

PARASHAT BAMIDBAR

"How Good Are Your Tents, Yaakov"

The Organization of God's Dwelling Place

Since parashat Bamidbar opens a new book of Chumash, it contains several fundamental elements that pertain to the Book as a whole. Chapters 1-9 (in fact, up to 10:10) are a sort of preface and introduction to the major part of the Book – the journey from Har Sinai to the plains of Moav (chapters 10-22). However, in the unit comprising the first few chapters of the Book we find various commands concerning the organization and layout of the camp, when it journeys and when it rests. [1]

One of the central commands in this context is the organization of the camp: which tribe should encamp adjacent to which other tribe, and where. We usually take this arrangement for granted, but in fact the very concept of encamping by tribes is not necessarily an obvious matter. What would be wrong with "free parking"? What if every person could choose his friends and neighbors, whether they belonged to his tribe or to a different one, and together they could set up their camp? It would seem that such an arrangement might contribute to a sense of closeness amongst the nation and avoid divisions along tribal lines.

Since the idea of encampment by tribes is not self-evident, the Torah must emphasize this principle, right at the outset: "Each person by his banner, according to the signs of the clans shall Bnei Yisrael encamp" (2:2).

The meaning of the word "his banner" (diglo) leaves room for debate. Some commentators (including Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Ramban), following the lead of Targum Yonatan, understand the word "degel" in accordance with our contemporary usage: i.e., each group of three tribes encamped on a certain side of the Mishkan had a flag of a specific color [2], with a certain biblical verse inscribed upon it and with a special symbol representing them. According to this understanding, a connection exists between "diglo" (his banner) and the very next word – "be-otot" (according to the signs) – for the flag itself was the sign. Other commentaries suggest, alternatively, that the term "diglo" refers to the military unit, as defined in the Midrash: "'Banners' refers

to armies (hosts)" (Shemot Rabba 15,7) [3]. According to this view, it is only in the word "signs" that the Torah commands that a special sign be made for each group of tribes. Either way, the conclusion of the verse emphasizes the tribal encampment: "by their clans."

The fulfillment of this command is also mentioned at the end of our chapter, and represents a sort of literary bookend for the entire chapter: "And Bnei Yisrael did as all that God had commanded Moshe; thus they encamped by their banners and thus they journeyed, each person with his family and in accordance with his clan" (2:34). This teaches that encampment according to tribal groupings is the main innovation of our chapter.

However, we are not taken so completely by surprise, considering the language of the text, which chooses to emphasize – in the original command – not the tribe, but rather the family: "By their clan... by their families, each with his clan." Camping by extended family clans is certainly reasonable, and since the women at the time joined their husband's clan, it is likewise understandable that encampment would be by tribe. In other words, the Israelite encampment is described as a familial-tribal encampment. We shall return to this point below.

The second innovation in the opening verse is the issue of camping around the Mishkan: "Around the Ohel Mo'ed shall they encamp" (2:1). This point is related to the centrality of the Mishkan, both in religious consciousness and in the practicalities of everyday life. However, we could still imagine a reasonable alternative whereby the Mishkan would be located at the head of the camp, as the leader, while all the tribes would follow it as the rearguard. This, too, would demonstrate reverence for Mishkan and its important status.

Indeed, since the Ark would travel before the nation during the journeys (Bamidbar 10), it would seem appropriate that it would rest, too, at the head of the Israelite camp, ready to lead the Israelites on the next stage of the journey. Why, then, does the Mishkan rest at the center of the camp?

There are at least two clear advantages to the form of encampment described in the text, rather than the alternatives proposed above.

Firstly, the Israelite camp was laid out as a military camp ready for war. This is evident in the census, included in our chapter, with a description of the places of encampment (although the census appears alone, in its own right, in chapter 1). This census includes only men who are "from twenty years old and upward," and the

reason for this apparently relates to the continuation of the verse: "all those enlisted for the army in Israel." As Rashbam (1:2) explains: "For now they were supposed to enter Eretz Yisrael, and twenty-year-olds are suitable for military service."

It is perhaps in this context that the fixed formula in our chapter should be understood – "the banner of the camp of ... by their hosts (le-tzivotam)." This expression is repeated with regard to each tribe: "its host (tzevao) and those numbered in it."

According to the above, the Israelite camp is set out as a military encampment, and in this sense it is clear that the "headquarters" are located in the most secure place – in the center of the camp, where there is protection from all four directions.

Secondly, the form of encampment of the tribes around the Mishkan also had educational value. In this way, all the tribes dwelled at the same distance from the Mishkan (with the exception, of course, of the tribe of Levi). The inter-tribal hierarchy (which existed in the nature of the division of tribes into the various "camps") was thus less glaring, since the basic shape of the camp was a square (or circle), with all observing a fixed distance from the resting place of the Divine Presence. Thus it was clear that everyone had the same opportunity, with the same effort, of reaching the holy place.

However, beyond these factors guiding the layout of the camp, it seems that there is a more fundamental explanation. Ibn Ezra, discussing the special signs drawn on the flags of the tribes, teaches:

"Our early sages taught that the banner of Reuven featured the figure of a man, symbolizing the deeper meaning of the 'dudaim;' the flag of Yehuda had the picture of a lion, for that was the image that Yaakov used to describe him; the flag of Efraim showed an ox, since he was the 'eldest of an ox;' and the flag of Dan was decorated with the picture of an eagle. **THUS THEY APPEARED LIKE THE KERUVIM SEEN BY THE PROPHET YEchezkel.**"

The source for this description of the various flags is to be found, with slight changes, in a midrash in Bamidbar Rabba (2:7). However, Ibn Ezra adds an important element to the teaching of the midrash: "Thus, they appeared like the keruvim seen by the prophet Yechezkel." He refers, of course, to the "ma'aseh merkavah" (Divine Chariot – Yechezkel chap. 1) that depicts four creatures, each with four faces:

"The likeness of their faces was like the face of a man (= flag of Reuven)
with a face of a lion on the right side of all four (= flag of Yehuda)

and the face of an ox on the left side of the four (= flag of Efraim)

and all four also had the face of an eagle (= flag of Dan)." [4]

The correlation between the pictures on the flags and the faces of the creatures in the Merkava is so complete and so clear that the Ibn Ezra seems to have solid reason for comparing the camp of Israel on the four sides of the Mishkan to the adornment of the Shekhina in the Divine Chariot by the four creatures.

However, this entire explanation rests upon the tradition of the Sages concerning the pictures on the banners of the tribes – a tradition that is not mentioned explicitly in the text. Is there anywhere in the literal text a connection between the cIsrael in the wilderness and the Divine Chariot in Yechezkel's vision? I believe that we may answer this question in the affirmative.

Firstly, let us keep in mind the beginning of Yechezkel's description of the Merkava: "And I saw, and behold, a storm wind came from the north, a great cloud and a blazing fire" (1:4) [5]. The great cloud, with a blazing fire within it, is a form of appearance of the Shekhina as it appeared many times to Bnei Yisrael, atop the Mishkan. Thus we read at the end of Sefer Shemot: "For the cloud of God was upon the Mishkan by day, and a fire was upon it at night before the eyes of all of the house of Israel, throughout all of their journeys" (Shemot 40:38) [6].

In this sense, the camp of Israel – camping around God's cloud and the fire – is reminiscent of the creatures adorning and accompanying the "great cloud and blazing fire." Just as four creatures, with "four faces," bear the Merkava, so the nation encamps around the Mishkan on all four sides, with four different banners.

But the Midrash mentioned above is anchored in our text more profoundly than just in terms of this general resemblance. When Yechezkel describes the movement of the creatures he emphasizes that as they rest, so they move: they have no need to turn in the direction in which the Merkava is headed: "And they went, each one straight ahead; to wherever their spirit was headed – there they would go; they did not turn as they went" (12) [7]. The same interesting detail appears in connection with the Israelite camp and journeying: "As they camped, so did they journey: each person at his place, by their banners" (2:17).

However, the Tannaim and Rishonim are divided in their interpretation of the above verse [8]. The question is how this verse, according to which it appears that the order of the journey was the same order in which they encamped ("like an ark" – square formation), relates to the description of the journey in 10:11-28, where the text seems to describe a special order for journeying that is different from the order of

encampment ("like a beam" – a long line). Either way, though, the formulation of the verse in chapter 2 ("as they camped, so did they journey") closely resembles the description of the creatures and the wheels of the Divine Chariot in Yechezkel's vision.

Finally, it should be noted that just as the camp of Israel was – as mentioned above – a military camp, so Yechezkel describes the bearers of the Merkava and the sound that they make: "And I heard the sound of their wings... like the sound of a [military] camp" (1:24).

On the basis of this connection, I believe, we can begin to understand the profound significance of the camp of Israel. The tribes of Israel accompany the Divine Presence on its journey as a chariot for the Shekhina. So long as the Shekhina is on high, it is the holy creatures and wheels that accompany the Shekhina on its journeys, and they comprise its Chariot. But when God chooses to make His Shekhina rest in the world, new escorts – an alternative Merkava – are required. God's seat is the keruvim and the Mishkan that Israel builds by God's command, and His escort is the nation of Israel, encamped "around the Mishkan," each person with his clan and by his banner.

But the appointment of Yechezkel as a prophet, in the midst of the description of the Merkava, involves the withdrawal of the Shekhina. In other words, the prophet Yechezkel - in Babylon - describes the Shekhina leaving its earthly abode, leaving the nation of Israel who are its permanent escort in Eretz Yisrael; now there is once again a need for a heavenly escort – the creatures and wheels.

In this sense, a very close parallel is created between Am Yisrael on earth and the angels on high – a parallel that finds expression in the words of the Kedusha section of the prayer service: "We shall revere You and sanctify You, like the pleasantness of the secret counsel of the holy angels." Am Yisrael sanctifies the Name of God in the world, as do the angels in heaven. But while the angels declare, "Holy, holy, holy is the God of Hosts; the entire world is full of His glory" (Yishayahu 6:3), Israel seeks to coronate God in a defined place upon earth: "God shall reign forever; your God, ZION, for all generations" (Tehillim 146:10).

An additional aspect of the organization of the Israelite camp is revealed to us at the conclusion of the narrative about the wanderings, as Bnei Yisrael reach the plains of Moav – in the blessing of Bil'am.

Bil'am blesses Israel in three cycles of blessing. Each cycle opens with a description of how Balak perceives the nation. The first cycle, in Kiryat Chutzot, opens as follows: "And he saw from there the periphery of the nation" (Bamidbar 22:41). Before the next cycle, uttered in Bamot Ba'al, Balak requests that Bil'am see only the

periphery of the nation, with the hope that this will lead to a curse rather than a blessing: "Go then, with me, to a different place, where you will see them; you will see only the periphery, you will not see all of them" (23:13). The third occasion is the most interesting of all, because there the Torah describes a special prophetic revelation to Bil'am: "And the spirit of God was upon him" (24:2). This third blessing is given from the top of Pe'or and, in contrast to the previous times, Bil'am now sees the entire nation: "... and he set his face to the desert. And Bil'am lifted his eyes and saw Israel dwelling by their tribes" (24:1-2).

This introduction tells us that this is not an external, banal view of the nation, but rather a perception of a certain quality amongst the nation of Israel: he sees them camping "by their tribes." This description refers, of course, to the order of encampment that we have discussed above. Fascinatingly enough, after Bil'am views this magnificent organization and order of the Israelite camp, by their tribes, each individual connected with his family and his clan, the wonderful blessing bursts forth: "How good are your tents, Yaakov, your dwelling places, Israel" (24:5).

The untamed desert bespeaks a world without boundaries: it is wild, devoid of order and regulation, a place without human habitation, a place where wild animals reign. Here, in the midst of the lack of boundaries that the desert embodies, a marvelous sight reveals itself: six hundred thousand foot soldiers, aside from women and children, journeying by tribes and by clans. It is specifically against the background of the desert that the splendor of the camp of Israel stands out: a nation that creates banners and tribes, that maintains clans and tents of families.

Even in a world where every possible boundary is smashed, even from the perspective of Balak of Moav - whose genealogy goes back to the story of Lot and his daughters, where the fundamental definitions of lineage are themselves blurred – the camp of Israel is based upon a solid foundation of "good tents."

Thus we discover that the Divine Chariot on earth, in the form of the nation of Israel, is connected first and foremost to the internal and intimate relationships within each individual tent, so that even in the wild, untamed desert, every child knows who is his father and who is his mother.

NOTES:

[1] In a previous VBM shiur, I proposed that the commands conveyed in this unit are related to the centrality of the Mishkan within the camp and its influence on the

inhabitants of the Camp of Israel, on various levels (socio-national, familial and personal).

[2] Rashi explains (following the Midrash Tanhuma) that the colors were chosen for each tribe in accordance with their representative stones in the breastplate of the Kohen Gadol.

[3] This, for example, is the interpretation of Y.Z. Moskowitz, Da'at Mikra - Bamidbar, Jerusalem 5748, p. 17.

[4] It should be noted that one of the differences between the Ibn Ezra and the version in the Midrash concerns the picture on the flag of Dan. According to the midrash, the picture featured a snake, while Ibn Ezra writes "the form of an eagle" – in accordance with the description of the Divine Chariot.

[5] Likewise in the description of "the appearance of the likeness of God's glor" verses 27-28.

[6] It is quite possible that Yechezkel's description of a "blazing fire" together with a great cloud, in the midst of a storm wind, is also related to the plague of hail in Egypt, concerning which we are told: "And God gave forth thunder and hail, and fire emerged earthward... and there was hail, with blazing fire within the hail, falling hard" (Shemot 9:23-24). The expression "a blazing fire" (esh mitlakachat) does not appear anywhere else in Tanakh; the plague of hail (the seventh plague!) also contains hints of Divine revelation.

[7] Likewise in verse 9. This emphasis is repeated in the description of the relationship between the wheels and these creatures in verses 20-21.

[8] See, for example, Talmud Yerushalmi, Eruvin 5:5.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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Yeshivat Har Etzion
Alon Shvut, Israel, 90433
office@etzion.org.il
