

Parshas Bamidbar & Shavuos – Keith Goldstein

ה' סיון תשע"ט – 8th June 2019 – שבת פ' במדבר וערב שבועות

Almost every year we read Parshas Bamidbar on the Shabbos before Shavuos. The reason given in the Gemara is that we do not wish to juxtapose Shavuos, which is the New Year for fruit of the trees, to the curses contained in Parshas Bechukosai and therefore we ensure that there is a Parsha in between.

I have seen an additional connection brought, namely a midrash which says that the Torah was given in fire, water, and the wilderness, quoting the beginning of this Parsha as the source for the last mentioned, to teach us that just as these three things are free and available to all, so it is with the Torah.

Perhaps there is also another connection. As Rashi brings, the counting of the children of Israel takes place at the time of important events as a sign of Hashem's love for us; that referred to in Bamidbar was intended to relate to the dedication of the Mishcon thirty days previously. (There are several reasons given as to why it was not done on the day, one being that, as we see in the Torah itself, and from the experience of King David, the exercise of counting the people can be a grave source of danger of the outbreak of a plague and it was not done immediately so as not to allow the possibility of people seeking to attribute the death of Nadav and Avihu on the day of the dedication of the Mishcon to the counting). Ramban says that the commandment to construct the Mishcon is, so to speak, to eternalise within our camp the manifestation of the Shechinah which appeared to us openly at Mount Sinai at the time of the giving of the Torah and accordingly that event clearly has a connection to Bamidbar.

In addition, the counting of the Omer is said to encapsulate the yearning of the children of Israel to receive the Torah and to purify themselves to enable that to occur. The giving and receiving of the Torah is attributed the status of a wedding between the Jewish people and Hashem and, indeed, most of the customs of a Jewish wedding can be traced back to the giving of the Torah. It is appropriate that we should read of Hashem's love for us at a time when we demonstrate our love for him by continuing and finishing our count *אני לדודי ודודי לי*.

אני לדודי ודודי לי are the three names which the Torah gives to the festival. One, of course relates to the weeks we count towards it and the other two relate to the harvest time and consequent offering which we are required to bring from new produce so as to allow new produce from that point onwards be brought to the Sanctuary. Our Rabbis, in the Mishnah and similar sources, when referring to the Yom Tov use none of those names but call it *עצרת*. That name in the Torah itself is allocated to two other festival days namely *עצרת ושמיני* *עצרת*. If we examine those two festival days we see that they have really one thing in common, namely that each has the positive mitzvah of Simcha and the negative mitzvah prohibiting work, except as allowed on other festival days but no mitzvah specific to that day, in contrast to the first day of Pesach, the first day of Succos, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The same is true of Shavuos (while our Rabbis say that a custom of Israel counts as Torah, that does not render the act of eating cheesecake the fulfilment of a positive mitzvah of the Torah!) The name *עצרת* is derived from the Targum in Parshas Pinchos and means to stop or refrain which really encapsulates the negative mitzvah applying on all three days.

Why were the Rabbis averse using any of the names used by the Torah itself? Of course, long after the giving of the Torah there arose heretics, the Sadducees and associated groups who denied the tradition that the first day for the counting of the Omer could fall on any day of the week but instead falsely interpreted the first day, stated in the Torah to be the day after Shabbos, as meaning Shabbos in its normal sense, i.e. the seventh day of the week so that the day following would always be on Sunday. The true tradition is that the word Shabbos in the verse refers to first day of Pesach. The normal understanding of *שבוע* is a period of seven days, the first of which is Sunday. Accordingly, to prevent the people inferring from the festival name that it will always be on a Sunday, they shied away from using that name. We find that our Rabbis went to great lengths to distance the people from the view of the heretics. Shavuos is the only foot festival which is one day. The individual sacrifices which each man of Israel is commanded to bring when coming to the sanctuary could not be offered up on the day of the festival, if it fell on Shabbos but would have to be offered up on one of the following six days. All of those days would normally have been a day when one could not fast and when the Cohen Gadol would have worn the garments of Yom Tov. However, to ensure that the people did not mistakenly believe that the day itself was Yom Tov, in that circumstance on the first of the six days the Rabbis allowed fasting and the Cohen Gadol did not wear the garments of Yom Tov.

Perhaps the reason that the Rabbis did not wish to use the other two names, which allude to the harvest festival offering, was that following the destruction of the temple we are not able to bring the sacrifices and therefore using the reference to them as the name of the festival would inspire sadness at the destruction of the temple rather than joy.

עקיבא יחיאל בן אברהם יצחק לעילוי נשמות הורי ע"ה