

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

This parasha series is dedicated
in memory of Michael Jotkowitz, z"l.

PARASHAT NASO

Dedicated in loving memory of Dr. Sid Finkelstein, z"l.
May the Finkelstein-Daniel family be comforted among the mourners of Zion veYerushalayim.

The Camp and the Chariot

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I

Shortly after opening, *Parashat Naso* switches gears. After narrating the completion of God's instruction to Moshe for counting the Levites and the details of their particular roles in transporting the Mishkan (4:21-49), the Torah reports that God commanded Moshe as follows:

Command the Children of Israel to send out of the camp all with an eruption (*tzara'at*), or discharge (*zav*) and whomever is defiled by the dead. Both male and female shall you send out, and they shall not defile their camps amidst which I dwell. (5:3)

This short passage raises numerous difficulties. On the simplest level, the divine fiat is clear. A person afflicted with *tzara'at* lesions, suffering from an abnormal discharge known as *zav* or one who has come in contact with a dead body, must be sent from the camp. These three cases, known in halakhic terminology as *avot ha-tuma*, constitute severe occurrences of defilement. As the Ibn Ezra reminds us (5:1), the defiled is impure for seven days and can pass his defilement onto others. Yet while the common denominator of the *metzora*, the *zav* and the *tamai la-nefesh* is clear, the rationale for their being expelled from the camp remains relatively obscure. While the text does refer to the problem of "defiling their camps," perhaps a reference to the capability of these three to defile other persons and objects, the intent of the passage remains unclear. If these *avot ha-tuma* require isolation, why can't they be isolated within the camp? Moreover, as the passage emphasizes, the rationale seems to revolve around a human-divine connection, or more accurately, distancing, rather than a human-human distancing. As the text concludes: "Amidst which I dwell" (5:3). Apparently, the thrice reiterated need to "send out" the defiled (5:1,2,2) stems from the presence of the Divine in the camp. But this requires some explanation.

Furthermore, the very location of the passage seems problematic. We have here a passage conceptually congruent with material normally thought of as belonging elsewhere in the Torah. The Book of *Vayikra*, the book of the Torah normally considered dedicated to issues of sanctity, holiness and defilement, indeed contains both a lengthy discourse on the laws of *tzara'at* (*Vayikra*

13:1-14:57) and a segment on the laws of discharge (15:1-15). While the laws of those defiled by the dead are mentioned in *Sefer Bamidbar* (19:1-22), as the Ramban (19:2) points out, the segment containing the laws comprises an independent unit, a kind of parenthetical insert. The corpus is located in chapter 19 of *Bamidbar* due to the unique role of the priest in the purification procedure and the desire to elaborate on the priests, priesthood, life and death in the aftermath of Korach's rebellion (16:1-17:28). In short, on the conceptual plane, the material belongs in *Sefer Vayikra*, the book of holiness, sanctity and defilement.

If so, we must search for a parallel justification for *Bamidbar* 5:1-3. What constitutes the rationale for placing this particular segment of the larger "defilement code," laws pertaining to sanctity and holiness, at this particular point in the Book of *Bamidbar*? We must puzzle out not only the reason why the defiled must be removed from the camp, but also the rationale for the placement of these laws of defilement at this juncture in *Sefer Bamidbar*.

II

In explaining the need to expel the *metzora*, *zav* and *tamei la-nefesh* from the camp, the Torah utilizes the phrase, "Amidst which I dwell" (5:3). The core of the phrase consists of two terms, *shokhen*, rooted in the stem *sh.kh.n* and meaning rest or dwell, and *betokham*, meaning amidst or among. This formulation should be familiar. It constitutes a slight variation on the phrase used to describe the purpose of building the tabernacle. In *Shemot* 25:8 God informs Moshe of the ultimate end goal of constructing the Mishkan.

And they shall make me a sanctuary (*mikdash*) so that I may dwell amidst them (*veshakhanti betokham*)

On some plane, either symbolic or metaphysical, the sanctuary constitutes the abode of the divine presence. The most common term for the sanctuary, *mishkan*, comprises but another variation of the stem *sh.kh.n*, meaning dwell or rest. In a similar vein, the Book of *Shemot* and the completion of the construction of the Mishkan, closes with the image of the divine cloud, symbolizing the divine presence, resting upon the Mishkan (*Shemot* 40:34-35). In this light, the phrase utilized at the end of our *parasha*, "Amidst which I dwell (*asher ani shokhen betokham*)" (5:3), seems to constitute a technical reference to the Mishkan, the abode of the divine presence located at the center of the Israelite camp.

Defilement on the one hand, and sanctity, sanctuary, holiness and Mishkan on the other, comprise conceptual and practical opposites throughout the Torah. For example, the beginning of the lengthy defilement code found in *Vayikra* teaches that a *post-partum* woman, until she has undergone her purification procedure, is also considered *tamei* and cannot "touch any sanctified object, nor come to the sanctuary" (*Vayikra* 12:4). Contact between holiness and defilement and therefore between sanctified objects and de-sanctified persons is forbidden. Consequently, a defiled person cannot enter the precincts of the Mishkan, the abode of the ultimate source of sanctity.

Likewise, the primary description of the laws of *tamei la-nefesh*, of those defiled by contact with the dead, informs us that:

Whoever touches a dead body and does not purify himself, defiles the Mishkan of God, his soul shall be cut off from Israel. (*Bamidbar* 19:13)

While the text here does not explicitly refer to trespass or physical contact, that does appear to be the intent. As Rashi (19:13) clarifies for us: "if he enters". Once again, *tuma* and the presence of the divine constitute inherently contradictory categories. Defilement prohibits one from approaching the Mishkan.

In this light, we can interpret the expulsion of the *metzora*, *zav* and *tamei la-nefesh* from the camp as a pragmatic matter. Their presence in the camp may lead to their approaching the sanctuary or trespassing upon its grounds. As already noted, this is defined by the Torah as "defiling the Mishkan of God" (19:13). This contradiction and possible defilement of the divine presence must be prevented and guarded against proactively. Consequently the three severe *avot ha-tuma* are sent from the camp, lest they trespass the border of the divine.

III

This reading should also help us clarify the second problem raised above, the placement of the *parasha* at this juncture in *Sefer Bamidbar*. On a cursory reading, the first four chapters of *Bamidbar* can be thought of as primarily an accounting, concerned primarily with numbers, and rendering for us the precise number of Israelites and Levites numerous times. However, upon closer analysis this is only part of the story. The chapters should also be perceived as a sustained discourse upon the physical arrangement of the Israelite camp.

As pointed out in our discussion of *Parashat Bamidbar* the counting of the Israelites reaches its conclusion, its logical purpose, in the arrangement of the various tribes into standards grouped around the Mishkan (1:1-2:34). Similarly, the twice-repeated Levite census (3:1-4:49) dictates the precise location of each subgroup of Levites around the Mishkan (3:22,28,35,38). On some level, it is no surprise that the numberings and consequent arrangements of the camp detailed in the census narrative (1:1-4:49) are followed by a legal segment detailing the expulsion of the *metzora*, *zav* and *tamei la-nefesh* from the camp. These laws of encampment follow naturally on the heels of the narrative detailing the arrangement of the camp. Both are variations on the theme of *hilkhot ha-machaneh*, the laws of the arranging of the camp.

But there is more to it than this. In point of fact, the connections run a little bit deeper. Let us turn our attention to some of the details of the preceding census narrative.

The danger of encroachment predicated in the short code of *hilkhot ha-machaneh* that opens chapter 5, crops up during these preceding segments of the story. Early on in the census narratives, the Torah informs us that the Levites will be counted separately (1:49). This is due to their unique function as servants of the Mishkan (1:50). In elaborating upon this point, the Torah informs us that the Levites are to encamp around the Mishkan so that "there will be no wrath

(*ketzef*) upon the Children of Israel" (1:53). Immediately afterwards, in the conclusion of the verse, the Levites are charged with guarding the Mishkan. This picks up on the mention two verses earlier of the fact that "the stranger" or non-Levite who attempts to participate in the transportation of the Mishkan is subject to the death penalty (1:51). To put this all together, part of the Levite's role consists of guarding the Mishkan from the possibility of encroachment. Just as the census narrative (1:1-4:49) is concerned with the possibility of trespass, so too the encampment code (5:1-3), which follows on its heels, is concerned with the possibility of trespass.

This leads us to an even deeper thematic element. Throughout the census narrative, the Torah focuses not just on the physical arrangement of the camp, but also on what might be termed the functional arrangement of the camp. As just mentioned, the Levites are counted separately and encamp around the Mishkan because of their unique function as porters and servants of the sanctuary (1:48-53). These functions devolve upon the Levites by virtue of their being selected by God to replace the first-borns, those who might have otherwise had the privilege of serving the sanctuary (3:11-13). As the text emphasizes, the *mishmeret*, or charge, function and duty of the Levites is in fact the *mishmeret*, or charge of the Israelites, one they carry out as replacements or perhaps representatives of the Israelites (3:8-9).

In line with this functional focus, both numberings of the Levites involve an extensive discourse on the precise role of each subgroup of the tribe. While the first counting involves a description of the respective general areas of Levite responsibility and their guard duty (3:14-38), the second revolves around a precise description of each subgroup's role in transporting the Mishkan (4:1-49).

The point of all this is that throughout the census narrative the text defines certain physical and functional axes. Without fail, the Mishkan remains at the center. Just as the Israelite tribes and Levite subgroups are arranged to the four corners of the compass around the central point of Mishkan (2:1-3:38) so too the unfolding of the narrative's text is arranged around the work of protecting and serving the central point of Mishkan. Just as the Mishkan travels at the center of the camp, (2:17), so too the guarding, transportation and service of the Mishkan stand at the conceptual center and culmination of the narrative's movement (3:5-4:49).

None of this is coincidental. The physical and functional arrangement relation to Mishkan described above should be understood as reflecting a particular spiritual arrangement and relation. The Mishkan constitutes the dwelling place of the divine and the location of divine service. As such, the physical and functional arrangement of the Israelite camp in the desert naturally revolves around the Mishkan. In doing so, the nascent Israelite society, reflected in the physical and social arrangement of the camp, is defined as oriented around the divine, divine service and the presence of the Divine. The structure of the community must place holiness and sanctity at the center. But it must also worry about how to preserve sanctity in its midst and the implications of having holiness in the camp.

As such, once again it is no wonder that the narrative depicting the physical, functional and spiritual arrangement of the camp (1:1-4:49) is followed by a segment of the laws of defilement

and holiness, our story of the expulsion of the three *avot ha-tuma* from the camp. Both involve the themes of sanctity, relation to sanctity and the protection of sanctity. In contrast to our original assumption, the opening of *Bamidbar* is in fact also about some of the key themes of *Sefer Vayikra*. It too is concerned with sanctity, relation to sanctity and the safeguarding of sanctity.

IV

Until this point, we have followed a pragmatic line, interpreting the need for sending the *metzora*, *zav* and *tamei la-nefesh* out of the camp as stemming from a practical danger of their trespassing upon the sanctuary. Yet haven't the Levites already been commanded to guard the sanctuary? In light of the Levites mandate, can the pragmatic concern of trespass be considered realistic?

For that matter, let us take a look again at the text. The precise language of the rationale provided by the Torah reads as follows:

And they shall not defile their camps amidst which I dwell. (5:3)

While this can be interpreted as a technical reference to the presence of the Mishkan at the center of the camp, the text makes no explicit reference to the Mishkan. Likewise, here we have no reference to any pragmatic issue of trespass.

A simpler reading of the text would seem to indicate that God's presence is located in the camp itself. For this reason, these three severely defiled individuals must be removed from the camp. In point of fact, the Ramban (5:2) seems to adopt this interpretation. To paraphrase the Ramban's terminology, "It is necessary for the camp to be holy and suited for the resting of the divine presence." The contradiction between sanctity and defilement arises not just prospectively, in light of possible entrance into the Mishkan or physical contact with sanctified objects, but by virtue of the simple presence of the severely defiled in the sanctified space of the camp. But by what virtue can the camp be said to be holy or to comprise a place where the divine presence rests?

Quite possibly, we may explain the simple sense of the text and the Ramban's interpretation along rationalistic lines, amending little of what has been argued until this point. The camp constitutes the location of the Mishkan, which in turn constitutes the "location" of the *shekhina*, the divine presence. As such, while it never can nor ever need operate according to the rules of the sanctuary itself, some of the sanctity of the sanctuary, and the demands of Mishkan may be said to apply to the surrounding camp. Simply put, application of the rules of Mishkan to the surrounding camp serve the purpose of further emphasizing the awesome sanctity of the sanctuary. Alternatively, on a more metaphysical note, the shadow sanctity of the larger encampment comprises a kind of radiance or overflow of the core holiness of the Mishkan and the divine presence.

Yet this would probably be an error. The intent of the Ramban and perhaps the text itself is aimed at something more wholly metaphysical. Turning our attention to the story of the *degalim*, the standards around which the Israelites encamped, should help elaborate the point.

V

In introducing the *degalim*, the Torah contents itself with a relatively pithy description. The Torah refers to "every man by his standard, with the signs of his father's house, around the tent of meeting shall they encamp" (2:2). But what are these standards? What is the point of the reference to the "sign of his father's house"? For that matter, what is the point of the tribes being grouped into four standards, each consisting of three tribes and then arrayed around the Mishkan?

In what might be thought of as a minimalist interpretation of the *degalim*, Rashi (2:2) interprets the standards as colored banners, the color for each tribe matching the color of the tribe's stone found in the high priest's breastplate. As such, the banners probably serve as no more than an organizational tool, an aid to travel or a rallying point for battle. In contrast, the Ibn Ezra and the Ramban present a more robust account of the standards, interpreting the "signs of his father's house" as forms pictured upon the standards.

Based upon a Midrash found in *Bamidbar Rabba* 2:6, and in accord with associations already defined in other parts of the Torah, the Ibn Ezra formulates a correspondence between each tribe and its respective form. For the standard of Yehuda, the form is a lion, in line with the statement of Yaakov in his blessing to Yehuda that "Yehuda is a lion" (*Bereishit* 49:9). For Reuven, the shape pictured upon the standard is a man. It was Reuven who found the *dudaim*, the plant carrying the power of fertility and the ability to make a man (*Bereishit* 30:14).

Based upon the blessing of Moshe (*Devarim* 33:17), the standard of Ephraim carries a picture of an ox, and finally, although the source is obscure, the Ibn Ezra maintains that the standard of Dan bore the image of an eagle. Strange claims for an exegete we expect to explicate the simple meaning of the text. Putting this point aside for the moment, the exegesis of the Ibn Ezra and the Ramban regarding the images depicted upon the four chief standards grouped around the Miskan creates a fascinating parallel.

The Book of *Yechezkel*, in describing Yechezkel's vision of the *merkava*, the divine chariot upon which the divine throne and presence rides, depicts a vision of four heavenly creatures who comprise the chariot. These creatures have four faces, the face of a man, the face of a lion, the face of an ox and the face of an eagle (*Yechezkel* 1:10). But these are of course the images found on the standards of Yehuda, Reuven, Ephraim and Dan.

As the Ibn Ezra formulates things: "The *degalim* resembled the *keruvim*, the divine creatures seen by Yechezkel" (2:2). In a similar vein, the Ramban (2:3) approvingly cites a Midrash claiming that God created four directions in the world, surrounded his throne with four heavenly creatures to bear his throne, and in accord arranged for Moshe the *degalim*. While the theology remains somewhat obscure, the literary claim should be obvious. The encampment of Israel, the arrangement of the tribes into four *degalim* surrounding the Mishkan, is meant to parallel the

imagery of Yechezkel's vision. Just as the heavenly creatures surround and bear the throne of the divine, so too the camp of Israel surrounds and bears the Mishkan, the seat of the divine presence. The theological or metaphysical significance of the parallel should be interpreted accordingly. Just as the divine creatures of Yechezkel's vision accompany and bear the throne of God upon its heavenly journey, so too the camp of Israel accompanies and bears the throne of God upon its earthly journey.

A brief return to the concrete world of texts should help strengthen and simultaneously clarify this latter, very metaphysical statement. While the Ibn Ezra and the Ramban do not make the point, Yechezkel 1:24 compares the sound of the creatures and the divine chariot to the sound of a "camp." In addition to this connection to the opening of *Bamidbar*, Yechezkel's vision of the divine first manifests itself as "a great cloud and fire" (1:4). This of course is the very image of the divine presence that accompanies Israel and its camp in the desert. A cloud and fire cover the Mishkan upon its completion (*Shemot* 40:34-38) and during the ensuing journey (*Bamidbar* 9:15-16). This dual parallel between the vision narrative in Yechezkel and the encampment narrative in *Bamidbar* implies that we confront the same story in both cases, the transportation of the divine presence by God's *merkava*, or chariot. The process occurs in both the heavenly and earthly realms.

But there is more to it than just parallel processes. The second book of *Shemuel* refers to the ark as "the ark of God, whose name is called the Lord of hosts (*tzeva'ot*) who dwells upon the *keruvim*" (II *Shemuel* 6:2). The creatures of Yechezkel's vision are known as *keruvim*. They possess an earthly counterpart, the *keruvim* stationed on top of the ark, whose outstretched arms form the throne of God. In the language of *Shemuel*, God can be said to "dwell upon" the *keruvim* and ark. But as fitting the King of kings, God is also accompanied by hosts or assemblies, known as *tzeva'ot*. The divine chariot is born and accompanied on its journey by the heavenly angelic assembly. But what is the earthly counterpart of God's heavenly host?

The resolution to this question may lie back in *Sefer Shemot*. During his dialogue with Moshe that proceeds the unleashing of the plagues upon Egypt, God informs Moshe, "I will lay my hand upon Egypt, and bring out my hosts (*tzivotai*), my people, the Children of Israel from Egypt" (*Shemot* 7:4). Similarly, the story that opens *Bamidbar* constitutes another story of God's *tzava*, his host or assembly, the Children of Israel. It is in fact the story of his earthly host or assembly, which escorts, accompanies and bears his presence as earthly counterpart to his heavenly host.

By this point, both the metaphysics of the Ibn Ezra's and the Ramban's interpretation of the *degalim* as well as the implicit approach to the opening narratives of *Bamidbar* should be clear. The entire camp of Israel constitutes a microcosm of the heavenly macrocosm, a parallel construction to the divine realm. This is the point of the organization according to standards. As such the camp serves to bear the divine presence, not just in the Mishkan, upon and between the *keruvim*, but in the entire camp itself.

The census narratives (1:1-4) are not just about counting, or even physical, functional or even spiritual organization. Rather they also form a type of metaphysical organization, where the

camp is organized as an echo of the divine realm and the divine presence is brought to the entire camp.

VI

To close the circle, in light of the above interpretation of the *degalim* as a kind of *merkava* and the organization of the camp as far more than a mere physical arrangement, we no longer need wonder about the language of the rationale provided by the Torah for the removal of the *metzora*, *zav* and *tamei la-nefesh* from the camp. Likewise we no longer need wonder about the meaning of the Ramban's claim that "it is necessary for the camp to be holy and suited for the resting of the divine presence." As a microcosm of the divine *merkava* and resting place of the divine presence, the entire camp is holy. The contradiction between sanctity and defilement must be avoided in the camp itself. Consequently, the severe cases of defilement, those defiled by *tzara'at*, *zav*, or death must be removed from the camp. The laws in question, and the placement of our short code of defilement and sanctity (5:1-3), follow naturally on the heels of the census narratives (1:1-4:49), the metaphysical organization of the camp as *tzeva'ot Hashem*, the earthly assembly bearing and animated by the divine presence.

Finally, from this perspective the opening of *Bamidbar* constitutes more than just a continuation of *Sefer Vayikra* and its key concerns of holiness, defilement and the sanctuary. In a certain sense, *Sefer Bamidbar* can also be thought of as a continuation of a key theme central to the book of *Shemot*. As mentioned earlier, *Shemot* 25:8 reports the true telos of constructing the Mishkan, "And I will dwell amongst them," and the book ends with the arrival of the divine presence in the Mishkan (40:34-35). But in some sense, as the beginning of *Bamidbar* reminds us, the divine presence has in fact arrived amidst the entire community of Israel. The end of *Shemot* is only the beginning of the story. *Sefer Bamidbar* is in fact where this theme plays out, the story of what happens when God dwells amongst the Children of Israel.

FURTHER STUDY

Note: Based upon the Ibn Ezra and the Ramban, the second half of the *shiur* above develops a theory of the metaphysical organization of the camp and a notion of the divine presence as resting in the entire camp. As such it comprises a good introduction to another topic, the moral conditions for the divine presence in the camp. In my opinion, ideally, these two issues should always be considered in tandem. Due to considerations of space, this topic was omitted from the above *shiur*. The issue emerges from *Bamidbar* 5:5-31, the two segments following the *parasha* dealt with in the above *shiur*. Some of this material can be found in questions three and four below.

1) See *Vayikra* 13:45-46 and *Vayikra* 14:2-3. Now look at *Vayikra* 15:1-5, 13-14. Now compare this to *Bamidbar* 19:1-10. Where are the *zav* and *tamei la-nefesh*? Now reread *Bamidbar* 5:1-3 and see Rashi 5:2. What is the textual basis for Rashi's claim? Try to relate this to the themes discussed in the *shiur* above.

2) Read the Ramban's introduction to *Sefer Bamidbar*. Now see the Ramban's comments to *Shemot* 25:1. In light of these comments, how does *Bamidbar* comprise the continuation of *Shemot*?

3) Scan 5:1-6:27. How can the text be divided? See Ibn Ezra 5:4 and Ramban 5:5. What central question raised in the *shiur* above should be raised regarding this material? Try to formulate the Ibn Ezra and the Ramban's solutions. Evaluate their solutions to the problem. See Rashi 5:12. Try to formulate a comprehensive theory for *Bamidbar* 1:1-6:27.

4) See 5:6, 5:12 and *Vayikra* 26:40. See *Shemot* 32:19-20. What is the connection? Now see *Shemot* 33:6-10. What are the conditions for the divine presence remaining in the camp?