

Bringing the Prophets to Life

**Weekly insights into the Haftara
by Rabbi Nachman (Neil) Winkler**

Author of Bringing the Prophets to Life (Gefen Publ.)

B'midbar - 22 p'sukim - Hoshei'a 2:1-22

Why the Desert "Counts"

Although we commonly identify the books of the Torah with their opening word(s), i.e., B'REISHIT, SH'MOT, VAYIKRA, etc., Chazal referred to each book based on its individual content: SEFER HAY'TZIRA, SEFER HAG'ULA, TORAT KOHANIM, etc. These titles were translated into the Greek by "Targum Hashiv'im" - the Septuagint - and eventually adopted by other nations: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, etc.

This week, we open Sefer B'MIDBAR, which Chazal called SEFER P'KUDIM or "Numeri" in Greek, as much of the book focuses upon the theme of numbers or counting. It is interesting to note, however, that the common name of B'MIDBAR (or, as generally [although incorrectly] pronounced, BAMIDBAR) is a fitting description for the book as well, for the sefer reviews the events that took place in the desert (MIDBAR) from year #2 through year #40 following the Exodus.

In the very opening of our haftara, the navi Hoshei'a shares the divine message that, in the future, the population of B'nei Yisra'el would number as the grains

of sand in the sea, a promise that provides us with the clear connection of the prophet's message to the parasha's census. However, it is the contrast to the Torah's counting that sends a more optimistic message than that which is read in our Torah reading. In the Torah, we are given the precise number of Israelites who traveled through the desert, while the haftara guarantees that the nation's population would be innumerable (ASHER LO YIMAD V'LO YISAFEIR). This also explains why it is Moshe who is to count the nation in our parasha while in Sefer Hoshei'a it is G-d Himself Who sets the number as being beyond human ability to count.

Interestingly, when we proceed to study the navi's entire message we uncover yet another connection to our parasha - one that focuses not on the P'KUDIM (counting) but on the MIDBAR. Rav Yissachar Ya'akovson turns our attention to the 17th pasuk in the haftara, a comforting verse that followed those of censure and condemnation, in which Hashem promises HINEI ANOCHI M'FATEHA, I will lure Israel, and V'HOLACHTIHA HAMIDBAR, I will lead her into the desert, V'DIBARTI AL LIBAH, where I will speak comfortingly to her. Here we are reminded that the midbar is the pathway OUT of the Galut and IN to the Geula - just as it was in the time of Moshe Rabbeinu.

In studying Sefer B'Midbar, we often remember the desert as the place of Israel's sins - those of EIGEL HAZAHAV

(Golden Calf), of the MERAGLIM (Spies), of the grumbling, of the complaints and of the demands to return to Egypt. Hoshe'a opens our eyes to the realization that Hashem "lures" us into the midbar to become a place of repair and repentance and for a time of returning to G-d. The haftara teaches us to regard the years of desert wandering as the era when we constructed the Mishkan and learned to worship G-d properly, when we received His Torah and taught us His mitzvot and when we were able to develop loving relationship with our Heavenly Father.

It should be no wonder, therefore, that the navi Yirmiyahu praises Israel by telling us how G-d remembers with deep love the years when His children followed Him through the wilderness. For He, too, regards those years with affection for they were years when He was able to develop a loving relationship with His chosen nation.

Ultimately, it is certainly true that Sefer P'kudim is filled with many "countings" but it is also important to remember that those desert years themselves really did count - both for us and for G-d! ✨