treat it [the Tabernacle] when it is resting and when it

is being carried [during the journeying], and how they are to guard it. Now these are all signs of distinction and honor for the Sanctuary, just as the Rabbis of blessed memory have said (Sifre Zuta: Parashat Korah. 18:4): A kings palace that has guards over it cannot be compared to palace that has no such guards. [Elsewhere Ramban adds that it is known that the term palace is a reference to the Sanctuary.]

Ramban continues and concludes that the mitzvot mentioned in Sefer Ba-Midbar are only to be observed for a short period of time:

Now this whole book deals only with those commandments which were meant only for a particular time, being the period when the Israelites stayed in the desert, and [it deals also] with the miracles which were done for them, in order to tell all the wondrous deeds of the Eternal which He wrought for them. It tells how he began to destroy their enemies before them by the sword, and He also commanded how the Land should be divided up amongst them. There are no commandments in this book which are binding for all times except for some commandments about the offerings which he had begun in the Book of [the Law of] Priests [i.e., Leviticus], and whose explanation was not completed there, therefore he finished them in this book.

There is a musar haskel implied in this last statement of Ramban which is simple and profound. What if we knew that we only would have forty years to live and not a minute more? What if we knew that we would only have forty years to observe the commandments of God? Wouldn't we be especially careful to observe them punctiliously? The children of Israel, that is, the generation of the desert, knew that collectively they would have no more (and often much less) than forty years to observe certain mitzvot, and that afterwards they would all die.

Their task was to face their “inevitable appointment” with equanimity and continue to observe these temporary commandments of the desert as best as they could.

None of us knows when our own inevitable appointment will occur. Taking a cue from this Ramban,

we must also strive to be God-fearing Jews during our temporary sojourn on this earth as best as we can. The “temporary mitzvot” of the desert have a message that pertains to us all.

The Connection between Bamidbar and Shavuot

Rabbi Shlomo Drillman zt”l

Written by Rabbi Benjamin Kelsen based on a shiur from Rabbi Drillman zt”l

In Masechet Megillah (Daf 31b) the Gemara explains that Ezra HaSofer, upon his return to Eretz Yisroel, established the practice of reading the section dealing with Berachos and Klallos from Parshas Bechukosai prior to Chag HaShavuot and the Berachos and Klallos found in Parshas Ki Savo before Rosh Hashana. Tosafos in Megillah is bothered by the fact that it is our custom Bamidbar prior to Shavuot and Parshas Nitzavim prior to Rosh Hashana, a clear contradiction to the practice established by Ezra. According to Tosafos, Chazal wanting to distinguish between the festive atmosphere of Yom Tov and the sobering message of the Tochacha ruled that there should be a week between the readings of the Tochacha and the observance of the Yomim Tovim.

Based upon Ezra’s edict it would appear that there is something about Parshas Bamidbar that connects the parsha to Chag HaShavuot and the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai. Yet what is the connection?

Parshas Bamidbar’s main focus, both structurally and halachically is the description of the setup of Klal Yisroel in the wilderness based upon various issues of Kedushah. One can view the positions taken by the various Shevotim as concentric circles ending with the Machane HaShechinah, which included the Kodosh HaKedoshim and the Mishkan at the center of the camp, encompassed by the Machane Levi’im which in turn is encompassed by the Machane Yisroel.

The Rambam in Hilchos Beis HaBechirah (7:11) describes these three camps, the Machanos HaShechinah, HaLevi’im, and Yisroel, as the blueprint to be used when establishing setup employed in later years around the Batei Mikdosh, both past and “l’doros” (in the future). According to the Rambam, the Machane Shechina encompasses the Mikdosh and the Kodosh HaKedoshim, the Machane Leviya includes Har HaBayis and the

Machane Yisroel refers to the rest of Yerushalayim.

The Rav, zt”l, explained that the Rambam is emphasizing the concept of Machane especially as it relates to l’doros, to the future. Yerushalayim, which is unlike all other cities due to its special status and Kedushah, obtains that same kedushah from its position within the borders of Machane Yisrael as a continuation of the concept of the Machaneh Yisroel. This is exactly the same level of Kedushah that was granted to the area of the Machane Yisroel in the wilderness. The same idea holds true for the Har HaBayis and the Mikdosh itself as being continuation of the Kedushas Machane Leviya and the Machane HaShechina. It is the aspect of Machane that defines and establishes the Kedushah of these 3 places. Without the perpetuity of the concept of Machane there would be no Kedushas Mikdosh. The Rav derived this from the language used by the Rambam, for example the Rambam does not say that Yerushalayim has similar sanctification to that of Machane Yisrael in the desert. Instead he says that the Machane concept is perpetual.

However, we are still left with a question: What is the nature of this concept of a perpetual Machaneh. The Machanos in the Midbar only maintained their positions in the wilderness on a temporary basis, moving from one place to the next. What one day was an area that held the highest levels of kedushah to the presence of the Mishkan could and often was, merely another piece of the wilderness. The Rav explained that the central Machane, Machane HaShechina was the source of the Kedushah which emanated from the center of the camp to the surrounding Machanos. The Machane Leviya, in turn, was closest to the Machane HaShechina, and therefore had a level of Kedushah that was greater than that of the Machane Yisroel, which was further removed from the Kodosh HaKedoshim. The application of kedushah from these first Machanos extended to the Beis HaMikdosh.

Now that we have examined the main elements of Bamidbar we can examine the question of what is the connection of the Parshah to Chag HaShavuot? The Rav explained that at the time of Matan Torah, Har Sinai achieved the status of Mikdash. In fact, Har Sinai was, in actuality, the first Makom Mikdash for Klal Yisrael. Additionally, just as there were three levels of Kedushah, varying in degree, at the Mishkan and the Makom HaMikdash in Yerushalayim, there were three distinct areas at Har Sinai - the top of the mountain where Moshe Rabbeinu received the Torah from HKB"Y had the status of the Machane HaShechina. Further down the mountain, where Aharon HaKohen waited with the elders of Klal Yisroel had the status of the Machane Leviya. Finally, the third area of Matan Torah, the area surrounding the mountain where Klal Yisroel waited had the status of Machane Yisrael. Before Matan Torah began, as part of the preparations that were made, Moshe Rabbeinu was instructed by HKB"Y to demarcate the three separate mechitzos that would separate the three machanos. Therefore, just as prior to the actual day of Matan Torah Klal Yisroel was separated into three machanos, so too, prior to the day set aside to commemorate Matan Torah we read Parshas Bamidbar in order to prepare ourselves for the coming Chag.

The Rav pointed out another connection between the Mikdash and the Kedushas HaMachanos. Chazal ask the following question: if the Mishkan was a portable structure and was disassembled in order to facilitate travel, which means that during the time of actual travel there was no Mikdash extant, how was the Kedushah of the Lechem

HaPanim maintained since without a Mikdash there could be no Lechem Hyponym? The Gemara answers that Kedushas HaMikdash remains in effect even though the physical structure of the Mishkan was not assembled. Each of the four groupings of the people surrounding the Machane Leviya and the disassembled Mishkan that made up the Machane Shechina retained their respective Kedushos during their travels. This, however, is different than the Kedushah which is associated with the Beis HaMikdash, which has an added element of Kedushas HaMakom associated with the Har HaBayis.

It is this concept of a "transient Mikdash", a Mikdash with no fixed place, such as that described in Parshas Bamidbar that has been essential to the survival of Klal Yisroel during so many years of Galus without a Beis HaMikdash. Though we no longer have a Beis HaMikdash that we can see and enter and thereby enhance our relationship with HKB"Y, we have not, B"Y, lost the Kedushas HaMachane associated with the Mishkan. This concept is especially interesting when we examine the Bris Avos that obligated Bnei Yisrael to keep the Mitzvos in return for being given Eretz Yisrael. Interestingly, the Bris that was made between the Ribbono Shel Olam and Klal Yisroel at Sinai was different in that there was no dependency on Eretz Yisrael integral to the covenant. The acceptance of the Torah at Har Sinai by Klal Yisroel was an agreement to keep the Mitzvos no matter where we may physically reside at any given moment.

This is the meaning of "v'atem tihyu li mamleches kohanim v'goy kadosh... ki li kol Ha'Aretz". HKB"Y tells Klal Yisrael that the Kedushas HaMachane can be found anywhere the Jew may find himself.

Kavod Hatorah U'Melamdehah

Rabbi Michael Taubes

This Parsha focuses primarily on the census of Bnei Yisrael taken by Moshe Rabbeinu in the desert, a little more than a year after Yetzias Mitzrayim. Among those counted, although not together with the rest of the nation, were the members of Aharon's family. That part of the census is introduced by a statement that what follows is a list of the offspring of both Aharon and Moshe (Bamidbar 3:1). The Gemara in Sanhedrin (19b) is puzzled by the reference here to Moshe, because his children are in fact not mentioned in the subsequent

Pesukim. Why does the Torah speak in the introductory Pasuk (ibid.) about the offspring of Aharon and Moshe and then identify only the children of Aharon? The Gemara (ibid.) explains that actually, Aharon's children were in fact Moshe's children as well, because although Moshe didn't father them biologically, he taught them Torah, and as such can be mentioned as their parent along with Aharon. From this, the Gemara (ibid.) concludes that anyone who teaches Torah to a child is considered, in certain respects, as if he produced that child. A similar

conclusion is reached by the Gemara later in Sanhedrin (99b) based on another source.

The Mishnah in Kerisos (28a) speaks of the Kavod, the honor, which one must extend to one who teaches Torah, and actually says that this obligation to honor one's teacher takes precedence over the obligation to honor one's biological parent. The Mishnah in Bava Metzia (33a) likewise documents this idea, giving some practical examples where this rule becomes relevant, and explaining that one's teacher deserves greater Kavod because one's parent brings him into this world, one's teacher, by transmitting Torah to him, provides him with the ability to gain entry into Olam HaBo. The Rambam therefore rules (Hilchos Talmud To-rah – Perek 5: Halacha 1) that just as there is a Mitzvah to honor and fear one's parent, there is also such a Mitzvah regarding one's teacher, and that the obligation to the teacher takes precedence. The Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah – Siman 242: Se'if 1) rules this way as well.

The Gemara in Bava Metzia (ibid.) discusses what kind of teacher must be given this high level of Kavod; The Rambam (ibid. - Halacha 9) and the Shulchan Aruch (ibid. - Se'if 30) writes that this obligation applies only to one's "Rebbe Muvhaak", that is, the teacher from whom one has acquired most of his knowledge. The Ramo (ibid. - Se'if 34) adds that this implies only to a teacher who teaches one To-rah for free, but if one's parent hired the teacher, the Kavod due to the parent takes precedence. Moreover, if the Parent also teaches the child Torah, the Mishnah in Bava Metzia (ibid) notes that the Kavod due to the parent is greater than that due to the teacher. The Rambam (ibid. - Halacha Aleph) rules accordingly, although elsewhere (Hilchos Ge-zailah V'Aveidah – Perek 12: Halacha 2), he indicates that this may be only if the parent is on the same level as the teacher, a position accepted in one place by the Shulchan Aruch (Choshen Mishpat – Siman 264: Se'if 2). The aforementioned Ramo (Yoreh Deah – ibid.), the Taz (ibid. Se'if Katan 19), and others elaborate on this point. Nevertheless, regardless of whether one's obligation to honor one's teacher is greater than his obligation to honor his parent or not, it is clear from these Poskim that one must have great Kavod for anyone who teaches him Torah since, as mentioned above, this person is like a parent to him.

The question is, may the Rebbe himself be "Mochel" –or forgo- this Kavod to which he is entitled? The Gemara in Kiddushin (32a-32b) says that although a parent may be

Mochel his Kavod – the Rambam (Hilchos Mamerim – Perek 6: Halacha 8) in fact says that a parent should do so to a certain extent – there is a dispute as to whether or not a Rebbe may do so. The dispute revolves around a fundamental distinction between a parent and a teacher in terms of the source of the Kavod that is due to him. A parent is respected for being the parent; the honor is for him as a person and he may thus forgo it. One authority holds, however, that the honor due to a Rebbe is for the Torah he represents and teaches; it is therefore not within his rights to allow the Kavod due to Torah to be ignored. In short, the Kavod is not his personally, but the Torah's, and because it's not "his" Torah, he can't be Mochel his Kavod due to it. Those who disagree feel that it is in fact "his" Torah, having mastered it, and thus he can be Mochel the Kavod. The Rambam (Hilchos Talmud Torah – ibid. Halacha 11) and the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah – ibid. Se'if 32) accept the latter opinion. Rav Ovadyah Yosef (Sha'ailos U'Teshuvos Yabiya Omer: Chelek 6 – Chelek Yoreh Deah: Siman 21) cites Poskim who say that this applies only to people who have mastered the Torah to the point of being Gedolei HaDor, while other Talmidei Chachomim cannot be Mochel the Kavod due to the Torah. He himself rules, however, that it indeed applies to all Talmidei Chachomim, and he supports his view with numerous sources.

The Rivash (Sha'ailos U'Teshuvos HaRivash – Siman 220) quotes from the Ra'avad that although a Rav can be Mochel the Kavod, he cannot allow himself to be shamed, mocked or disgraced, just as a parent who may be Mochel his Kavod cannot allow his child to talk to him in a disrespectful or disparaging fashion. Whether or not this ruling is accepted may be a dispute between the Mechaber and the Ramo (Choshen Mishpat – Siman 263: Se'if 3; Siman 272: Se'if 3); the Mechaber says that at least for the sake of a Mitzvah, a Rav may act in an undignified manner, while the Ramo says it is improper even then. The Ramo (Yoreh Deah - ibid.) thus feels that it is necessary to stress that even if a Rav has been Mochel his Kavod, it remains forbidden to disgrace him. The Mechaber (Yoreh Deah – ibid.) himself, like the Rambam (ibid.), notes that even if a Rav has been Mochel his Kavod, it is proper for his students to display some minimal amount of respect anyway.

The Meaning of Midbar

Rabbi Mordechai Machlis

Why is it that the Torah was given in the desert? Is the midbar really the ideal location for the greatest revelation in world history?

According to one approach in rabbinic literature, one of the messages of the Torah of the midbar – desert is to encourage each one of us to behave accordingly. We, too, are to behave – and to become – like amidbar. In the language of the Midrash to our parasha (Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7): “למה במדבר סיני? כל מי שאינו עושה עצמו כמדבר הפקר” (1:7): “Why in the desert of Sinai? &he! llip; Those who do not open themselves up (to others) like a desert will not be able to acquire wisdom and Torah.”

The desert – midbar represents a certain level of accessibility to all. The Torah that each one of us possesses must be made available to everyone! If we are privileged to have certain spiritual or material resources which can bring benefit and blessing to others, we are enjoined to make deliberate efforts to open ourselves to all – to turn ourselves into a midbar.

The Torah teaches in Parashat Chukat (Bamidbar 21:18): “ומדבר מתנה”. Although the plain meaning of the text may indicate the order of the travels of the Jewish People from the desert to Mattana, Chazal in Masechet Eruvin (54a) read these words in a homiletic fashion: “ומדבר מתנה... אם משים אדם עצמו כמדבר זה שהכל דשין בו, תורה ניתנה לו במתנה.” “If people make themselves like a desert-midbar which everyone treads upon, the Torah will them be given to them as a gift.” We learn from the desert how to be humble before others. We consciously allow people to often speak and act to us even in ways which may be improper, for we are students of the desert Torah. The midbar setting guides us in our pathway of proper interaction with people. The midbar person acting like a desert will be rewarded with the precious gift of the Divine Torah of the desert.

If we study the life and practices of one of the most outstanding personalities at the time of King David, we can gain further insights into the Torah of the midbar. Yoav Ben Tzeruya (known most for his outstanding accomplishments as the leading general in the army of Dovid HaMelech) is spoken of in the world of Chazalas

being one of the most learned and pious Torah sages of his generation. In Sefer Melachim (I Kings 2:34) we learn that Yoav’s house was in the desert. Yoav’s home was a desert! The Gemara in Sanhedrin 49a is most intrigued by the unusual description of Yoav’s home.

בביתו במדבר? אטו ביתו מדבר הוא? אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: כמדבר, מה מדבר מופקר לכל - אף ביתו של יואב מופקר לכל.

Was Yoav’s home really a desert? Rav Yehuda taught in the name of Rav: The text is teaching us that Yoav’s home was similar to a desert. Just as everything in the desert is ownerless and free for all to take, everything in the house of Yoav was ownerless and free for all.

Yoav internalized the message of the Torah of the desert. The poor and the wretched felt ever so comfortable and welcome in Yoav’s home, for the foundations of his home were based on the concept of midbar. When one widely opens the gateway of the home and of the heart to the needy, one is demonstrating a deep level of understanding of why the Torah was given in the desert locale.

Our great and beloved Sages teach us that the tent of Avraham and Sarah was open on all four sides. On the most basic of readings, our rabbis are teaching us the special levels of sensitivity of our revered father and mother. They never wanted to trouble anyone to have to walk around in order to enter their home. Regardless of where he or she was coming from, the wayfarer always had direct and immediate access. However, Rav Kook (see Ein Ayah to Berachot 58) understands the four-sided openness on yet another level. Many hosts are prepared to open their homes to visitors on condition that the visiting guest is from a very same mindset as the host. If we are both from the conceptual west or both from the conceptual east, there’s plenty of room in the tent. What happens when one is from the conceptual north and the other is from the conceptual south?!? Are such guests welcome? Avraham and Sarah opened ! their loving tent on all four conceptual sides, for they founded the nation that bases itself on the Torah on the midbar – desert.

May our study of Parashat Bamidbar, coupled with our spiritual preparations for the holiday of the Torah, help each of us move closer and closer to the inner meaning of the midbar revelation.

My World

Rabbi Josh Hoffman

This week we begin reading the book of Bamidbar. As pointed out by Rabbi Naphtali Tzevi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv) in the introduction to his commentary, *Ha'amek Davar*, to Bamidbar, this fourth book of the Torah is also called, by the author of the early halachic work *Halachos Gedolos*, the book of 'pekudim,' or of countings, apparently in reference to the countings of the nation recorded in the book. Rabbi Berlin notes that the title, written in the plural, refers to two separate countings, one in this week's parsha, taken in the second year of the people's journey, and another in parshas Pinchas, taken in the fortieth year, when the people were about to enter the land of Cana'an. Why, he asks, should these two countings have such importance that they should determine the name of the entire book? He answers that there is a slight change between the two countings that highlights the transition the people underwent before they entered the land. In parshas Bamidbar, we find that the tribe of Ephraim is counted before that of Menashe, and in the counting in parshas Pinchas, Menashe precedes Ephraim. By analyzing the manner in which Ya'akov gave blessings to the progenitors of these two tribes, Rabbi Berlin shows that Ephraim had predominance in spiritual matters, while Menashe had predominance in physical matters. Thus, while the Jews were just beginning their trek in the wilderness, Ephraim was counted first, because that journey was typified by the supernatural divine providence bestowed upon the nation, manifested by their receiving their daily sustenance through the heaven-sent manna and the miraculous well of Miriam, being surrounded and protected by seven clouds of glory, and, in general, experiencing a constant flow of miracles. As they prepared to enter the land, however, they had to be slowly educated to live their lives in a more natural way, for in the land they would have to sustain themselves through working the land, and, in general, would no longer benefit from such clear miracles. Divine providence in the land would express itself within the regular workings of nature. To mark this, in parshas Pinchas, which discusses the division of the land among the various tribes, Menashe, who was predominant in physical matters, is counted first. Thus, the two countings in the book of Bamidbar, when examined closely, highlight the transition the nation underwent in moving from the

wilderness to the land of Cana'an, and, for this reason, it is known as the book of countings, just as, in English, it is known as Numbers. I would like to offer a different explanation for giving the book this name, one which, besides telling us something about the nature of the book, also has a message relevant to Shavuot, which usually (although not this year) occurs during the week after which parshas Bamidbar is read. Ramban, in his commentary to this week's parsha, gives several reasons for the census recorded in it. One of these explanations, which he brings from the Midrash Rabbah to our parsha, is that, by singling out each person, he is given the honor that is his due, rather than being considered a mere cog in a vast machine. In fact, the word used for the command of counting—*seu*—literally means 'lift up.' By counting each person separately, Moshe was telling them that they each had an important, unique task to fulfill. The author of *Kli Yakar* gives a similar explanation. The commentary *Sefas Emes* points out that the reason that it is considered (according to most authorities) forbidden to count the Jewish people without the use of a half shekel or some other device that avoids a direct head count is the fear that a regular enumeration carries the danger of reducing each person to a mere number, whereas, in truth, each person constitutes an entire world, and as such, holds great importance. Many of the accounts we find in the book of Bamidbar do point to the uniqueness of the individual. For example, in parshas Beha'aloscha, we find that individuals who had been impure when the Pesach sacrifice was offered in the month of Nisan and were therefore not able to participate in it at that time, came to Moshe and asked for an opportunity to bring it. Moshe asked God what to do, and the divine response was to inform him of the laws of Pesach Sheni—the second Passover sacrifice—a divinely granted second chance to participate in this mitzvah. We also find, in parshas Naso, the case of the Nazir, the person who wants to accept upon himself an extra measure of restrictions. While some view this ability as a temporary corrective measure to offset an exaggerated degree of indulgence in the material aspects of life, Ramban, in his commentary, views it as a laudatory attempt to attain a higher degree of holiness. These and other sections of the book of Bamidbar underscore the importance of the individual as noted by

the Ramban himself in his explanation of the census, and can help us understand why the book is also called the book of countings, or Numbers.

There is, however, another aspect of the unique importance of each individual that is brought out in the book of Bamidbar, and must be included in the message inherent in the name it is given by the Halachos Gedolos. In parshas Shelach we are told of the unfortunate episode of the spies, who brought back an evil report of the land of Canaan and swayed the people to complain and resist entering it. Although twelve spies went on the mission to scout out the land, only ten of them brought back an evil report. Yehoshua and Calev told the people that the land was conquerable and that they should not accept the comments of their ten colleagues. Interestingly, the Talmud derives the requirement of ten men for a minyan from the fact that these ten people are referred to as 'edah'-a congregation. Yehoshua and Calev, thus, were able to assert their individuality and remove themselves from this group among which they were originally included, and told the people that they, too, should refrain from joining the ranks of this 'edah.' In other words, the unique value and nature of each individual places upon him the obligation to act as an individual and not be swept along with any immoral trends or groups that he may encounter. Because each person is singled out and honored, because he is uplifted and accorded separate recognition, he has an obligation to be unique, and reject those elements of his society that do not conform with the demands of the Torah. Because the nation did not do so, and was swayed by the argument of the spies, they were punished and not allowed into the land. The next counting we encounter in the book of Bamidbar is that of the new generation that will enter the land. Thus, the two countings highlight, on the one hand, the unique character of the individual, and, on the other

hand, the consequent obligation to assert that uniqueness, and the consequences involved when one does not do so.

The dual nature of the uniqueness of the individual is brought out very starkly in a mishnah in Sanhedrin (5,4), part of which was made famous by the film 'Schindler's List.' The mishnah discusses the procedure involved in testifying in capital cases. How, asks the mishnah, do we warn these witnesses, to ensure that they will indeed go ahead and give their testimony, and do so in a completely proper manner? The Mishnah states that they are told that what they are about to do has tremendous importance, and that if they testify falsely they will be responsible for the irreplaceable loss of a human life. They are then told, "Therefore, man (Adam) was created alone, to teach you that whoever destroys a life is considered as if he destroyed the entire world, and whoever preserves a life is considered as if he maintained the entire world.....and to teach the greatness of God, for man makes many coins with one stamp (or mold) and they are all identical, while the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, coined all people with the stamp of the first man, and not one of them is identical to another. Therefore every person is obligated to say, 'the world was created for me.'" The message of this mishnah, following the thought we have been developing, is that because each man is unique, he is obligated to consider himself as the only person in the world, and act in a moral way, offering his testimony in an honest fashion, regardless of any outside forces that may pull him in another direction. The gift of uniqueness carries with it the obligation to act in a unique manner when the forces around one all tell him to follow the crowd. This idea lies in the center of the book of Bamidbar, and serves as an important introduction to the festival of Shavuot, which celebrates the giving of the Torah, the blueprint of our lifestyle.

Bamidbar: The Book of Transition

Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

Even though the fourth book of the Torah is most commonly known as Sefer Bamidbar, the Rabbis actually refer to it as Chumash Ha-Pekudim, the "Book of Numbers" (see, for example, Yoma 68b). This name, of course, derives from the two censuses which were taken while the Jews were in the desert; the first in this week's Torah portion, Parshas Bamidbar, and the second in Parshas Pinchas.

Nevertheless, despite the importance of taking a census, it is somewhat surprising that counting the people is given such prominence. After all, other significant events occur in Sefer Bamidbar – the episode of the meraglim, Korach's rebellion and miraculous destruction, the drama with Bilaam, etc. – so why do Chazal view the census, of all things, as the defining motif of the entire sefer?

The Netziv, in the introduction to his commentary on Sefer Bamidbar (Ha'amek Davar), explains that more than just counting the people, the two censuses serve as “bookends” which demarcate a fundamental transition in the way that Hashem interacts with the Jewish people.

The first census, taken towards the start of their sojourn in the desert, occurred when the people still led a miraculous existence. Everything they needed – food, clothing, shelter – was provided directly by Hashem. The census reflected this supernatural reality, as the order that the tribes were counted in was deliberately patterned after the order that they were encamped around the Mishkan, the embodiment and central location of Hashem's presence in the world.

The second census, however, took place in their final year in the desert, when, according to the Netziv, the supernatural influence had already begun to wane. This transition to a more “natural” existence was intended as a preparation for the people's entrance into the Land of Israel when they would become responsible for their own safety and sustenance. Reflecting this new reality the census in Parshas Pinchas was structured in a way that deemphasized the miraculous and wasn't focused on the Mishkan.

This, then, is the real theme of Sefer Bamidbar: not the censuses per se, but the transition from a supernatural to natural existence. While in the desert the people were guided – and dependant – on the “bright light” of Hashem's manifest presence. But once they entered the Land of Israel that light “dimmed” and although Hashem remained ultimately in control of all events, they were forced to take a more active responsibility for their fate (see Bereishis Rabbah #2).

When discussing the purpose of the census taken in our parsha, the Seforno also points to the supernatural reality of the time, but he then suggests that this reality should have carried into Israel as well. In fact, he explains that the census was meant to prepare the people to enter Eretz Yisroel right away at which time they would have conquered the land miraculously and without any need for war. This intended divine plan was, alas, squandered by the people's insistence on sending spies and the punishment that resulted from the meraglim's negative report. The fallout of this catastrophic mistake was therefore twofold: entry into Eretz Yisroel was delayed and settlement would not be miraculous but rather the result of successful wars fought against the inhabitants of the land.

Ultimately the Jewish people spent 40 years in the desert and, as a result, also took part in another census which, by that time, was intended to mark their transition towards a more “natural” existence and prepare them for the challenges of life in Eretz Yisroel.

This is a particularly appropriate message to consider a few days before we celebrate Yom Yerushalayim. After all, it was during the Six Day War that, perhaps more than any other time in the last 2,000 years, Hashem's miraculous hand was evident as the Israeli army – defying any purely military explanation – not only beat back mortal enemies but reacquired large swaths of our ancestral homeland. It was as if for six short days we were transported back in time and Hashem's original plan of a supernatural conquering of Eretz Yisroel actually took place. When celebrating Yom Yerushalayim, therefore, we should not only be thankful for the blessings we have merited but also appreciative of the miraculous nature of these events.