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Weekly Parsha

Bemidbar

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“Take a census of the entire congregation of Bnai Yisrael. Do it by their families, by the households of their fathers, according to the names of each male, taken individually.” (BeMidbar 1:2)

Moshe is commanded by the Almighty to take a census of Bnai Yisrael. The Torah uses an interesting term for taking a census.

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SEEKING TRUTH

Dear Rabbi, Thank you once more for your very thorough responses to my questions. In regards to my questioning only certain aspects of the Biblical accounts (for example, you mention that I don't question the existence of Egyptians, Jews, or the River Nile itself) I do not feel that my acceptance of these historical players/geographical features demands that I also affirm the authenticity of the Jews or the Egyptians' interpretations of natural phenomena. For example, though I do not question the existence of Caesar and the Rubicon and thus will read his accounts of battles with a good deal of credulity, I would not read an assertion Caesar he made about the earth being flat with the same belief. Do I doubt his senses? No, to his eyes the earth was indeed empirically flat. Sometimes, empirical evidence for humans

must be corroborated by more advanced scientific discoveries.

This being said, however, and despite my belief in the potentially scientifically explicable nature of the plagues, (see below from BBC about frogs) I agree with you that it is not the individual plagues per se that makes Moses' prediction of them remarkable, but their occurring in tandem and ending when Moses had ordained. This can only be deemed as something otherworldly, it is indeed, as you aptly put it “a clincher.” And the fact that the death of the first-born was a plague also is highly sup portative of your conclusions, for nothing “natural,” could ever begin to explain such an occurrence.

Thank you again for all your help and insight. – Colleen
Mesora: Colleen, your search for truth, and your acceptance, are both admirable. – Moshe Ben-Chaim □



SAUL, THE WITCH, & SAMUEL

REALITY OR METAPHOR?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Steve: I do personally believe the story described in Samuel I (of the Baales Ove – witch – who raised Samuel from the dead). Even the Egyptian conjurers performed miracles and Moses said that a prophet or a dreamer of dreams might do miracles and wonders and the miracles and wonders would come to pass or come true. Still, if they taught us to follow other gods, we should not listen to them. In other words if they performed miracles but gave us new laws, statutes and judgments different from those that Moses gave us from G-d, they were not a true prophets.

Mesora: Although the Torah tells us not to follow the signs of a false prophet instructing on Torah violations...his signs are not “magic”. Sforno states that “signs” in this case refers to heavenly signs, i.e., natural phenomena, predicted based on their observable and repeating natures. There exists no true “miraculous” signs of those deviant souls opposing God. God will not deceive other innocent people, granting false prophets the ability to predict and/or enact true miracles. Far be it. Sforno says further, “Don’t investigate his words to determine validity in some of it, for beyond any doubt, they are all lies, made up from his own heart.” It is clear, false prophets cannot produce miracles, and their words are lies. These are the words of the Rabbis.

Saadia Gaon states that the Egyptians – and anyone for that matter – possess no power, other than what each man’s muscles can manipulate. In Egypt, the astrologers and magicians were no different than today’s sleight of hand performers. Ibn Ezra – another great Rabbi – commented that the Torah does not prohibit that which is real and true, rather, only that which is lies is prohibited. God desires we recognize the truth, and not ignore what is real. Thus, the reason necromancers, witches, enchanters, warlocks, psychics, et al. are prohibited is because they have no powers. Had they any powers in Egypt, why couldn’t they remove God’s plagues? Why couldn’t they at least use their own magic – as you assume – and conjure up some sort of defense? Why did they not even try, if they truly

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Metaphors

possessed powers of any kind? If I had powers, and these plagues visited my area, I would certainly do what I could to rid myself of them. But the lack of any attempt by Egypt to remove the plagues clearly unveils the truth: they knew they possessed no powers. Pharaoh too must have realized this, for we find nowhere in the Torah any demand by Pharaoh on his astrologers and magicians that they remove Moses' plagues. Pharaoh always addressed Moses when he desired the plague to end. Your mind must find some satisfaction in this point. This is Egypt's confession: they possessed no powers.

Egypt was quite entrenched in the mystical, similar to today's phony mystics who believe in alien, unproven forces. But all mentioned herein are idolatrous, as they all imagine forces other than God. These forces are not real, and have never been witnessed. Psychics are today's permutation of Egyptian astrologers...and not one psychic ever won the lottery. Wouldn't you think these charlatans claiming to know all about your past and future, could guess a few simple numbers?

Steve: When the Baales Ove brought the Shmuel (the judge and prophet) up, everything he told the king came to pass. The fact that a Baales Ove or a sorcerer can perform something and it comes about, this does not make him or her a true prophet. This is why we Jews do not accept the NT as prophetic because though I personally believe miracles were performed, this is not the test of a true prophet.

Mesora: The Baales Ove did nothing, and if you will study that area, you will learn from the verses that she knew very well this was King Saul seeking Samuel. So she feigned that she saw Samuel out of recognition of the King. All that came to pass afterwards, i.e., that Saul died, was because Saul lost his own confidence due to his own imagined daydream of Samuel reiterating his previous rebuke, when Saul left Agag alive, ignoring God's commands that he slay him. Man – when not confident – will err in his activities, and unfortunately, Saul's next activity was war. Saul truly believed he heard Samuel foretell his imminent death at war, along with his son, and the Jews being captured. This was not prophetic, but Saul's own imagination. This was all a daydream, as one who is desperate to speak to someone of greatness like Samuel, may actually believe to be doing so. Saul previously displayed great insecurity a number of times; when appointed as king, he was hiding, (Sam I, 10:22) and upon capturing Amalek, he succumbed to the people's opinion to save the good cattle and the king, Agag. And throughout his relationship with David, Saul was paranoid of David, and sought to kill him. Again with regards to the Baales Ove, Saul demonstrated a great insecurity, and was so distressed, that he sought an idolatrous and useless means of contacting the dead Samuel: "When Saul saw the Philistine camp, he was greatly afraid and his heart trembled greatly."

(Samuel I, 28:5) Out of his horror, Saul resorted to useless idolatry. This event must be explained in the context of King Saul's personality: instead of assuming forces which have never existed, nor exist today, we may readily explain this metaphorically, "as if" Saul contacted Samuel. The Torah thereby expresses in exaggerated terms, just how real Samuel was in Saul's insecure mind.

I feel it appropriate at this point to stress what care must be taken when interpreting the Torah. Without years of tutelage under Rabbis well versed in interpreting the Torah, we cannot read an area and assume we understand it. God wrote the Torah. Therefore, much trepidation must accompany any read of any portion of Torah, Prophets, or Writings. Certainly, if the Rabbi openly stated that an area is metaphoric, we are wise to understand their heavy words, and not abandon their authority, in favor of our assumptions; assumptions based on limited knowledge, and embarrassingly absent analytical skills. It takes decades to master competent, Torah analysis skills. Only after this amount of training can one approach the Torah's intended meanings.

Returning to Saul and the witch, no human has power over life. You must understand that just as King Solomon said in his opening words to Proverbs, the Rabbis "speak in riddles", this case of Saul and the Baales Ove is also a riddle of sorts. The Torah described the Baales Ove "as if" she raised Samuel from the dead, to teach how real Saul imagined this daydream to be. The Torah presented Saul's daydream, as if it were reality, because it desired to teach how far man will believe his own imagination when he is desperate, as was Saul in this case. □

Gentiles & Torah

Question: It seems that a most serious thing like death, if decided by the Rabbis, must at least be alluded to in the Tanach. Is there a part in the Tanach suggesting that teaching Torah to Gentiles is so serious, that it is deserving of the death penalty? Thanks, S.

Mesora: The Torah verse is Deuteronomy 33:4, "Moses commanded us in Torah, an inheritance to the congregation of Jacob." This means that it is the "congregation of Jacob" who is bound to Torah, and no others. But God does not play "favorites", as He created all men and women. How can He not desire the good for everyone, and only offer Torah to the Jew?

The great commentator Nachmanides says the following on this point, "The Rabbis explained, 'congregation' is used here and not 'house of Jacob, or 'seed of Jacob', thereby including all those who

Letters

yearn to cleave to the Torah. Thus 'congregation' is used to refer to even the convert. Therefore, both Jew and convert are referred to by God as His 'congregation'."

Nachmanides makes it clear that any human being desirous of leading the highest lifestyle as following all 613 commands is welcome, and is in the same footing. One born as "Jew" has no advantage over a convert. The reason Gentiles have but seven commands is not a "limit" to their performances, but a "minimum" requirement to retain a right to life. If a given person cannot comply with at least these seven Noachide laws, then his life is meaningless.

God's desire that only the Jew study Torah is for good reason. It should be understood why the punishment is so severe, if a gentile learns Torah other than what applies to his seven Noachide Laws. By doing so, the Gentile then blurs the lines of who is a "Torah Authority", and this done en masse, will destroy Torah, as other Gentiles not fit to teach, will proliferate ignorant rulings. Only by the Rabbi/student relationship is the Torah insured from falling into the hands of those without proper training.

It may be very possible that a Gentile has the same intelligence as a Rabbi. Judaism does not make false claims such as "we are more intelligent than others", as I have unfortunately heard from ignorant fellow Jews. There is no difference between a Jewish mind and a Gentile mind, or a Jewish soul and a Gentile soul. However, a Gentile is not bound to fulfill the 613 commands. As such, the level of meticulous Torah study and adherence will probably not be found among Gentiles who study Torah for its theoretic beauty alone.

Perhaps it is the Jews' obligation, which engenders the proper attitude essential for the highest level of Torah study, and thus, Torah leadership. This secures for Jews alone the right to disseminate Torah. I would note that many converts became some of Judaism's greatest teachers. However, to teach Judaism, one must be one of those people who inherited Torah, through "obligatory" Torah study – and this is only the Jew or the convert.

The preservation of the Torah system by the obligated Jew in fact serves both Jew and Gentile. For without such care to accept the Jew's designation as the sole Torah authority, other less informed people would corrupt the Torah system, not enabling a Gentile the opportunity to observe Torah accurately, or convert, according to true Torah law. Additionally, any Gentile desirous of accepting more Torah laws is wise to do so and is fully permitted. For through these additional laws, he or she will become more perfected, as is God's plan for every man and woman. The only laws a Gentile may not observe unless converted, are the Sabbath and Holiday, and I feel Tefillin as well. This is because these laws function to distinguish the Jew from others, as the Torah authority, as we have explained □

The term is se'uh et rosh. Literally translated, the phrase means "lift the head". Midrash Rabbah explains that this term has a number of meanings in the Torah. It can mean elevation to a higher position. For example, Yosef used this term when foretelling the release from prison and reappointment of Paroh's wine butler.[1] The term can also mean execution of punishment. Yosef used the phrase to tell Paroh's baker that he would be executed.[2]

The Midrash explains that this phrase is used here because of the alternative meanings. If the nation follows the Torah, this census will result in the nation's elevation to a higher status. However, if the people disregard the Torah, this census will lead the people's demise.[3]

This is a difficult comment to understand. We expect the nation to be rewarded and punished for its actions. However, the Midrash seems to say that because of the census the nation will be judged for its actions. Are we to assume that without the census the nation's actions would not be judged?

There is another related question that must be answered. The Torah forbids the direct counting of the nation. Instead, the Torah requires indirect counting. A token – generally a coin – is collected from each individual. These tokens are then counted. This provides a census. The Chumash explains that this method is used to protect the nation from punishment. The question is obvious. Why should taking a census endanger the nation? Why must tokens be used instead of a direct count?

It is difficult to entirely answer these questions. However, Nachmanides provides an important insight. From his comments the beginnings of an answer can be derived. He begins with an observation. The Torah uses another term for taking a census. This term is tifkedu.[4] Nachmanides explains that this term is also associated with Divine providence. When Hashem grants Sara a son, this term is used.[5]

Why is this term used for taking a census? Nachmanides explains that there is a direct connection between the compilation of a census and providence. The counting of the nation invites a closer providential relationship. In other words the census taking increases the level of providence over the nation.

Nachmanides further explains that reward and punishment is an expression of Divine providence. Hashem rewards us for observance of the Torah. He punishes us for transgression. It follows that the higher the level of providence the more our actions are scrutinized. With greater providence our observance will be more fully rewarded. However, we will also be more strictly punished for our transgressions.

Nachmanides now answers our questions. The census invites an increase in the providential

relationship. This, in turn means that the Almighty will more closely scrutinize our actions. The tokens or coins used for the census represent our recognition of our own weaknesses and failings. Through providing a coin to be counted, the individual acknowledges the need for atonement. These coins will be used to provide for communal needs. This donation is an atonement. The individual is stating that close scrutiny of one's personal actions will uncover shortcomings. Therefore, the individual provides an atonement at the time of the census.

Nachmanides also explains the comments of Midrash Rabbah. The census will not directly result in reward or punishment. Our observance of the Torah determines our fate. However, the level of providence is directly affected by the census. This is the message of the Midrash. The census will impact upon the level of Divine providence. This means that the nation's behavior will be judged more strictly. The people will be more richly rewarded and more severely punished. In the words of the Midrash, the census can result in the elevation of the nation to a greater status. It can also bring about the execution of severe punishment.[6]



“Do not take a tally or census of the Leveyim together with the children of Israel.” (BeMidbar 1:49)

Parshat BeMidbar begins with Hashem's command to take a census of Bnai Yisrael. Hashem instructs Moshe to exclude the shevet – tribe – of Leyve from this tally. Rashi offers two explanations for this exclusion. The first is that the shevet was designated to serve in the Mishkan. This appointment bestowed a special status upon the tribe. The exclusion of Shevet Leyve from the census acknowledged the exalted status of the tribe.[7]

Rashi offers a second explanation. Hashem foresaw the incident of the spies. The nation

would send spies into the land of Israel. These scouts would return and report that the land could not be conquered. The people would accept this report and refuse to proceed and take possession of the land of Israel. The nation would be punished. The generation would be condemned to wander in the wilderness for forty years. During this period, the generation would die. Their children would conquer the land of Israel.

The decree that the generation should perish would not include the entire nation. Only those included in the census would be subject to the punishment. Hashem wished to spare the tribe of Leyve. The Almighty instructed Moshe to exclude Shevet Leyve from the tally. This exclusion assured that the shevet would not share in the punishment of the generation.

Why was the tribe of Leyve to be spared? Rashi explains that the Leveyim were not involved in the sin of the Egel HaZahav – the Golden Calf. As a reward for their faithfulness, they would be permitted to enter the land of Israel.[8]

These comments are difficult to understand. Rashi is asserting that the Leveyim were spared from the punishment of the generation because they did not participate in the sin of the Egel. Were the Leveyim involved in the sin of the spies? This alone should determine their survival or death in the wilderness. If the Leveyim were involved, they deserved to be punished. If they were not parties to the rebellion, they were entitled to be spared! What is the relevance of their refusal to participate in the previous sin of the Egel?

We can answer this question based upon the comments of Gershonides. These comments require an introduction.

The first city in Israel conquered by Yehosua and Bnai Yisrael was Yericho. Yehoshua instructed the people to completely destroy the city. No one was to take spoils.

The second city Bnai Yisrael attacked was Aiy. The initial attack was not successful. The attackers were turned back from the city. Thirty-six members of Bnai Yisrael's army were killed.

Yehoshua was astonished by this defeat. He turned to Hashem for an explanation. G-d explained that this set-back was a punishment. The prohibition against taking spoils from Yericho had been violated. The defeat at Aiy was a punishment for this transgression.

The commentaries ask an obvious question. The thirty-six soldiers killed at Aiy had not violated the prohibition at Yericho. Why did they deserve to die?

Gershonides explains that these thirty-six victims did not die for the sin of Yericho. It is normal in a battle for both sides to suffer casualties. These thirty-six innocents were casualties of war. Only through Divine intervention can such losses be avoided. The sin at Yericho deprived Bnai Yisrael of this providence. The soldiers at Aiy did not die

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because they sinned. They perished because Bnai Yisrael did not deserve the miracle necessary to save them.[9]

This provides an explanation of Rashi's comments. The Leveyim were not guilty of the sin of the spies. However, this does not mean that they deserved to be spared from the punishment of their generation. Hashem had decreed that the nation should wander in the wilderness for forty years. This provided adequate time for the generation to naturally die out. In order for the Leveyim to be spared a special act of providence would be required. Hashem decided that Shevet Leyve deserved this Divine intervention. How did they earn this treatment? They did not participate in the sin of the Egel. In other words, the generation was punished for the sin of the spies. Shevet Leyve's behavior at the incident of the Egel caused the Almighty to protect the shevet from the decree upon the generation.

“Do not cut off the tribe of the family of Kahat from among the Leveyim.” (Bamidbar 4:18)

Each of the families within the Leveyim were assigned a specific duty in the caring and transport of the Mishkan. The most sacred components were carried by the family of Kahat. In our pasuk, Hashem commands Moshe and Ahron to protect the family of Kahat. They must not be

endangered. What is the reason for this command? What special danger confronted this family?

The simplest explanation is based upon the process described by the Chumash for the handling of the Mishkan. The most sacred components were prepared for transport. They were wrapped in special coverings before being entrusted to the family of Kahat. This function was performed by Ahron and his sons. This was an act of respect for these sacred objects. After proper preparation, the objects were delivered to the family of Kahat. Failure to properly prepare these components would endanger the members of this family. Handling these sacred objects before their proper preparation would be disrespectful. Moshe and Ahron are instructed to be careful that the components are wrapped with their special coverings, to assure that the members of Kahat are not endangered.[10]

Sforno provides an alternate explanation. Each component must be assigned to a specific individual or group from the family of Kahat. This assures that the process of transporting the components will be conducted with dignity. Moshe and Ahron must assure that the components are not seized by members of Kahat in a chaotic fashion. There can be no debate and strife over assignments. Any of these behaviors would express a lack of respect for this sacred

duty.[11]

There are many reasons for the practice of appointing a fixed Chazan to lead the congregation in prayers. If a congregation does not have a Chazan, the Gabbai appoints individuals to lead the various portions of the service. The idea expressed by Sforno provides an important reason for these practices. Without a system for determining who will lead the congregation, debate easily arises. Debate can lead to argument and chaos. These behaviors degrade the sanctity of the prayers. The practice of appointing a fixed Chazan assures that the prayers will be treated with dignity and respect. Entrusting a Gabbai with the responsibility of choosing individuals to lead the prayers also serves this purpose. ■

[1] Sefer Beresheit 40:13.

[2] Sefer Beresheit 40:19.

[3] Midrash Rabbah, Sefer BeMidbar 1:9.

[4] Sefer BaMidbar 1:3.

[5] Sefer Beresheit 21:1.

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer BaMidbar 1:1-3.

[7] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 1:49

[8] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 1:49

[9] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Yehoshua 7:5.

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[11] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 4:20

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