

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

Bamidbar

The opening chapters of Sefer Bamidbar give the details of the pattern in which the Israelite communities were to march in the wilderness en route to the Promised Land:

The Israelites shall camp according to their flag... The camp of Yehuda... shall be first to journey (2:2,9).

On occasion, the S'forno examines a theme in kabalistic dimensions. His presentation of the census and the marching procedures in this Parasha is one of them.

In his introduction to Sefer Bamidbar, the S'forno explains that the census and the designation of flag-marked positions for each tribe in the camp were G-d's acts of kindness to the Israelites. For G-d's directions to Moshe placed the Israelites in a physical position that was in harmony with the MERKAVA (Divine chariot), experienced as a vision by the nevi'im (prophets). That would enable them to enter the Promised Land peacefully, as the nations would leave on their own accord (S'forno to 1:2).

Indeed, it may be suggested that the emphasis on military eligibility with all males over 20 - in such a formation - would achieve two things. Firstly, it would create a sense of order and decorum in a community that were

slaves until very recently. Secondly, its disciplined formation viewed from afar or by hearsay would indicate military power, persuading the seven Canaanite nations to take themselves elsewhere.

Such action in making order and decorum possible fits in with a famous Midrashic tradition in B'reishit Rabba (100:2; see Rashi to 2:2; also to B'reishit 50:13). When the 12 sons of Yaakov Avinu accompanied him on his last journey for burial in the Cave of Machpeila, they travelled in the formation that he, Ya'akov, had already instructed him. He specified which three of his sons were to lead the funeral party, which three were on the south side, which three on the north, and which three at the rear. These were the positions that were to set a precedent for the same journey, albeit by a much longer route, in the future when they would travel from Egypt to the Promised Land.

And this was important for the following reason: to prevent quarrels between the tribes for the most desired positions on the forward march; of the "We deserve to be at the front" or "We're insulted because we're last to go" variety. Following this Midrashic explanation, one of Ya'akov Avinu's last acts was to ensure that the sort of quarrelling that divided his sons earlier on in their lives would not happen again, not with them, not with their future generations. And indeed, what he planned, worked. Though his sons and later his descen-

dants were recorded as being factious and fractious, their actual travelling was in harmony with the precedent set with Ya'akov's funeral procession: "So they camped according to the banners, and so they journeyed, every person according to... the father's house" (2:34).

And perhaps this gives a connection between this Parasha and what immediately follows it in most years, Chag HaShavuot, also known as Z'man Matan Torateinu. The Torah describes the Israelites' camping down at Mount Sinai in the singular, instead of the usual plural. As Rashi (based on the Mechilta) explains, all the people were in unity, with the single desire to hear the word of G-d and to learn the way He required them to live. For the people of Israel had to in unity in order to step up to their highest calling. Only when unified with personal harmony rather than acrimony, was it in position to accept and learn the Torah in the spirit of NA'ASEH V'NISHMA (Sh'mot 24:7), we will do and we will learn... 