

Parshas Bamidbar commences with the command to conduct a census of the Jewish People. (1:2) The order of the census is according to the birth sequence of the shevatim born to each of Yaakov's wives, such that Reuven, the firstborn, is to be counted first, followed by Shimon, then Yehuda, and so forth. (Shevet Levi is omitted from this count, as shall be explained.)

The parshah later details the marching order and formation of the tribes, and - rather than Reuven leading the regiments - Yehudah is to be at the head, flanked by the shevatim of Yisachar and Zevulun. Why is this order different from that of the census at the beginning of the parshah?

It would appear that the answer to this question derives from the very essence of Sefer Bamidbar. This sefer is marked by an unusual abundance of conflict and spiritual downfall. The story of the Meraglim is the centerpiece of Sefer Bamidbar's many tragedies, and the events of Korach, the Misonenim and Kivros Ha-Ta'avah, the Ma'apilim, Ba'al Peor, and the complaints against Hashem and Moshe at the periphery of the Land of Edom, as well as the individual acts of Miriam and the Mekoshesh Eitzim, all signal that something very strange is transpiring in this Sefer.

Sefer Bamidbar presents the period of transition of the Jewish People from B'nei Yaakov and the Dor Deah to the generation of those who were to conquer Eretz Yisroel and establish a commonwealth therein. The change from living on open miracles in a world without physical cares to facing the responsibilities of military and agrarian life, coupled with personal toil for all sustenance, was something which presented quite a struggle. The requirement to put forth effort for self-defense and livelihood, while realizing that Hashem was really controlling all and "calling the shots", was most difficult to integrate. The challenges of transition from the Dor Deah experience to that of future conquerors of the Promised Land were at the crux of the Sin of the Meraglim and underscored the many other tragedies of Sefer Bamidbar.

As such, Parshas Bamidbar serves as an introduction to the entirety of Sefer Bamidbar. The Jewish People are first presented (in the census) as the B'nei Yaakov, with Reuven first. However, Yehuda, who would head the commonwealth in Eretz Yisroel, assumes the lead position when the parshah then depicts tribal marching formation. This change reflects the transition from the Dor Deah experience to that of conquest of the Land, which is the central theme of Sefer Bamidbar.

(It is noteworthy that the first parshah of each of the Five Books of the Torah serves as an introduction to the balance of the that Book. Parshas Bereshis portrays Hashem's selection of the worthy individual (Noach) from the general span of creation and existence, and the rest of Sefer Bereshis is committed to the development of the selected people (the Avos) as bearers of Hashem's message. Parshas Shemos presents Hashem's commitment to B'nei Yisroel and to their redemption, and the entire Sefer Shemos is dedicated to the fruition of B'nei Yisroel's relationship with Hashem and their geulah. Parshas Vayikra sets forth the basics of Avodah, and the following parshiyos of the sefer detail all realms of spiritual and sacrificial service. Parshas

Devarim introduces the notion that Moshe Rabbeinu's own words constituted actual Torah, and the balance of Sefer Devarim is comprised of commands and prophecies in Moshe's own expression which attain full Torah status.)

Shevet Levi is omitted from the census at the beginning of Parshas Bamidbar and is counted much later in the parshah (in chapter 3). Rashi (on 1:49) quotes Medrash Rabbah that Shevet Levi must be counted separately in order to distinguish it from the other shevatim, who would be condemned to punishment for their involvement with the Chet Ha-Meraglim. Additionally, unlike the other tribes, who are tallied from the age of entry to the military (1:3), Levi is counted from infancy (3:15); Rashi (ibid.) once again invokes the words of Medrash Rabbah and explains that Levi's inherent holiness merited that the shevet be counted from a very young age.

Despite the different nature of Shevet Levi's census, why was it performed so late in our parshah, rather than being performed right after the first census, such that the Torah would have featured the census of the other tribes and then the census of Levi, after which it would have presented the order of the Machaneh (Camp), which included all of the shevatim? Why is Levi's census delayed until after the Machaneh is delineated? It appears out of place to break Levi's census off from the flow of the parshah.

It would seem that Shevet Levi's exclusion and total separation from the standard census reflects the unique role of Shevet Levi in the transition theme of Sefer Bamidbar. Levi's position in the camp immediately surrounded the Mishkan. (1:53) Unlike the other tribes, Levi never settled down in ancestral plots in Eretz Yisroel; rather, Levi was granted individual cities which were part of the land of other shevatim, and Levi regularly traveled between those cities and the Mishkan/Beis Hamikdash. It is quite evident that Levi never made the transition from the Dor Deah experience to that of "normative" life. Levi was tightly connected to the Mishkan/Mikdash, where open miracles akin to those reserved for the Dor Deah could still be regularly seen. Rather than leading lives linked to the material, Levi was linked only to Hashem, and its proximity to Him in tribal formation and in the Promised Land attests to this. The general census of B'nei Yisroel reflected military preparedness, symbolic of conquest of Eretz Yisroel and subsequent apportionment of territory therein; this notion was totally inappropriate for Shevet Levi. Rather, Levi's census appears in the parshah as part of its induction to Hashem's service, which was forfeited by the Bechorim. This transition into formal Avodah is the only change which Levi experienced. Instead of "settling down" to somewhat everyday life, Levi served as the living remnant of the Dor Deah, and it was thus excluded and set apart from the first census and its significance.

The Rambam (Hil. Shmitah V'Yovel 13:13) beautifully depicts the character of the tribe of Levi as elaborated upon above. The Rambam affirms that all individuals can adopt the spiritual path of Levi and forego their portion in this world for a portion in Hashem. May we all be so worthy.