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BAMIDBAR

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LA VOIE
A SUIVRE

PREPARING FOR SHAVUOT (BY RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA)

In the order of the Torah's parshiot, we always read Parsha Bamidbar before Shavuot (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 428:4). We need to understand why the Sages have instituted this order in the reading, as well as what the connection is between Parsha Bamidbar and Shavuot.

I would like to explain this according to the statement of the Sages on the verse, "Hashem spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai" (Bamidbar 1:1). The Midrash states, "Our Sages have inferred from this that the Torah was given to the accompaniment of three things: Fire, water, and desert" (Bamidbar Rabba 1:7). It may be that by this teaching, the Sages wanted to show man that he can only safeguard his learning and resist the evil inclination, which seeks to control him every day, by means of the Torah which possesses these three characteristics. As our Sages have said, "I created the evil inclination, but I created the Torah as its antidote" (Kiddushin 30b). In other words: If you study Torah, you will not be delivered into its hands; otherwise you will be.

The Sages have also taught that David said, "Do not let my feet go where they want to, but towards Your Torah all day long in the Beit HaMidrash" (Midrash Tehillim 119), for the evil inclination does not enter the Beit HaMidrash. It accompanies man wherever he goes, but when it comes to the Beit HaMidrash, it has no right to enter.

Since the evil inclination is made of fire, as it is written: "He makes...the flaming fire His attendants" (Tehillim 104:4), a person can only resist it by the power of Torah, which is compared to fire: "My word is like fire, the word of Hashem" (Jeremiah 23:29). The evil inclination is like a small fire that anything can extinguish, and the Torah is a blazing fire that never goes out, as it is written: "Its flashes are flashes of fire, the flame of G-d. Many waters cannot extinguish the love" (Shir HaShirim 8:6-7). What does a person do when he has a small fire that he is afraid will spread, but lacks water to extinguish it? He throws it into a blazing fire, where it will be consumed. Thus the fire of the evil inclination is consumed by the fire of the Torah.

In order for a person not to grow proud on account of the fire of the Torah, he must humble himself and resemble water. Just as water always flows from a higher to a lower place, a talmid chacham must conduct himself with humility. The Torah only endures with the humble who are like water, who descend towards a lower place (Taanith 7a). From the fact that they conduct themselves with humility, the evil inclination cannot instill pride in them. When we attain humility, this leads to annulling oneself in the service of Hashem like a desert, as Moshe did when he separated himself from his wife because he spoke with the Shechinah at all times: "He did not deal with his own affairs, but with those of Israel" (Tanchuma 96:13).

When a person frees himself for the sake of learning Torah, and when he resembles a desert, he will never blame Hashem for anything. Thus the Sages have said that a man must say a blessing over evil just as he says a blessing over good, even if his life is taken (Berachot 54a). King David said, "All my bones will say, 'Hashem, who is like You?'" (Tehillim 35:10), which teaches us that he devoted all his bones to Hashem by doing everything that He commanded him.

They Elevated Themselves to a Very High Level

This is why the Sages instituted the reading of Parsha Bamidbar close to the festival of the giving of the Torah. It is in order to remind man that the Torah only endures in him when he makes himself into a desert for G-d's will, like a slave who annuls himself before his master and does everything that he commands.

We find other things similar to this, for the Sages instituted the reading of Parshat Parah and Parshat HaChodesh before Passover in order to remind us to prepare for the festival of Passover (Rashi, Megillah 29a). We find this mentioned in the Midrash: "Why do we read the scroll of Ruth on Shavuot, which is the giving of the Torah? In order to teach us that the Torah was only given through hardship and poverty, and Ruth – who was the daughter of the king of Moab – devoted herself to Torah and mitzvot, which is why she merited for King David to descend from her"

(Ruth Zutah 1).

The Children of Israel also merited to receive the Torah in the desert after having completely freed themselves for Hashem. They said, "Everything that Hashem has said, we will do and we will hear" (Shemot 24:7), which teaches us that they completely annulled themselves before G-d's words and wanted to do everything He commanded. In fact they elevated themselves to a very high level at that point (Shir HaShirim Rabba 1:15), and the evil inclination was removed from their hearts. The Holy One, blessed be He, feared that they would become proud, which is why He said: "Beware of ascending the mountain or touching its edge. Whoever touches the mountain will surely die. A hand shall not touch it, for he shall surely be stoned or thrown down, whether animal or man" (Shemot 19:12-13). Since they did not approach the mountain, but stood far from it, they did not become proud, and they immediately devoted themselves to Hashem.

Like an Animal

We need to understand why they were told, "animal or man." We can logically infer that if the Children of Israel, who devoted and purified themselves for three days before the giving of the Torah, were not to touch the mountain, then how much more was an animal, which is not sanctified, not to touch the mountain!

However the Holy One, blessed be He, said to the Children of Israel: If you transgress – if you approach the mountain and touch it – you will become proud; and if you become proud, even if you possess Torah, you will be like an animal. Thus our Sages said with regards to Doeg, "Where is he who enumerated all the letters of the Torah? Where is he who weighed all the light and heavy [precepts] of the Torah? Where is he who counted the towers – who counted 300 fixed laws on a tower flying in the air?" (Sanhedrin 106b). Nevertheless, because he spoke Lashon Harah, Doeg did not leave the world before having forgotten what he had learned. When he died, three angels of destruction came: One made him forget everything he had learned, another burned his soul, and a third spread his ashes among synagogues and houses of study.

CONCERNING THE PARSHA

Increasing the Glory of Heaven

It is written, “The charge of Elazar the son of Aaron the kohen is the oil of illumination, the incense spices, the daily meal-offering, and the anointing oil” (Bamidbar 4:16).

Here our Sages cite Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi as saying, “Elazar was chief commander, prince of the princes, as it says: ‘The prince of the princes of the Levites, Elazar the son of Aaron the kohen’ [Bamidbar 3:32]. See what rank he held! Yet do you think that because he was a great man, he gave to others the task of carrying the vessels which he was appointed to carry? No! He himself carried them, as it says: ‘The charge of Elazar the son of Aaron the kohen is the oil of illumination, the incense spices, the daily meal-offering, and the anointing oil’ ” (Bamidbar Rabba 4:20).

The Midrash continues by stating, “How could he carry all of this? Our Sages explained that he carried them in this manner: The oil of illumination in his right hand and the incense spices in his left, while the daily meal-offering hung from his arm. Where was the anointing oil placed? Rabbi Acha said in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, ‘A sort of small flask was suspended from his girdle, for he had a belt around his loins, like a servant before his master. This is to inform you that pride has no place with G-d’ ” (ibid.).

The great commentator Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman Zatzal describes in his famous commentary how the prince of princes, Elazar the son of Aaron the kohen, carried the sacred objects. He even counts and translates the exact weight of oil for the Menorah and the incense, for the daily meal-offering, and for the anointing oil. He writes the following:

“According to the Yerushalmi, mentioned in the commentaries of Rashi, that he [Elazar himself] carried them, it would be a heavy load! For the incense consisted of 368 maneh [about 180 kg], and Moshe our teacher would not have prepared [only] half of the required quantity, and the oil for the light for a whole year was a large amount, namely 183 log [about 63 liters], and as for the daily meal-offering, we do not know how many days’ supply he carried.”

The Ramban ends by answering the question that naturally arises, namely how Elazar the son of Aaron could carry this sanctified load by himself, a large and heavy weight.

He replies by saying, “But Elazar was very strong and powerful, as was our Patriarch Jacob, and so also was Moshe our teacher and his brother Aaron, and ‘those who wait for Hashem will renew their strength’ [Isaiah 40:31]” (Ramban on Bamidbar 4:16).

For I Honor Those Who Honor Me

Why did Elazar the son of Aaron the kohen, who was “the prince of the princes of the Levites,” personally want to carry this heavy load, since he had the opportunity to give it to the other kohanim who served before Hashem? Why was he not content with carrying just one of the vessels of the Sanctuary, which would not have been so heavy?

The Midrash briefly responds to this by saying: “This is to inform you that pride has no place with G-d.”

True, it may have been somewhat degrading for the prince of the princes among the kohanim to personally carry a load that is too heavy for one person to carry, namely 368 maneh of incense, oil

for the Menorah, and the daily meal-offering. It is obviously not fitting for a man of such stature to take this load upon his shoulder, not even any load, and especially not the one carried by Elazar the son of Aaron, the prince of the princes of the kohanim. Hence our Sages note this to Elazar’s honor, as a path taken in the service of Hashem “to inform you that pride has no place with G-d.” Eliyahu said, “When a man thinks much of the glory of Heaven and little of his own glory, both the glory of Heaven and his own glory are magnified. If one, however, thinks little of the glory of Heaven and much of his own glory, the glory of Heaven remains unimpaired but his own glory wanes” (Bamidbar Rabba 4:20).

The Midrash goes on to say, “A man...was standing in synagogue with his son standing by him. All the people said ‘Hallelujah’ after the reader, but his son uttered some flippant words. They said to him: ‘Look, your son is uttering flippant words!’ He said to them: ‘What can I do to him? He is only a child, let him amuse himself.’ On the following day the same thing happened, all the people responding ‘Amen! Hallelujah,’ as the son made flippant responses. ‘Look,’ they said to him, ‘Your son is uttering flippant words.’ ‘What can I do to him?’ he said to them. ‘He is only a child, let him amuse himself.’ During all the eight days of the festival, his son uttered flippant words, but he did not say anything to him. In the course of that year and the next and the next [one misfortune after another occurred], for the man died, as did his wife and his son and his grandson. Fifteen souls died in his house, and only a pair of people was left, one lame and blind, the other mad and wicked.”

Why Did You Raise Your Voice?

On the other hand, the Sages also tell us that when a person increases the glory of Heaven, both the glory of Heaven and his own glory increase.

The Midrash goes on to say, “Another incident is related of a man who experienced regret at not having read Scripture or studied the Mishnah. He was once standing in synagogue, and when the reader reached the sanctification of the Divine Name, he raised his voice and cried: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the L-RD of Hosts.’ They asked him, ‘Why did you raise your voice?’ He said to them, ‘I was never privileged either to read Scripture or study the Mishnah, and now that I have the opportunity, shall I not raise my voice, so that my mind may be at rest?’ In the course of that year and the second and the third [good fortune came to him]. The man went up from Babylon to Eretz Israel, was made leader of the emperor’s army and appointed head of all the fortresses in Israel. They also assigned him a place where he built a city and settled down, and he was called coloni [i.e., he was granted Roman citizenship and exempt from taxation], both he and his children and grandchildren for all time. From here you learn that a man should not comport himself with pride before the Omnipresent, for whoever displays pride in His presence suffers disgrace. Thus it says, ‘For I honor those who honor Me, and those who scorn Me will be accursed’ [I Samuel 2:30]” (Bamidbar Rabba 4:20).

AT THE SOURCE

Tribe by Tribe

It is written, "The sons of Naphtali" (Bamidbar 1:42).

For the other tribes we read, "For the sons of," whereas for Naphtali we read: "The sons of Naphtali," not "For the sons of Naphtali." In the book Likutei Torah, our teacher the Arizal gave a reason for this difference:

When the tribes were being counted, census takers would pass through the camp of Israel and stand at the door of every tent, recording in a book: "So-and-so, the son of so-and-so, from the tribe of such-and-such," until all the tribes were counted. From the names inscribed in that book, they created another book in which the people were listed by separate tribes.

Thus the first book was begun with the statement, "So-and-so, the son of so-and-so, from the tribe of such-and-such." The name was then recorded, until all the names of that tribe were recorded, thus completing the first book.

A book for the second tribe was then completed, followed by the third, until the only tribe left was that of Naphtali. At that point there was no need to begin again, because there were no other names besides theirs. This is why they were counted right away, as we read: "The sons of Naphtali," followed by their numbers. For the other tribes, however, their numbers had to be calculated, and so for them we read: "For the sons of..."

Righteous Children

It is written, "When they offered strange fire before Hashem...and they had no children" (Bamidbar 3:4).

What connection is there between the death of Nadav and Avihu, who died due to the strange fire that they offered before Hashem, and the fact that "they had no children"? Would things have been different if they had children?

Rabbi Meir Simcha HaCohen of Dvinsk Zatzal answers this question by citing the Midrash. He states that a man is not punished for his sin if he has a son who is a tzaddik. Otherwise, if such a man were to be punished, his son would also suffer, and why should a tzaddik suffer?

This is the meaning of the statement, "they had no children," for if they had children, it is possible that they could have avoided punishment due to their merit.

For All Time

It is written, "The Levites shall be mine; I am Hashem" (Bamidbar 3:45).

In his book Ohr HaChaim, Rabbeinu Chaim ben Attar writes that the verse ends with "I am Hashem" because "the service of Hashem will return to the firstborn in the future." Yet with all this, the Levites will not cease to be holy to Hashem.

This is why the Torah says by allusion, "The Levites shall be mine; I am Hashem." In other words: Just as My Name will endure for all time, the Levites shall be mine for all time.

To Do Work

It is written, "All who enter into the legion, to do work in the Tent of Meeting" (Bamidbar 4:3).

Some commentators ask why the Torah says "work" with regards to the sons of Kohath, whereas the same description is lacking for the sons of Gershon and Merari.

The book Meshech Chochma answers this question by stating that the sons of Gershon and Merari transported certain parts of the Sanctuary

on wagons that were pulled by animals. When they were traveling in the desert, they did not have "work" in the halachic sense (as in the "work" of Shabbat). All they had to do was to make the animals hitched to these wagons walk, which is not considered "work."

However in regards to the sons of Kohath, they carried the components of the Sanctuary on their shoulders, and in regards to Shabbat this is considered as real "work," namely to carry something in the public domain. Hence for the sons of Kohath, the verse states that they were "to do work."

THE WAYS OF THE FATHERS INSIGHTS ON PIRKEI AVOTH BY RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA

Controlling the Evil Inclination

Rabbi Meir said, "Whoever occupies himself with the Torah for its own sake merits many things. Furthermore, he is worth that the whole world should have been created because of him. He is called friend, beloved" (Pirkei Avoth 6:1). This is surprising, for apparently the characteristics of a person who studies Torah do not appear in their natural order. The Tanna first notes that he merits many things, but then abruptly stops and says that he is worth the creation of the entire world. It seems that he should have said, "Whoever occupies himself with the Torah for its own sake is worth that the whole world should have been created because of him. Furthermore, he merits many things and he is called friend, beloved." In fact the statement "he is worth that the whole world should have been created because of him" is not among the things that he merits. Rather, it is a general assertion: Whoever studies Torah for its own sake, he is worthy of having the entire world created for him.

We may say that among the tzaddikim, those who study Torah for its own sake, the entire world means nothing to them. They have no need for the world and its pleasures, and they study Torah in want, without benefiting from anything in this world. Thus Rabbeinu HaKadosh raised his ten fingers and said on his deathbed, "Sovereign of the universe, it is revealed and known to You that I have labored in the study of Torah with my ten fingers, and that I did not enjoy [any worldly] benefits even with my little finger" (Ketubot 104a). He said this despite being exceedingly wealthy, as we know from what the Sages have said.

Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa survived by eating a portion of carobs every Friday, and a Heavenly voice went forth and proclaimed: "The whole world is sustained for the sake of My son Chanina, and Chanina My son has to subsist on a kab of carobs from one week to the next" (Berachot 17b).

This is why the Tanna did not speak of this characteristic from the very beginning; it does not benefit the tzaddikim themselves, since they want nothing whatsoever. However it is actually of great benefit to the world, for the world endures by the merit of their Torah. Hence the Tanna spoke of this characteristic after having said that a tzaddik merits many things, wanting to speak about what he says next, namely that he is called "friend, beloved" – these are the true characteristics of a tzaddik who studies Torah for its own sake. Nevertheless, the Tanna interrupted his words to say this from the start of his remarks, doing so in order to teach us that the world endures by the Torah of the tzaddik.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

RABBI OVADIA OF BARTENURA

“He performed miracles. He did not fail to illuminate what needed light, all while providing explanations in a language that was pure and clear. Thanks to his commentary, whoever consults the Mishnah will easily understand what it means, in general and in detail, and will find what he is looking for. The great figures of the generation have seen his work and praised it. All the succeeding generations have followed the ways of the Mishnah in his light.” This is how the author of the book *Darchei HaMishnah* expresses himself in describing Rabbeinu Ovadia of Bartenura’s commentary on the Mishnah, which millions of people around the world have consulted and whose teachings they have learned.

The gaon Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura was born in a G-d-fearing family in the northern Italian city of Bartenura around the year 5200 (1440). Rabbi Ovadia was the student of Rabbi Yosef Kolon and served as the Rav of Bartenura, whose name was carried by his family. The leaders of the city later honored his great name, which made their city famous around the world, by naming a certain part of town “Ovadia Bartenura Square.”

On Kislev 1, 5246, Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura left for Eretz Israel. His journey lasted two years and four months, since he lingered in Naples, Palermo, and Salerno (where he taught Torah), as well as in Messina and Rhodes. It was only afterwards that he continued his journey to Alexandria in Egypt.

He remained in Alexandria for a week, and there he met a Jewish family that was heading for Jerusalem. He passed through Cairo with them at the beginning of Adar 5248, and on the 20th of the month he traveled through the Sinai with a caravan of camels. On the way, he passed through Gaza, and from there he traveled to Hebron and then to Bethlehem before finally reaching Jerusalem. Thus after an exhausting voyage of nearly three years, he arrived in Jerusalem on Nissan 13, 5248. While living in Jerusalem, he was appointed as the leader of the Jewish community, which he strengthened both spiritually and materially. The residents of the city were poor, and they even lacked Torah scrolls. He succeeded in dramatically improving their dire state, investing a great deal of energy into strengthening the Jerusalem community. He lived there for about 20 years, until his dying day.

The Journey to Eretz Israel

Rabbi Ovadia wrote dozens of letters. The most important were those which he sent to his father, his brothers, and to an anonymous person whose name he does not mention (Rabbi Ovadia simply addressed him as “lord”). These letters recount his journey towards Eretz Israel and the first two years of his travels. These three categories of letters provide us with information on the history, customs, and everyday life of Jews in Sicily, Rhodes, Egypt, and Eretz Israel. This information often represents the only Jewish source for a description of Jewish life in these countries at the time. His letters are filled with accurate geographical, historical, and commercial information. They also provide us with a glimpse into the character of Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura, not only as a great commentator on the Mishnah, but also as a researcher in whom we can place our complete trust. He published his thoughts on his journeys in the book *Voyage to Eretz Israel*. The description of his journey to Gaza is found in a letter that he wrote to his elderly father on Elul 8, 5248. It is his first letter

from Eretz Israel to his hometown of Bartenura. In it, he describes the city of Gaza, where he arrived on Sivan 7, 5248: “In Gaza I saw the house that Samson brought down upon the Philistines, from what the inhabitants told me. In Gaza today there are about 70 Jewish families and two families of Samaritans. I did not see any Karaites in Gaza, where we remained for four days. The name of the Ashkenazi Rav is Rabbi Moshe of Prague, who arrived there from Jerusalem. I reluctantly accepted an invitation to his home, where I remained during my entire stay in Gaza. On Shabbat the elders of the community came and ate with us, bringing clusters of grapes and fruits, as was their custom. We drank seven or eight glasses before eating, and we were joyful.”

In regards to Jerusalem, he states among other things: “In Jerusalem there were about 200 families who distance themselves from all transgression and are attentive to observing mitzvot. Morning and night the people gather together, rich and poor alike, to pray with devotion. There are two G-d-fearing chazanim, men who pay attention in their prayers to each letter and word that comes from their mouths. Two times each day the public stands in love to hear words of Torah. I moved into a house here in Jerusalem, near the synagogue. ... I have to thank Hashem, Who up to now has blessed me, for I have not fallen sick like the other people who came with us. Most of the people who come to Jerusalem from a distant country fall sick because of the change of weather and the constant temperature changes, from cold to hot and from hot to cold. All the winds in the world come and blow in Jerusalem.”

After the expulsion from Spain in 1492, Jews went to settle in Jerusalem, where Rabbi Ovadia founded a yeshiva that was financed by Rabbi Yitzchak ben Nathan Shaoul, a prominent figure from Egypt. Rabbi Ovadia strived to lower the tremendous taxes that burdened the talmidei chachamim of the city.

In his commentary on the six orders of the Mishnah, Rabbi Ovadia performs wonders. This work was first published in Venice, and it is included in almost all printed editions of the Mishnah to this very day. Besides this, he wrote a book on Rashi’s commentary of the Torah, which was published in Pisa and later reprinted in a collective work entitled *Rabboteinu Ba’alei HaTosafot*. He also wrote poems that have remained in manuscript form, and a collection of his letters has been translated into English and French.

GUARD YOUR TONGUE

Speaking Out of Hatred

Something that is extremely widespread, because of our numerous sins, is speaking out of hatred. For example, a person may hate the rav of his community because he did not win a case in his court, or because the rav is among those who are wholehearted in their fear of Heaven and performance of mitzvot. By nature, scoffers and habitual speakers of Lashon Harah absolutely hate such people, for they know that they oppose what they say and do. Such individuals, when they hear a rav giving a sermon in synagogue, will go and listen to him, but with an evil intention, namely to ridicule it afterwards. Yet when a rav gives a long sermon, it contains many things that are very useful, such as encouraging people to fear G-d and observe Torah. – Chafetz Chaim