

Bemidbar – 5783

This week we begin the reading of the fourth book of the Torah, which in Hebrew is called Bemidbar and in English Numbers. As with so many things about Torah, the naming is very important and symbolic and helps us to understand what we are going to read about in the weeks ahead and how to assimilate this new understanding into our grasp of our tradition and how it affects us. Bemidbar means literally in the desert and this narrative will review the 40 years spent by the wandering Israelites in the desert as the generation of slaves brought out of Egypt dies off and the new generation without any preconceived notions of what life will be like matures. As the introduction to this week's beginning of the fourth book, our Eitz Chaim siddur points out, the central character in this book is HaShem and his role in the life of the wandering Children of Israel. He will provide for the needs for shelter and protection and sustenance throughout the whole of the 40 years. We get a glimpse of the aspect of protection in the description in this week's parsha of the structure of the camp as the people move from place to place. This mishkan is to be at the centre of the camp and a funnel cloud of smoke will arise from there as a guidepost. The Kohanim and Levi'im are to be on the outside of the mishkan and the tribes in a circle around that. In the weeks ahead, we read about the search for food and water and the giving of manna and quail and sweet water, not without grumbling though. We'll leave inspection of these things to the weeks ahead. However, in passing note that the structure of the camp and the search for the necessities of life are taken care of by HaShem so that the Israelites can focus on the lessons to be learned about freedom and independence.

The first thing that we read about this week, especially since we are at the beginning of the three-year Triennial Cycle, is the census conducted of the tribes and their various members. In addition, there is another census we read about today and

that's of the Levities who are not considered to be part of any tribe. From this census taking at the beginning of the book we get the other name for it, Numbers. The sages have sought to understand why the census is taken here and what was its significance. Nachmanides (Moses ben Nachman, 12th century), for example, interpreted that the census was of a military nature and was carried out in preparation for the conquest of the Land of Israel. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 11th century) saw the census as an expression of God's affection for the children of Israel, and He counts them every hour because of that affection.

However, I find the explanation given by Rabbi Isaac Arama, who was the head of a Yeshiva in Spain, just prior to the expulsion of the Jews from there in 1492, more noteworthy in light of how we live our lives today. The census, he says, carries a double meaning. On the one hand, it indicates equality. Each person is counted equally to the other. In a census, there is no difference between number 1 and number 10,000. The first and last are equal. This insight fits into and further signifies the importance of the entire book ahead. Remember that the introductory commentary for Bemidbar in Eitz Chaim points out that HaShem lies at the centre of all the action to follow. In Genesis, the heroes are the patriarchs and the matriarchs. In Exodus, the narrative begins and ends with Moses. In Leviticus, everything is about the Jewish people and the expectations of them in their life as free men. But here, we are presented with a picture of a camp, with the mishkan containing the tablets at its centre and the Israelites in a circle around it so that they are all equidistant from the Mishkan, or the law. The children of Israel have been told throughout Leviticus that they are to seek justice and that they are to protect one another, and everyone is to be treated the same.

On the other hand, Arama suggests, the census counts individuals, not families or groups. In this way, he sees the individual and unique aspect of each person, since "the virtue of each one is separate from the virtue of his fellow."

He bases this on the Midrashic comparison between the children of Israel and the stars of heaven. Remember that HaShem told Abraham and Jacob both that their descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. When we look at the stars, it seems to us that they are all small dots in the sky. The star in the east is no more important than the one in the west. But we know that each star has its own singularity in size, position, and role in the astronomical system. Our tradition is filled with examples of how we considered to be each one equal to the next and yet each of us different in our own way.

So, although one can find the reading of this parsha boring and curious on its surface, when we delve deeper into the words, and their relationships to each other, we are forced to realize that power of its message to us. This past week, I hosted a group of students from Holy Cross Secondary School who were exceptionally well behaved, and in many ways, quite knowledgeable. But I pointed out to them as I have tried to point out to so many others, our faith and practice of it, gives us our identity. We know who we are and what is expected of us. Those are the same words sung by Tevye the Milkman when singing about our tradition. That message of equality and uniqueness is one that we can share proudly with those around us. If we could ensure that all our children heard and felt the truth of that message, imagine what it would do to the quality of mental health overall. Surely a message worth spreading.