

## **Bamidbar**

“Having journeyed from Rephidim they entered the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness.” Thus begins Chapter 19 of the Book of Exodus. According to the creative imagination of our sages, this description of encampment “Vayachanu b’midbar Sinai,” connects the giving of the Torah with Parshat Bamidbar. More specifically, Parshat Bamidbar provides the details regarding how the people of Israel encamped at Sinai, and therefore should have preceded the narrative in Exodus but following the Rabbinic dictum *Ain Mukdam u’mayachar b’Torah* – “there is no chronological order in the Torah” we can rest assured that this morning’s Parsha is meant to expand our understanding of the mysterious encounter between God and Israel described in Exodus 19.

In fact, it should not surprise us that those mysterious events remain somewhat indistinct unless they are explicated by the much more practical-administrative, we might say, details that Parshat Bamidbar provides. Even the encounter with God requires some order. Someone has to guide the people as to where to stand, how to arrange themselves...after all I don’t have to tell you that we have two families here today who are in the process of celebrating a sublimely spiritual and mysterious event. But without months of practical-administrative attention to detail no one would be here to do so. From this perspective the otherwise vaguely tedious details of the encampment take on a heightened importance. Those are the details involved in arranging the marriage between God and Israel.

The fascinating thing about the details that underlie the preparations for any simcha in which God and Israel meet, whether at Sinai or under the chuppa in

Philadelphia, is that these details, like any words of Torah, also function on deeper levels, resonate with meaning that include but transcend the merely practical. In the case of Parshat Bamidbar, those deeper levels are revealed precisely once one has understood the connection between the order of the encampment and the Revelation of Torah. That is, exactly why it was important that Israel encamped in a certain order before Mattan Torah could occur? Our commentators answer this question in a way that addresses one of the fundamental theological underpinnings of the Jewish experience, one that is perhaps more than any other threatened by contemporary culture, the concept of Klal Yisrael at its deepest meaning. It is not an affirmation of ethnic unity, nor of nationalist sentiment and is only obliquely relevant to the obligation to donate money to Jewish causes. Rather, it refers to a truth about the idea of Revelation, of Torah, as it emerges out of the Torah narrative and is carried through rabbinic tradition.

According to commentators, every Israelite had to be in place – all 600,000 of them – because each one represented one of the 600,000 letters of the Torah. God's voice is fragmentary. Absent one member of the community that voice must be incomplete. Increase the number of absences and you increase the incompleteness of the voice until it borders on incomprehensibility. Perhaps that is where we find ourselves. Fractured and fragmented by the vicissitudes of history on the one hand and the blandishments of enlightenment on the other resulting in the perception that the voice is incomplete, insufficient, and perhaps incomprehensible.

How do we address the problem? How do we begin to put the pieces of God's voice back together? The message of the Parsha is clear: we begin by recognizing that every single Jew (and, mysteriously, every single person who becomes a Jew) contains a

precious letter of the Torah without which what we currently understand as Torah is incomplete. We begin by, therefore, welcoming each person and his or her letter into the community so as to encourage their articulating the letter of Torah they carry. We make them know that they are precious to us. We nurture their discovery of that inner letter they carry. We recognize that those who are not inside the community are precisely those who we need in order for us to know what the full meaning of our Torah is. The Slonimer Rebbe claims that it is this reality that truly explicates the great principle of the Torah: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On this reading we expand our interpretation even further to suggest that every human being carries his or her letter of the Torah and we must love his or her letter as our own for without it ours is insufficient.