

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT BAMIDBAR

The Census of the Leviim

By Rav Yonatan Grossman

This week we begin to read the Book of Bemidbar. We often tend to overlook the natural division of its parshiyot into two units: from Parashat Bamidbar until Parashat Shelach (dealing with the incident of the spies), and from the aftermath of that incident onwards. Up until the sin of the spies, the Jewish people stand on the threshold of entering the Land; consequently, the beginning of the book deals almost exclusively with the preparations for this journey and a description of it. However, as a result of the sin of the spies, the Jewish people are condemned to wander for forty years, a journey which receives scanty description but nevertheless looms large in our consciousness.

Thus, when we begin to read the book, we must keep in mind that at this point the Children of Israel are preparing to conquer the land. Against this background, the question arises as to why God commands (in the opening section of Bamidbar) that the people of Israel be counted:

"God spoke to Moshe at the wilderness of Sinai in the Tent of Meeting on the first day of the second month in the second year after the exodus from Egypt saying: Count the entire congregation of Israel according to their clans and families, each male according to their number."

This question bothered Rashi, who explained:

"Because of God's love for the people He counts them constantly. When they left Egypt He counted them; when some perished after the incident of the Golden Calf, He counted them to ascertain how many remained. When He was about to cause His presence to dwell among them He counted them: the Tabernacle was erected on the first of Nisan, and on the first of Iyar He counted them."

Rashi's comments are themselves an expression of his great love for his people, but the straightforward reading of the text seems more in line with the explanation of the Rashbam. He explains that the census described here was in preparation for the war of conquest of the land that was to follow. The Jewish people stood poised to conquer the land. Before engaging in battle, one must know the number of available soldiers and must prepare accordingly. (Let us again emphasize that the sin of the spies, which resulted in a delay of forty years, had not yet transpired.)

The most telling allusion to the purpose of the census is the age at which the people are to be counted: "from the age of twenty and above, all those in Israel WHO GO OUT TO BATTLE, shall be counted by you and Aharon." This expression – "from the age of twenty and above, all those who go out to battle" – recurs throughout the count and is the summary statement for the census of each tribe. Thus, it is essentially a conscription of fighting men that constitutes the major reason for this census.

In light of this, if we find a certain group that is not counted among the others, we must conclude that it is not supposed to enter battle along with the rest of the tribes. This is the case at the end of the census, when God says: "The tribe of Levi are not to be counted among the Children of Israel" (1:48).

Why is the tribe of Levi excluded from the census and why does it not participate in the battle to conquer the land? The verses that follow attempt to answer this question, and what seems to be a chiastic arrangement can be presented thus:

1. You shall appoint the Leviim over the TABERNACLE OF THE TESTIMONY and all of its vessels... and they shall serve in it...

2. AND SHALL ENCAMP AROUND THE TABERNACLE.

3. When the Tabernacle is to journey, the Leviim shall disassemble it, and when the Tabernacle camps, they shall erect it,

4. And the stranger who draws near shall die.

3a. The Children of Israel shall encamp according to their positions and ensigns.

2a. The Leviim shall encamp AROUND THE TABERNACLE OF THE TESTIMONY and there shall not be anger on the congregation of Israel.

1a. The Leviim shall guard the TABERNACLE OF THE TESTIMONY.

The framework of the command, which is an explanation of why the tribe of Levi is not to be enumerated among the people (1 – 1a), stresses the role which is placed upon them – to serve in the Tabernacle and to guard it. Immediately thereafter, the verses stress that they are to camp around the Tabernacle (2 – 2a). They are not joined with any of the other tribes that camp along the sides of the Tabernacle; rather, they are to camp in the center, in proximity to the Tabernacle itself. This is emphasized by the contrast that the verses present (3 – 3a) between the camp of the Leviim - which is in fact the camp of the Tabernacle, which they are to disassemble and assemble - and the camp of the Israelites, which is "according to their positions and ensigns." The central hinge (4), around which everything else revolves, speaks in particular of the Israelites and does not mention the Leviim – "the stranger that draws near shall die." It stands to reason that the designation of the Leviim for the role of assembling and disassembling the Tabernacle solved the projected problem of "corpse impurity"

associated with warfare, which would have rendered many Israelites unfit for coming into contact with the Tabernacle.

Let us now try to focus more precisely on the reason for the Leviim's exemption from participating in the war of conquest. It seems that the text presents us with a division of labor: most of the people are to go out to war, while one of the tribes is to be exclusively involved with another type of guard-duty, namely that of the Tabernacle. This tribe is to avoid any possible contact with tum'a (impurity) and it would certainly be inappropriate for it to go out to war, where contact with death is unavoidable.

This division of labor is alluded to in a curious expression which occurs further on when the tribe of Levi is enumerated. At the conclusion of our parasha and the beginning of the next, each of the clans of Levi (Gershon, Kehat and Merari) is counted separately and assigned a different task associated with the conveyance of the Tabernacle. The recurring phrase there is: "from the age of thirty until the age of fifty, all those who enter THE RANKS ('la-tzava') to do labor in the Tabernacle" (4:3, 4:23, 4:30). At first glance, this expression seems out of place. What army, exactly, is being referred to? What battle would take place within the precincts of the Tabernacle? Rather, this phrase seeks to connect the two "armies" spoken of in our parasha, the two "conscripted" and groups of "soldiers." At the outset of the parasha we read about all those who "enter the ranks in Israel" and here we read again about all the Leviim who enter the "ranks." The task of the first army is to conquer the land, and the task of the second army is to guard the Tabernacle and take care of it.

The Rambam describes this parallel in his conclusion to the laws of Shemitta and Yovel (13:12):

"Why did the tribe of Levi not merit a portion in the land of Israel and in the spoils of its conquest with the other tribes? Because they were separated to serve God and to teach His upright ways and righteous laws to the multitudes. As the verse states: 'They shall teach your laws to Jacob and your statutes to Israel.' Therefore they are separated from the ways of the world. They do not wage war like the rest of the tribes nor do they acquire a portion in the land or provide for their own sustenance. Rather they are the army of God, as the verse states: 'God will bless His army.' God provides for them, as it states, 'I am your portion and inheritance.'"

The Rambam calls the tribe of Levi the "army of God" immediately after stating that "they do not wage war like the rest of the tribes." It seems to me that the Rambam as well is drawing a parallel between the two parts of the people – the soldiers who go out to war, and the soldiers dedicated to serving God and teaching His ways.

However, it is not enough to describe this distinction between the Leviim and the rest of the people, because in our parasha we find two separate countings of the Leviim. One we have already mentioned: the counting of the Levitical clans which takes place at the end of the parasha, and includes all of those between the ages of thirty and fifty. The first of the two, though, in which the tribe of Levi is counted by itself, occurs after the completion of the count of the entire people.

"God spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai saying: Count the children of Levi according to their clans and families, all of the males above the age of one month shall be counted." (3:14-15)

In this count, the entire tribe was enumerated, beginning from those aged one month and above. Obviously, this count was not meant to determine the number of able-bodied servants of the Tabernacle, since a one-month-old cannot serve. The purpose of this count is spelled out in the text:

"God spoke to Moshe saying: I have taken all of the Leviim from among the Children of Israel; in place of all of the first-born among the people of Israel, the Leviim shall be Mine. For all of the first-born belong to Me; on the day that I smote the first-born of the land of Egypt I sanctified the first-born among Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine, I am God." (3:11-13)

This count is not at all connected with the service of the Leviim in the Tabernacle, but rather has to do with the first-born of the Israelites. After this count of the tribe of Levi, we read of the census of the first-born Israelites above the age of one month (3:40-43), and the text speaks of the exchange of the first-born for the Leviim. The first-born Israelites who did not have a corresponding Levi had to redeem themselves with five shekels of silver. This linkage has nothing to do with the role of the Leviim in the Tabernacle, but rather has to do with the sin of the Golden Calf. There, after the transgression and the breaking of the Tablets, we read Moshe's impassioned cry:

"Moshe stood at the gate of the encampment and said: 'Whoever is for the sake of God, let him come to me!' The whole tribe of Levi gathered to him. Moshe said to them: 'Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: Let each man gird his sword upon his thigh. Pass throughout the camp and slay all of those who worshipped the calf, even one's fellow, friend or relative.' The children of Levi did as Moshe had commanded, and about three thousand people perished on that day. Moshe said: 'Fill your hands this day for the sake of God, for each one of you has seized hold of his fellow, so that a blessing might be extended to you this day.'"

The expression which occurs in Moshe's last sentence – "Fill your hands this day for the sake of God" – is similar to all other uses of this term in the Torah. It implies the preparation of a particular group for the execution of a particular religious function. Thus, we find the term employed at the dedication of the Tabernacle when the Kohanim were invested with their holy tasks. Here as well at the incident of the Golden Calf, the Leviim are chosen for a specific religious function. In our parasha we read of the actualization of the promise that was extended to the Leviim in response to their loyalty. Over and over again the text of our parasha stresses: "and the Leviim shall be Mine..." (3:12-13). This phrase echoes Moshe's cry, "Whoever is for the sake of God, let him come to me!" It connects the election of the Leviim with their conduct at the sin of the Golden Calf, where they demonstrated the special tribal qualities that rendered them suited to serving in the Tabernacle.

Thus, we have two separate countings of the Leviim. The first one, from the age of one month and above, highlights their replacement of the first-born of Israel (who had been chosen initially as a result of their preservation during the slaying of the first-born in Egypt). After the first-born succumbed to the worship of the Golden Calf, they forfeited their unique position, which was subsequently transferred to the Leviim. The other counting of the Leviim, from the age of thirty to the age of fifty, focuses on the service of the Tabernacle.

These two separate positions of the Leviim are tied to a tension of sorts which seems to permeate the parasha. There is a dual perspective associated with the Leviim – one from the point of view of the Kohanim, and the other from the point of view of the Israelites. The following passage highlights this duality:

"God spoke to Moshe saying:

Draw the tribe of Levi near, and stand them near Aharon the Kohen so that they will serve him.

They shall observe his charge

And the charge of the entire congregation before the Tabernacle

To perform the service of the Tabernacle.

They shall guard all of the vessels of the Tabernacle

And shall keep the charge of the people of Israel

To perform the service of the Tabernacle." (3:5-10)

This passage is structured as two stanzas. The refrain "to perform the service of the Tabernacle" ends each one of the stanzas. The focus of the two stanzas, however, is decidedly different. The first one begins with the expression "They shall keep (Veshamru) his charge (Aharon)," while the second says that, "They shall guard (Veshamru) all of the vessels of the Tabernacle." It seems that both of these stanzas are really reflecting on a dual perspective concerning the service of the Leviim in the Tabernacle, which itself is an expression of the two elections associated with this tribe. On the fundamental level, the tribe of Levi is responsible for the ongoing functioning of the Tabernacle (and here their election is the result of the unique status given to them by God). Aharon and his sons are to function as the Kohanim and the remainder of the tribe of Levi is to act as his assistants, as the verse states: "Stand them before Aharon the Kohen so that they might serve him." This fact is emphasized in the first stanza, where the text speaks of the charge of Aharon that the Leviim must observe.

In addition, however, the Leviim have been chosen by virtue of their conduct at the sin of the Golden Calf. In this connection, the Leviim take the place of the first-born of Israel, who were initially singled out as a result of the slaying of the first-born in Egypt. According to this perspective, the Leviim serve in the Tabernacle not as the servants of Aharon, but rather as a reward for their meritorious conduct after the sin of

the Golden Calf. This aspect is stressed in the second stanza, where the guarding is not the charge of Aharon but rather of "all of the vessels of the tabernacle." Later on, the text is even more emphatic about this point:

"I have given over the Leviim to Aharon and his sons from among the children of Israel, TO PERFORM THE SERVICE OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL IN THE TABERNACLE and to atone for them. There shall not be a plague on the children of Israel for having come too close to the holy area." (8:19)

The text designates the role of the Leviim as being the performance of the service of Israel in the Tabernacle. Here, the Leviim are not only the servants of Aharon but rather performing their own service as the representatives of the people of Israel.

This dual perspective finds further expression later in Sefer Bamidbar, when the Leviim are made fit for their service. There, we read of a dual laying on of the hands by two different groups:

"You shall bring the Leviim before the Tabernacle and gather the entire congregation of Israel. Bring the Leviim before God and the Children of Israel shall place their hands upon them. Aharon shall wave the Leviim as an offering before God on behalf of the people of Israel and they shall perform God's service." (8:9-11)

At the beginning of the dedication process, the people of Israel are to place their hands on the Leviim and Aharon is to wave them. Here, the Kohanim and the Leviim are both designated as the representatives of the people of Israel to perform the service in the Tabernacle. Just as the people of Israel participated to a limited degree in the dedication of the Tabernacle (especially the eighth day of the dedication), so too they lay their hands on the Leviim and designate them as representatives. Aharon waves them as an expression of his authority over them. However, these acts do not conclude the process of dedicating the Leviim to the divine service. God gives Moshe an additional command:

"Stand the Leviim before Aharon and his children and wave them before God. Separate the Leviim from among the people of Israel to be Mine. Afterwards, the Leviim will come to perform the service of the Tabernacle and you shall purify them and wave them. For they are given over to Me from among the Children of Israel; in place of all of the first-born from among the people of Israel I have taken them as My own. For all of the first-born in Israel, both man and beast, are Mine; on the day that I smote the first-born of Egypt I sanctified them to be Mine. I have taken the Leviim in the place of all of the first-born of Israel." (8:13-18)

Here, MOSHE must wave the Leviim. In addition to the laying of the hands by the people of Israel and the waving by Aharon, it is necessary that Moshe as well prepare them for service. Here, we again notice the recurring phrase, "The Leviim shall be Mine," which brings to mind Moshe's impassioned cry at the sin of the Golden Calf, "Whoever is for the sake of God, let him come to me!" Here, God says explicitly that

the Leviim are a replacement for the first-born of Israel and therefore the verse repeats: "You shall separate the Leviim from among the people of Israel... and they shall be given to Me from among the people of Israel." In this sense, the Leviim receive their charge not from the People of Israel or from the Kohanim, but rather from God as just rewards for their loyalty and dedication to Him at the sin of the Golden Calf.

(Translated by Michael Hattin)

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