

O H R N E T

SHABBAT PARSHAT BAMIDBAR · FOR THE WEEK ENDING 29 IYAR 5760 · JUNE 3, 2000 · VOL. 7 NO. 35

PARSHA INSIGHTS

THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY

"In the desert..." (1:1)

One of the most chilling photographs at Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Center in Jerusalem is that of a well-to-do Dutch family being escorted to a train to take them to their final destination. They have no idea where they are going. They take with them everything they can including the family dog. There is an air of quiet desperation on their faces.

I often wonder how I would have reacted in their place. How would I have stood up to standing in a cattle train for 16 hours surrounded by the screaming of small children and the stench of an overflowing pail to accommodate the sanitary needs of over fifty people? How would I have reacted standing naked in a line on my way to the showers? I wonder.

How was it that seemingly ordinary people were able to show such extraordinary courage and bravery in the face of events which make a nightmare pale?

Our Sages teach us that the Torah was given in Fire, in Water, and in the Desert.

What does this mean?

It was through Abraham that we received the Torah in Fire. Abraham went through the fiery furnace of Ur Kasdim rather than deny G-d. He is the father of the Jewish People, our progenitor. We carry his spiritual genes.

At the Reed Sea, the Jewish People as a nation passed an ordeal by water. The Egyptians army was poised to drive them into the sea. At G-d's command the entire nation jumped into the water...and the sea parted.

And if you'll say that this was merely a moment of brava-do, then look at a third event that sealed the capacity of the Jewish People for self-sacrifice: They followed Moshe into the unsown vastness of the wilderness, without food, without water, with nothing more than the promise of miracle food from Above. Their only companions were snakes and scorpions.

It was these three ordeals — fire, water and the desert — that anchored in the spiritual genes of the Jewish People the capacity for self-sacrifice. To this day, it is this legacy which has empowered ordinary people to behave extra-ordinarily, to reach up and proclaim their faith in the face of Hell.

Sources:

Rabbi Meir Shapiro from Lublin
in *Mayana shel Torah*

PARSHA OVERVIEW

The Book of Bamidbar — "In the desert" — begins with G-d commanding Moshe to take a census of all men over age twenty — old enough for service. The count reveals just over 600,000. The *levi'im* are counted separately later, because their service will be unique. They will be responsible for transporting the *Mishkan* and its furnishings and putting them together when the nation encamps. The Tribes of Israel, each with its banner, are arranged around the *Mishkan* in four sections: East, south, west and north. Since the tribe of Levi is singled out, the tribe of Yosef is split into two tribes, Ephraim and Menashe, so there will be four groups of three. When the nation travels, they march in a formation similar to the way they camp. A formal transfer is made

between the firstborn and the *levi'im*, whereby the *levi'im* take over the role the firstborn would have had serving in the *Mishkan* if not for the sin of the golden calf. The transfer is made using all the 22,000 surveyed *levi'im* from one month old and up. Only *levi'im* between 30 and 50 will work in the *Mishkan*. The remaining firstborn sons are redeemed with silver, similar to the way we redeem our firstborn today. The sons of Levi are divided in three main families, Gershon, Kehat and Merari (besides the *kohanim* — the special division from Kehat's family). The family of Kehat carried the menorah, the table, the altar and the holy ark. Because of their utmost sanctity, the ark and the altar are covered only by Aharon and his sons, before the *levi'im* prepare them for travel.

Machar Chodesh

This Haftara has been selected to be read on the Shabbat whose morrow is *Rosh Chodesh*. It begins with the words “Tomorrow is the *Chodesh*” which Yonatan, the son of King Saul, said to David at the outset of his plan. King Saul had demonstrated hostility towards David, whom he viewed as a competitor for his throne; was it safe for David to remain in the royal entourage? Out of his great love for David, Yonatan assumed responsibility

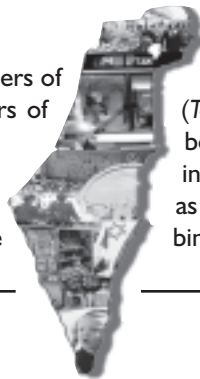
for alarming David if the tense situation ever reached a danger point.

To avoid the king’s ubiquitous spies, Yonatan devised a secret method to inform David of King Saul’s reaction to David’s absence from the *Rosh Chodesh* feast. The Haftara ends with David’s flight from Saul’s anger, and the covenant David and Yonatan reiterate which will forever bind them and their posterity. David and Yonatan’s mutual affection is cited by our Sages as the model of selfless love between two people.

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

GOFNIT



In this ancient city there were 80 sets of twin brothers of kohanite families married to 80 sets of twin sisters of kohanite families.

Maharsha (*Mesechta Berachot 44a*) suggests that the name of this community was derived from the word *gefen* (grapevine), as in the verse: “Your wife

shall be like a *gefen poriah*, a fruitful grapevine.” (*Tehillim 128:3*) The union of two partners who are both of kohanite families is compared to the blending of grapes with grapes (*Mesechta Pesachim 49a*), as opposed to a less dignified union which is like combining grapes with thorns.

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I DIDN'T KNOW THAT!

When Yaakov blessed his sons at the end of his life, he hinted that the tribes of Reuven, Yehuda, Yosef and Dan would lead the four flag-camps. Anyone whom Yaakov addressed in the second person — “you” — became the head of a flag-camp. Reuven: “You are my firstborn”; Yehuda: “You, will your brothers acknowledge”; Yosef: “From the G-d of your father”; Dan: “For your salvation I long.”

• *Ba'al Haturim 2:2*

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NEW LIGHT ON AN OLD STORY

One of the best known Talmudic stories is that of Rabbi Akiva and his heroic wife, Rachel. The daughter of the fabulously wealthy Kalba Savua, Rachel recognized the extraordinary potential of the ignorant shepherd who worked for her father and agreed to marry him if he would go study in the yeshiva. The outraged father removed her from his home and made a vow forbidding her to benefit from his resources. When Rabbi Akiva returned 24 years later at the head of 24,000 disciples, his identity was unknown to his father-in-law who came to see this famous scholar in the hope that he could nullify the vow he now regretted having made.

“If you had known that your daughter’s ignorant husband would be a great scholar, would you have made that vow?” he asked in the manner of every authority seeking to find an opening for the vow-maker to express regret. “If he would know even one chapter, or even one law, I would not have made such a vow,” replied Kalba Savua. When Rabbi Akiva then revealed his identity and pronounced the vow null and void, his overjoyed father-in-law kissed his feet and presented him with half his wealth.

There are two interesting observations made by Tosefot regarding this touching story. Rabbi Akiva’s future wife, says the *gemara*, appreciated him as being “modest and upright.” This same Rabbi Akiva elsewhere (*Mesechta Pesachim 49b*) describes in graphic terms the hatred he had harbored for Torah scholars while he was still an ignorant shepherd. This hardly seems to fit the description of being an “upright” Jew! Tosefot explains that, in his ignorance, Rabbi Akiva was extremely critical of what he mistakenly presumed to be the haughtiness of learned men towards their ignorant coreligionists, and he reciprocated the hatred which he presumed they harbored towards ignorant men like himself.

In regard to the nullification of Kalba Savua’s vow, the challenge is raised from the *mishna* (*Mesechta Nedarim 64a*). The *mishna* relates to the case of one who vows not to derive any benefit from a certain person, and that person eventually becomes a Torah scholar whom he needs; in such a case, states the *mishna*, there can be no nullification based on the regret that had he known he would become a scholar, he would not have made that vow. If a situation which did not exist at the time of the vow and which could not be anticipated is not a solid opening for regret, why then did Rabbi Akiva employ it? The answer, says Tosefot, is that the vow was made when he was on the way to yeshiva, and it certainly can be

anticipated that one who goes to yeshiva will become a great scholar.

• *Ketubot 62b*

SEEING FORTUNE IN MISFORTUNE

“Rabbi, please support me,” cried the young lady to Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai as he rode out of Jerusalem followed by his disciples.

The poor girl had been subsisting on picking bits of oats from among the droppings of the animals of Arab nomads. When the Sage asked her who she was, she revealed that her father was the fabulously wealthy Nakdimon ben Gurion, and that Rabbi Yochanan had signed as a witness on her *ketubah* when she got married. That *ketubah*, the Sage informed his disciples, included a dowry of a million golden dinars from her father besides what was given by her father-in-law.

When Rabbi Yochanan asked her what had happened to all of her father’s wealth she replied that it all had been lost because he had been negligent in his charity responsibilities. This brought about the loss of not only his money but that of her father-in-law as well.

Upon hearing this Rabbi Yochanan exclaimed:

“How fortunate are you, O Israel. When you act according to the will of Hashem no nation or culture can dominate you. But when you do not act in accordance with the will of Hashem you are delivered into the hands of a lowly people (so-called because they are nomads living in the desert — Rashi), and not only a lowly people but into dependence on the animals of a lowly people.”

How could Rabbi Yochanan see in this tragic scene a cause for commenting on the good fortune of Israel?

Each nation, explains Maharsha, has its own “*mazal*” and angel in heaven determining its fortune. The fate of the Jewish people, on the other hand, is determined directly by Hashem alone. When they act as Hashem wishes, they are therefore above all the nations whose fortunes are limited to the power of the heavenly forces designated for them. This is so dramatically expressed in Hashem’s placing Avraham above all the stars and asking him to look down upon them, and promising him that the limitations of natural forces would be removed in order for him to have children. But when we fail to act as Hashem wishes, He removes His Presence from us and we fall to a state below that of the other nations whose “*mazal*” sustains them.

An awareness of this special relationship is what made Rabbi Yochanan exclaim that we are indeed fortunate!

• *Ketubot 66b*

PARSHA Q&A?

1. Why were the Jewish People counted so frequently?
2. What documents did the people bring when they were counted?
3. What determined the color of the tribal flags?
4. What is the difference between an "ot" and a "degel"?
5. How do we see that the Jews in the time of Moshe observed "techum Shabbat" — the prohibition against traveling more than 2000 amot on Shabbat?
6. What was the signal for the camp to travel?
7. What was the sum total of the counting of the 12 tribes?
8. Why are Aharon's sons called "sons of Aharon and Moshe?"
9. Who was Nadav's oldest son?
10. Which two people from the Book of Esther does Rashi mention in this week's Parsha?
11. Why did the *levi'im* receive *ma'aser rishon*?
12. Which groups of people were counted from the age of one month?
13. Name the first descendant of Levi in history to be counted as an infant.
14. Who assisted Moshe in counting the *levi'im*?
15. Why did so many people from the tribe of Reuven support Korach in his campaign against Moshe?
16. Why did so many people from the tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar, and Zevulun become great Torah scholars?
17. In verse 3:39 the Torah states that the total number of *levi'im* was 22,000. The actual number was 22,300. Why does the Torah seem to ignore 300 *levi'im*?
18. The firstborn males of the Jewish People were redeemed for five *shekalim*. Why five *shekalim*?
19. During what age-span is a man considered at his full strength?
20. As the camp was readying itself for travel, who was in charge of covering the vessels of the *Mishkan* in preparation for transport?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 1:1 - They are very dear to Hashem.
2. 1:18 - They brought birth records proving their tribal lineage.
3. 2:2 - Each tribe's flag was the color of that tribe's stone in the breastplate of the *kohen gadol*.
4. 2:2 - An "ot" is a flag, i.e., a colored cloth that hangs from a flagpole. A *degel* is a flagpole.
5. 2:2 - Hashem commanded them to camp no more than 2000 amot from the *Ohel Mo'ed*. Had they camped farther, it would have been forbidden for them to go to the *Ohel Mo'ed* on Shabbat.
6. 2:9 - The cloud over the *Ohel Mo'ed* departed and the *kohanim* sounded the trumpets.
7. 2:32 - 603,550.
8. 3:1 - Since Moshe taught them Torah, it's as if he gave birth to them.
9. 3:4 - Nadav had no children.
10. 3:7 - Bigtan and Teresh.
11. 3:8 - Since the *levi'im* served in the *Mishkan* in place of everyone else, they received tithes as "payment."
12. 3:15, 40 - The *levi'im*, and the firstborn of *B'nei Yisrael*.
13. 3:15 - Levi's daughter Yocheved was born while the Jewish People were entering Egypt. She is counted as one of the 70 people who entered Egypt.
14. 3:16 - Hashem
15. 3:29 - The tribe of Reuven was encamped near Korach, and were therefore influenced for the worse. This teaches that one should avoid living near the wicked.
16. 3:38 - The tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar, and Zevulun were encamped near Moshe, and were therefore influenced for the good. This teaches that one should seek to live near the righteous
17. 3:39 - Each *levi* served to redeem a firstborn of the Jewish People. Since 300 *levi'im* were themselves first born, they themselves needed to be redeemed, and could therefore not redeem others.
18. 3:46 - To atone for the sale of Yosef, Rachel's firstborn, who was sold by his brothers for five *shekalim* (20 pieces of silver.)
19. 4:2 - Between the ages of 30 and 50.
20. 4:5 - The *kohanim*.

KASHA! (KASHA MEANS "QUESTION")

Question: The Tribe of Levi was the smallest tribe? Why?

Answer: Concerning the period of enslavement of the Jewish People in Egypt, the Torah states, "as they afflicted them, so

they multiplied" (*Shemot 1:12*). The Jewish People reproduced miraculously, in direct proportion to the degree in which they were afflicted. Since the Tribe of Levi was not enslaved in Egypt, they reproduced in natural proportions.

• Ramban

Do you have a KASHA? Write to kasha@ohr.org.il with your questions on any Parsha!

COURAGE & COWARDICE

From: Smile
<smile1940@aol.com>

Dear Rabbi,
In the Torah, where can I find a definition of courage?

Dear Smile,

The best place to go to get an answer to this question is the Mishna in Pirkei Avot: Ben Zoma said: "Who is a strong person? Someone who subdues his evil inclination, as we find expressed in the verse: 'Someone who doesn't lose his temper is better than a strong man, and someone who controls his spirit is better than someone who conquers a city.'"

The Mishna is describing a trait that applies only to people: Courage. Animals exhibit physical strength. But courage, spiritual strength, only applies to people.

Physical talent can be developed, but the potential is basically inborn. Either you have the potential to play professional basketball or you don't. The basic talent must be there.

But when it comes to spiritual strength, everyone has the same opportunity to excel. Wherever you stand spiritually, there is a challenge. Though some people, due to place of birth, education, etc., would seem to have it easier, in actuality each person has his own tests which are perfect for him.

An amazing story is recorded about

Rabbi Chaim Vital (16th century) and the Arizal (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria). The Arizal was the great teacher of Kabbala in modern times. Rabbi Chaim Vital was his primary student, who recorded almost all of the Arizal's teachings. Once Rabbi Vital asked the Arizal the following question: "If the Talmudic Sages with all their greatness and levels of holiness weren't able to bring the *mashiach* (messianic era), then how are we going to be able to?"

The Arizal's answer is even more understandable today that it was then. He answered: "In the time before the *mashiach* it will be so challenging to correctly observe *mitzvot* that the *mitzvot* done in those times will have more power than they did in the earlier times. Even though those *mitzvot* may not be done as completely, but because they will be so difficult they will have the power to bring the *mashiach*."

Sources:

- Tractate Avot 4:1

WHOOOPS!

From: Anonymous
<Anonymous@yabbadabbadoo.co.uk>

Dear Rabbi,
What is the probability of something going wrong during circumcision?

Dear Anonymous,

I spoke with the head doctor of the emergency department at Israel's Ma'ayanei Hayashuah Medical Center about your question. He said that

complications are very rare. The most common problem is excessive bleeding, which needs sutures. He classified this as rare. Infection, he said is very, very rare, and he has never seen a case.

The danger of the *mohel* (certified ritual circumcisor) cutting too much, which is what most people are worried about, is basically unheard of. Nowadays the *mohel* uses a protective shield that makes this not only unlikely but impossible.

The Jewish people have been circumcising their young for around 3750 years. So far so good.

MAN FROM GROUND

From: Keenan
<Keenan5@prodigy.net>

Dear Rabbi,
Why did G-d fashion man out of the ground?

Dear Keenan,

Because plastic hadn't been invented yet. (Just kidding.)

There are four layers of existence: Inanimate objects, plants, animals, and humans. Each level takes the level of life which is below it and elevates it. A plant derives its nutrition from the ground, elevating the ground and incorporating it into a higher level of existence. The same is true of all the levels. One reason we were created from the ground is to remind us that we can constantly strive to elevate every aspect of existence, even the lowly dirt.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Comments, quibbles and reactions concerning previous "Ohrnet" features

Re: WHO IS A BAGEL (Ohrnet Behar):

Regarding your definition of a bagel: I've been told that to "sleep a bagel" in slang means to sleep a full 12 hours; the shape the hour hand of the clock makes during this time would look like a bagel.

- Rachail Deitsch <rdeitsch@ttec.com>

Another view of the bagel: To complement the optimist's and the pessimist's view of the ubiquitous bagel (the most beneficial invention ever invented), permit me to express the following: *As you wander through life, Let this be your goal, Keep your eye on the bagel, And not on the hole.*

- Nathan Gold, Delray Beach, Florida <natgold@email.msn.com>

A person who fixes cars is called a mechanic. In Hebrew, a person who educates is called a mechanich. In the following story, an auto mechanic unwittingly educates one of our readers about judging favorably. So, let's call him in this story...

THE MECHANICH-MECHANIC

I had an appointment to have my car serviced but had to cancel the appointment. Later that day my car broke down and required expensive work.

I later thought about the number of times in the past that I joined in with persecuting auto mechanics for cheating and being untrustworthy. I realized that if I had taken my car in for the routine service, I would have incorrectly blamed it on the mechanic when it later broke down. I never would have believed that the car broke down on its own; I would have suspected foul play.

• An Ohrnet reader in England

YIDDLE RIDDLE

In the song at the end of the Pesach Seder we describe the significance of the numbers from one to 13 as they relate to Jewish life and thought: "Three are the fathers, Four are the Mothers... 12 are the Tribes of Israel..." What about the next 13 numbers? And after those? What significance do they have in Jewish tradition?

This week, we challenge you to answer:

"WHO KNOWS 16?" Write to info@ohr.org.il

Last time we asked: Who knows 15? Here are some reader responses:

Fifteen steps leading up to the Temple.

• David Goodman <goodman@szmc.org.il>

The 15 Psalms the Levites sang on the 15 stairs in the Temple.

• Jechezkel Frank, Johannesburg <j.b.frank@attglobal.net>

Rosh Hashana for fruit trees is 15th Shevat (known as Tu B'shevat)

• Hilary Hurwitz <hila@jerusalem.muni.il>

Fifteen words in the *bircat kohanim*, the priestly blessings.

• Laya E Witty, Brighton MA <layawitty@juno.com>

The 15 sections of the Pesach Seder, 15 morning blessings.

• Shlomo Dovid Freedman, Baltimore
<steven_freedman@yahoo.com>

15 cubits that the flood waters covered the mountain tops.

• Mike Turniansky
<turnip@bcpl.net>

15 is the numerical value of G-d's name (*yud* and *hey*).

• Sidney Stern, Highland Park, NJ
<Sid.Stern@ProcessPlants.BOC.com>

15 steps in the song "*dayenu*."

• Rebecca Feiner
<rebeccafeiner@hotmail.com>

Fifteen generations from Abraham to King Solomon; then 15 generations from Solomon until the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash* (Holy Temple).

• Randall Rowlett MD
<Psyetc@compuserve.com>

Fifteen categories of women exempt their rivals from *yibum* and *chalitzah*.

• Jacob Florans <jflorans@trebnet.com>

* * *

The Haggadah only goes up to 13 because the next number, 14, is "*dalet yud*" — which in Hebrew means "enough!"

• Efraim Darom
<darom@mail.biu.ac.il>

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

RAMBAN

Introduction to Bamidbar
1:3 The Draft Age
1:45 The Reason for Counting
2:2 The Organization of the Camp
3:14 The *Levi'im*

4:16 The Role of Elazar ben Aharon

IBN EZRA

1:19 Organization of the Camp
SFORNO
Introduction to Bamidbar