

Parshas Bamidbar (Reprinted) – Joel Berman

ה סיון תשע"ה – 22 May 2014 – שבת פי במדבר

"Le'olam Korin Parashat B'midbar Sinai Kodem Atzeret" – We always read Parashat Bamidbar before Shavuot. In last week's sedrah we read about the many tragedies that would befall the B'nei Yisroel should they not adhere stringently to the Torah. We learn in Tosfot, Megilla 31b that Bamidbar, (like Nitzavim between Ki Tavoh and Rosh Hashanah) acts as a separation between Shavuot and the curses in Bechukotai.

We can expand on the fact that Bamidbar is connected closely with Shavuot, commemorating Matan Torah. In order to receive the Torah, Hashem required two criteria to be met by the B'nei Yisroel: 1) That there should be "Shalom" – peace amongst them and 2) "Achdut" – unity between them. As it says in Yitro 19:2, "Vayichan sham Yisroel neged hahar" – Israel encamped by the mountain in a state of total unity, as if they were one single person. The Mechilta explains that "Vayichan" is in singular form so as to represent the state of unity, of oneness, that B'nei Yisroel were in at the time. – "K'ish echad, b'lev echad" – they rested there like one man with one heart. In comparing this "unity" with that of the B'nei Adam at the time of their collaboration to build Bavel, one finds that their unity was misguided and against the will of Hashem. Only at Sinai, was total unity, based on Torah, achieved.

Bamidbar is the sedra that shows us this unity, and how we as a nation can identify with it. How does taking a census show us this unity? Typically, one counts something that is precious to him, and we can interpret that Hashem is doing just that. We learn that Hashem will count the B'nei Yisroel 10 times in total, 9 so far and once more when Moshiach comes. Throughout the generations, we the Jewish People, wherever we may have been scattered, have drawn strength from being counted as we remember that Hashem hinted to Moshe in Bamidbar that we are to be counted so that we should never be nullified.

We all know that Hashem, in his infinite wisdom, does not need to physically count us in order to ascertain our physical numbers!? So we must learn from this that through this census, the B'nei Yisroel became equals, each Jew worthy of one count. In any faction of people, some may be stronger than others, some are kinder, some wealthier, some cleverer and vice versa. They will all have differing strengths and weaknesses. But through this census, each and every Jew was counted as one Neshama before Hashem. In our essence, our Neshama, we are equal in the eyes of Hashem – one nation, united by a common denominator. Collectively, each and every Neshama made up the entire congregation of B'nei Yisroel. Unity.

The opening words of the sedra, "Vayedaber Hashem el Moshe b'midbar Sinai." – "And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert..." pose a question: We know that the B'nei Yisroel were in the wilderness, so why remind us here? There is a further clue in the answer to this as to why Bamidbar is a sedra to be read before Shavuot. The Gemara Ta'anit (9a) explains that as we know, the desert is a barren, arid land where very little grows, a desolate place with no water, food or protection. What a strange place to give the Torah? On the contrary, the experience of being in the desert is what enabled B'nei Yisroel to understand and comprehend the true relationship between man and G-d.

In the desert they would survive on the Mon (by virtue of Moshe) they would be miraculously protected by the pillar of clouds, which cleansed and adjusted their clothing to size (by virtue of Aharon), and would have water by virtue of Miriam. The moral lesson is that one must study Torah and submit themselves to rely entirely on Hashem, only then will He provide all that is necessary materially and spiritually.

The Midrash Rabba commentary says that "Our attitude towards learning Torah is the most important thing. One who doesn't allow themselves the freedom of the desert is unable to absorb the wisdom of the Torah properly." The desert in its barren and open state, sets us free from physical restraints, calling on the B'nei Yisroel to submit to their faith and trust in Hashem – once this elevated state has been achieved, only then can we be fit to receive the Torah at Sinai. Indeed this is amplified by the requirement of the Levi'im to erect the Mishcan as soon as they arrived at a new place in the desert. First and foremost, the priority is involvement and worship of Hashem – even in the "midbar" there is no boundary for "kedusha."