

# The Book of Bamidbar

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## An Introduction

The transition from the book of Vayikra to Bamidbar represents something of a change of scene. The tempo speeds up as we are thrust into the hustle and bustle of the Israelite camp. It is a world of administration. National demographic statistics are procured as to the state of the nation: the number of fighting men, the twelve army divisions which consist of the twelve tribes of the nation.

The attentive reader senses that Bamidbar is a very different book to Vayikra. But what has changed? What things define Bamidbar as opposed to Vayikra? Maybe it would be worthwhile to dwell for a moment upon a few classic differences between the books.

### LAW and NARRATIVE

At the outset, let us state the central thesis clearly. We shall establish a simple distinction between the two books. It is clear that Vayikra is predominantly a book of law. Vayikra does not make any attempt or presumption to tell a story based on narrative. Rather it transcribes a system of law, a legal system that is to shape a Jewish society in the Land of Israel.

In contrast, Bamidbar is a book whose central drama is the journey to Israel. That is its primary agenda. The book narrates Israel's departure from Mount Sinai and its journey through the wilderness for an entire generation until reaching the border of the promised land. To this end, Bamidbar begins with the organisation and counting of the camp in preparation for the great march to the Promised Land. The text describes the marching process itself (Ch. 10-11) and it interests itself with the failures and setbacks of the mission. At the end of the day, the book is complete when the Israelites are ready to enter the Land of Canaan.

As a result of these basic differences, we can pinpoint other areas in which the two books diverge:

### 1. TIME :

The book of Vayikra has no sense of time, we might describe Vayikra as a-historical. It is a book which predominantly ignores a sense of historical context. There are, indeed few "stories" or historical occurrences in Vayikra. The stark exceptions are the dedication ceremony of the Mishkan - Ch.8-9 and the story of the "Blasphemer" in Ch. 24 . However, even these stories are absorbed within a primarily legal narrative and they are noticeably unusual sections in this book. in fact,

Bamidbar is a book with a clear eye towards historical detail. It begins with a date:

"On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the Exodus from the land of Egypt ..."(1:1)

and the book continues charting the historical progress of the Children of Israel throughout the desert. Indeed one of the pivotal episodes of Bamidbar is the story of the spies, an event in which the delay of 40 years is a focal element in the drama. The drama of time creates the tempo of the book.

### 2. GEOGRAPHY :

Vayikra takes place in a single location:

"These are the commandments that the Lord gave Moses for the Israelite people on Mt. Sinai" (The concluding verse of Vayikra. cf. also Vayikra 7:38)

While the Israelites encamp at the foot of the mountain, God transmits the details of Judaic law in all its punctilious detail, to Moshe. But there is no movement here. Transit is unnecessary. The revelation is to be completed at the mountain itself.

But Bamidbar is a very different book. It describes a journey that begins at Sinai (1:1), travels through the wilderness with the aim of reaching the Promised Land. The book ends in the Plains of Moab, opposite Jericho on the border of the Holy Land (22:1, 36:13). In fact there are those who wish to use this criteria as a basis for a threefold division of Sefer Bamidbar:

Ch.1-10               - At Mt. Sinai  
Ch.11-21             - In transit through the wilderness  
Ch. 22-39            - At Arvot (the Plains of) Moav

### 3. LITERARY STYLE

There are two primary styles of parshiot in the Torah. The first class is passages which tell stories. Whether it is the Creation or the story of the Exodus, Joseph or Bilaam, there are many story texts which are expressive of a narrative style of writing. The second style is legal writing. The Ten Commandments would be a good example or the passages which describe the construction of the Mishkan.

How do these genres match the biblical books? We can see clearly that a book such as Bereshit is solely narrative or story-based. There are no legal passages in Sefer Bereshit.

The opposite extreme is Sefer Vayikra. Vayikra has a strict formal legal style. As we have mentioned, it rarely breaks into story. The legal sections are clearly defined with headings and endings to sections, all carefully laid out.

Sefer Bamidbar, however, is more complex. Bamidbar is characterised by a composite mixture of narrative-story and law. The central thread of Bamidbar is clearly based in narrative - in telling the historic story of the journey to Canaan. That is its backbone. However, there are many legal sections in this book (eg. Chs 5-7, 15, 18, 28-29, and others.) The relationship between these alternate groups is a question that seeks urgent resolution if one is to gain a coherent understanding of the purpose of the book. As (mori v'Rabi) R. Menachem Leibtag has demonstrated, the legal, Halakhic sections generally feature as a boost or support to the central story of the narrative. The legal statements will serve

as an illustration, giving shape to the story at hand, and at times, the legal sections will fill in gaps in the story, redressing certain balances connected with the central narrative.

An example that comes to mind is the legal list of all the gifts to the priesthood in chapter 18. This list comes immediately after the story of the Korach rebellion. Why is this legal passage joined to the story of Korach? Maybe, because particularly at this moment - in the aftermath of a direct attack to the priestly position - there is a pressing need to talk about the priesthood - its privileged position, and its benefits and responsibilities. The legal review reiterates the authority of the priestly laws providing a balance to the story text. Rav Leibtag stresses that the choice of certain legal sections and the weaving of these laws into the fabric of the storyline expresses a deliberate purpose. The storyline is highlighted by halakhic sections which will inevitably reinforce a particular aspect of that story.

At any rate, let us state again. Vayikra is exclusively legal. Bamidbar is a hybrid of law and history.

We might take this theory a stage deeper. Vayikra is a book of revelation. The entire book is a series of communications to Moshe which were transmitted at Har Sinai. Vayikra is "Torah" in the sense that it is the revelation of God's will, of the injunctions and restrictions, of the lifestyle that God wishes us to lead, the Torah and Mitzvot that constitute a Halakhic lifestyle.

How about Bamidbar - or any "history" text for that matter? In what way does history become "Torah," God's teaching? We might suggest that Bamidbar is about the application of God's law. That law which is described from Sinai to the end of Sefer Vayikra is put into action in Bamidbar. Bamidbar is a historical story that always has to refer to "the law" in order to assess the conduct of Am Yisrael. However, it is "Torah" in a different way. Bamidbar is "Torah" in the sense that God has seen it fit to transmit the stories of Bamidbar to us so that we may gain "life experience" by examining the faults(1) of Bnei Yisrael during their wilderness sojourn. Bamidbar is normative in a somewhat subtle manner.

Maybe that explains the need to intersperse the legal passages within the narrative continuum of Bamidbar (2). The legal sections remind us that this "story" is part of Torah, and that the key to the struggles we experience in our acceptance of God's will, lies in our acceptance of his mitzvot.

#### 4. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL

This difference between the legal and the historical leads to another difference between the books. Vayikra is a prescriptive sefer. Bamidbar is largely descriptive. Vayikra describes things as they SHOULD happen as is the nature of all law. Bamidbar describes the way that events DID happen, with all the tragedy and the fallibility that is so endemic to the human condition.

#### TRIBAL LEADERS OR KOHANIM?

In the first chapter of our parshat Hashavua, we should be impressed by a further division between the books of Vayikra and

Bamidbar.

The opening passage calls on Moses to take a census of the men of fighting age. We find that the people who are responsible for the census are the heads of tribes, later described as Nesi'im - princes or chieftains of the tribes. They are listed here by name. But this is only the first of many such lists of tribal leaders (see ch.1, ch.7, 13:4-16, 16:2, 34:16-29). In Bamidbar, it is the Nesi'im who would seem to be the primary instrument of leadership. There is also a great deal of attention paid to the structure of the nation in terms of its tribal make-up. So we have an emphasis on Princes and their tribes.

But these are unheard of in Vayikra. In Vayikra the leader is the priest, the Kohen. And the tribal leadership simply does not feature.

Why?

The starting point of Sefer Vayikra is the Mikdash or Mishkan. The functionary of this sacred institution is the Kohen. From this point we widen the circle to all of Israel, all of life and land. However, the starting point sets the agenda of creating a holy nation whose origin and ultimate meaning are concentrated in the Mishkan.

In Bamidbar, it is the camp in which the focus is placed. The mishkan is spoken of as a structure which needs transportation, but does not take centre stage in the drama of the narrative described. Indeed in Bamidbar, Aaron functions orientated towards the nation (6:22-24, 17:11-24) more than towards the Mishkan. He figures as a national leader more than the elevated "Kohen Gadol."

What I am stressing here is that Bamidbar has an agenda that centres explicitly upon the nation. Vayikra on the other hand is concentrated on Mishkan and ritual more than on the drama of the nation.

This is particularly interesting in the places which do mention the Mishkan within Sefer Bamidbar. Hence, the dedication ceremony of the Mishkan which is described in Shemot and Vayikra as a solely "Kohen" event, is re-narrated in Bamidbar as an event orchestrated by tribal leaders. The focus of each book is clearly defined. Vayikra is "Torat Kohanim" and Bamidbar is left in the hands of the Nesiim.

#### THE COUNT

Let us further illustrate what we have said here with a very simple example; the enormous project of the census dominates our parsha. But not just this parsha. If we take the name of this book - Numbers - or in its original rabbinic form - Sefer Hapekudim, The Book of the Census - we realise that the notion of counting and organising the people, has spiritual dimensions over and above a mere technical count. In Chapter 26 we read of a second national census, a repeat performance. What possible significance can a national count have in the spiritual-religious plane? Why is counting the people a definitive feature of one of the books of the Torah? And why the deliberate language describing in painstaking

detail and precise formula, the numbers of each tribe? What is it for?

## MOBILISATION

The Rashbam (1:2) suggests a straightforward answer:

“Now the Children of Israel are about to embark on their journey to the Land of Israel. The males above the age of twenty are of fighting age - eligible for the draft. On the twentieth of the second month, the cloud set forth [the signal to dismantle the camp and begin the journey] and it is stated ‘We are setting out for the place of which God has said “I will give it to you”’ (Num 10:11). This is why God instructed them to take a count at the start of the month.”

God’s instruction to Moses regarding the census is dated as “the first day of the second month”. In less than three weeks they are planning to leave Mt. Sinai, where they have spent almost an entire year studying the divine law and constructing the Sanctuary. Now they move to the next stage of the plan; the Land of Israel. But the Land of Israel will not be presented on a silver platter. They people will have to organise an army. They have to conquer the land in battle. They will have to learn how to form divisions and platoons, how to use weapons. In addition, the camp must know how to march as a group. It is a year since their last desert trek. How will they organise an efficient marching order, an organised method of encampment? How will they transport the Tabernacle, the portable Temple. How is it dismantled, transported and set up anew in a fresh location?

This, in a nutshell, is what our parsha aims to describe. Let us start at the beginning.

CHAPTER 1 is a national census of men between the age of 20 and 60 - “all those in Israel who are able to bear arms.”(1:3) This chapter aims to gain information as to the size of the army. Battle divisions are defined on a tribal basis. The data which will assist the generals in drawing up battle plans is clearly presented here.

CHAPTER 2 gives us the layout of the camp, the precise camping and marching order. They encamp as a square, with the Mishkan at the focal centre point and the twelve tribes around it. Each tribe has a flag to rally around. “They march in the same formation as they encamp” (2:17). It should all work like clockwork.

CHAPTER 3 & 4 describe the Leviim: their appointment and separation from the general populace, their own census, and their role vis-à-vis the transporting of the Mishkan. The Leviim are counted apart from the rest of the nation because they do not join the army. They follow a different path for they are the religious representatives, the guardians of the Temple and the Torah. Each family within the Levite clan had a specific, clearly defined task as regarded the Mishkan and its transportation.. If everyone was to pull their weight and act in a responsible manner, the system would work perfectly.

## THE CHALLENGE AND THE FAILURE

This approach explains the need for a census, but it also defines the entire orientation of the book of Bamidbar. This is a book about the journey to the land of Israel. It begins the tale with an atmosphere of preparations, mobilisation and a great sense of anticipation. Everything is put in order so that the great march to the Promised land can commence. It is interesting that the second national census in Chapter 26 also precedes the entry into the land of Israel. As Israel are massing on the Border, they are counted once again. Again an inventory is drawn up.

But we must realise that 39 years separate chapter 1 from chapter 26. As much as the book of Bamidbar describes the excited preparations for the long march to Israel and the subsequent settling of the land, it also describes the failure of the first attempt, the incident of the spies and the other sins which caused the entire enterprise to collapse and ensured that Israel would remain in the wilderness for forty years. This book begins with a description of the hopes and plans for entering Israel. It then details the subsequent sin(s) and God’s refusal to allow this group into the Promised Land. The journey is put on hold. We regress, wandering for a generation. But then, forty years later, we witness once again, the preparations, the counting of the army, the supplies and training, which lead to the Children of Israel into the land of Israel under the leadership of Joshua. This book is about the attempt to reach Israel, its failures and successes.

## A CASE STUDY: THE MISHKAN CENSUS & THE MIDBAR CENSUS.

I have been contrasting Bamidbar with Vayikra. However, when talking about the counting of Bamidbar, it is instrumental to contrast this count with the earlier census (3) which was taken in the process of preparations for the building of the Mishkan.

“Each man should give an atonement for his soul to the Lord that no plague may come upon them...a half-shekel by the sanctuary weight ...You shall take the expiation money from the Israelites and assign it to the service of the Tent of Meeting; it shall serve for the Children of Israel as a reminder before the Lord.” (Shemot 30:11-16)

The purpose of the "count" has a religious intonation although it is not explicitly stated. It would appear that the entire operation is administrated by the Mishkan. After all the coin itself is a "shekel Hakodesh" and the money goes to the "Tent of Meeting". Moreover, the entire enterprise would seem to be a process of atonement more than a national census. Money is counted rather than people.

The relationship between this count and the Bamidbar census has occupied the minds of many of the mepharshim. Did the Bamidbar census function via the half-shekel system. Indeed was the half-shekel counting method, a mitzva for time immemorial or was it a once-only mitzva. (See Rashi, Ibn Ezra Bamidbar 1:2 and see the Sephorno. Ramban 1:18). But at the level of plain p'shat, the Bamidbar counting would appear to be very different.

It would appear that it is the people themselves, rather than their coins that are counted. A phrase which repeats itself over and over in our parsha, is that the census was undertaken, "by a count of names." No mention is made of the half-shekel and instead, the names of person, family and tribe are used as identifying features for each individual.

" Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head."(1:2)

The Ramban notes:

"The Holy One blessed be He instructed Moses to count them in a manner that would confer honour and greatness on each one of them individually. Not that you should say to the head of the family: 'How many are there in your family? How many children?', but rather, all of them should pass before you with the honour due to them..." (Nachmanides on 1:45)

So we have a stark contrast between these two national polls which in other respects appear so similar (4). The very form of the census belies its unique character. Here we see how the count of Bamidbar emphasises the national aspect, both in its motive and its method. The national leadership supervises it, and the motive is a national project of war, travel and conquest. The counting of Shemot is Mishkan orientated and Mishkan supervised. It has a religious (atonement) atmosphere about it. Its aim is to suppress the personal and to rise above it.

Even in the mode of counting, the spirit of each "world" is illustrated.

Shabbat Shalom.

Footnotes:

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(1) Lust - chap 11. Spies - chap 13-14. Rebellion and leadership challenge - chap 16. Lack of faith - 21:4-16. Sexual promiscuity and idolatry - chap 25.

(2) Ramban in his introduction to the Sefer categorises the mitzvot of this book as "Hora'at Sha'a" indicating that there is some interaction between the events of the times and the "timeless" mitzvot.

(3) To a certain degree I am looking at the latter (Mishkan) section of Shemot as similar in style to Vayikra. Certainly this is true as regards the emphasis upon Kehuna, the legal nature of the text, and the subject matter. In other aspects, clearly, Shemot is distinct from Sefer Vayikra.

(4) These two counts are linked by Rashi's opening comment to the Parsha. However, more remarkable is the fact that they result in the exact same number! Cf. Bamidbar 1:46 with Shemot 38:26.