



THE PARSHA EXPERIMENT

PARSHAT BAMIDBAR: HOW CAN WE TRANSMIT GOD'S VALUES?

SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

- I. We've finally closed the book on Leviticus
 - a. Done with korbanot, done with laws about priests, and done with the intricate details of the Mishkan that took us half of Exodus and the entire Leviticus to cover.
 - b. We can finally get into the more interesting stories of the travels in the desert, like Moses hitting the rock, the spies exploring Israel, and the rebellion of Korach.
 - c. But that's not how the book starts.
 - i. Instead, Bamidbar opens with a census of the entire nation of Israel.
 - ii. Then, the parsha tells us where each tribe will camp around the Mishkan as they travel.
 - iii. And finally, there is a special focus on Levites.
 - d. You see, while we've heard about the role of the kohanim, a subset of the tribe of Levi, we now hear about the rest of the tribe.
 - i. Each of the three major families of Levi is given a special responsibility to serve the priests, doing work related to the Mishkan.
 - ii. But all of this seems like an odd introduction to the book of Bamidbar.
 - iii. And the responsibility of the Levites vis a vis the Mishkan seems particularly out of place, considering that we just finished Leviticus, much of which is about the Mishkan service of the other special group from the tribe of Levi --- Kohanim.
 - iv. Why should this be the introduction to the book of Bamidbar?

- II. We think that the key to understanding the entire introduction of Bamidbar is through a deeper exploration into the responsibilities given to the Levites.
 - a. First, God tells Moses: "Appoint the Levites over the Mishkan and its vessels and all that belongs to it - they'll carry the Mishkan and its vessels and they'll keep its charge. And when the Mishkan travels, they'll disassemble it, and when the Mishkan rests, they'll reassemble it" (Numbers 1:50-51)
 - i. Okay, that's certainly important, but is that it?
 - ii. Their fancy new job is to be the schleppers?
 - iii. There must be more to the Levites' new role than just being Mishkan carriers.
 - b. And we find that there is.
 - i. A few chapters later, God expands on the Levites' new job; he tells Moses: "I have taken the Levites from among Israel, in place of every firstborn Israelite" (Numbers 3:12)
 - ii. So the Levites aren't just Mishkan schleppers, they also have some sort of spiritual role, to stand in for, or represent, the firstborn of Israel.
 - iii. But what would that mean?

- c. We explained back in Parshat Bo that the bechor plays a unique role in a family.
 - i. Practically, he's the one closest in age to the parents and to the rest of the children.
 - ii. Therefore, the bechor is in the best position to take the values of the parents and model them for the next generation.
 - iii. He's the transitional figure - the bridge.
 - d. And that explains a few uses of "bechor" throughout the Torah.
 - i. Back in Egypt, the final plague was symbolic:
 - ii. By killing every firstborn, God destroyed Egypt's generational bridge, preventing the transmission of immoral values to the next generation.
 - iii. And God, Father of all humanity, says, "Israel is my firstborn" (Exodus 4:22)
 - iv. Israel will be that bridge, to spread God's legacy to His other children, the nations of the world!
 - e. And now, the Levites are here too, as the bechor between God and the people.
 - i. So we have God - Levites - Israel - other nations.
 - ii. But we also learned in Leviticus about more intermediary groups; the kohanim are also a bridge.
 - 1. They work in the Mishkan, where they do God's service and eat of God's sacrifices.
 - 2. And among them, there's another bridge: a kohen Gadol, a high priest -- who comes the closest to God, when, once a year, he enters the Holy of Holies and encounters God.
 - iii. So now we have an expanded version of what we might call a spiritual order - God - Kohen Gadol - Kohanim - Levites - Israel - and other nations.
- III. And building these bridges make sense because it's hard to transmit values.
- a. Look at, say, a very human example, the military, led by the commander in chief, the President of the United States.
 - b. We have thousands and thousands of men and women in uniform, representing our military.
 - i. The President couldn't give them direct orders, it would be complete chaos.
 - ii. Imagine if a soldier asked his commanding officer, can I have lunch now? And the officer responded, well, I don't know, that's not up to me, we have to call the President! That would be ludicrous.
 - iii. Instead, we have a clear chain of command.
 - 1. The President sets the overall principles and policies of the military, but beyond that, leaves everything in the hands of the generals to break down, and they delegate to the colonels in further detail.
 - 2. This continues throughout the entire system, all the way down to military cadets, and the people they're charged to defend.
 - 3. The bridges are necessary, to make sure that each person in the organization can effectively translate the principles and policies of the commander in chief.
 - c. The Torah, too, is building a system of bridges, to ensure that God's values can really be transmitted at every single step.
 - i. God adds the Levites because, though the priests represent us through their Mishkan service, they can't really relate God's values to us; they spend their

- days so close to God, and so removed from the rest of the nation, in the innermost sanctum of the Mishkan, that there's a disconnect.
- ii. We need another bridge - people like us to take God's values from the kohanim and bring them to the rest of us! In other words, the non-priestly Israelites needs a bechor too.
- d. God tells Moses that the Leviim can be that bridge.
 - i. Moses is commanded to place the Leviim before Aaron, and they should serve him. They should keep his charge and the charge of the entire community (Numbers 3:6-7).
 - ii. God is explicitly spelling out both sides of the Levites' bridge -- they are meant to perform duties for the priests, on the one hand, and the people, on the other.
 - iii. In fact, that phrase is used in Leviticus to describe the special role of the priests as well: "And you shall keep the charge of God" (Leviticus 8:35)
 - e. Look at that progression: the Kohanim are meant to serve God, and the Leviim are supposed to serve the Kohanim and the people.
 - i. And look at this. Remember the inauguration of the priests back in Leviticus?
 - ii. The people of Israel were just bystanders - they watched as Aaron performed semicha, laying his hands on the kohanim, marking their introduction to the Mishkan service.
 - iii. But at the inauguration of the Levites, the nation becomes participants: "Israel leaned their hands on the Leviim" (Numbers 8:10)
 - iv. They performed semicha, and in so doing, the Levites substitute for Israel. They represent Israel!
 - f. But why do the Leviim get to be the bridge?
 - i. Is it arbitrary; could it just have easily been the lefties of the nation, or the best foosball players?
 - ii. What is it about Leviim?
- IV. In the entire Torah, there is only one other story that involves the tribe of Levi, and it gives us a clue as to why they were chosen.
- a. In the middle of Exodus, after Israel built and worshipped the Golden Calf, a furious Moses screamed, "Whoever is with God, come to me" (Exodus 32:26)
 - i. It was a call to those who did not abandon God with the Golden Calf, those who remained steadfast to God's values throughout the storm.
 - ii. And who stepped up? All the sons of Levi gathered to him (Exodus 32:26)
 - iii. Of the entire nation of Israel, only the Leviim proved themselves to be committed to God's values.
 - iv. They remained loyal to Him - and only those who stay with God can then transmit those values to the rest of the nation.
 - b. And in case you weren't convinced, Moses makes this explicitly clear.
 - i. At the end of the Torah, when blessing each tribe of Israel, Moses says to the Levites: "You shall teach the laws to the people of Jacob, and the Torah to Israel" (Deuteronomy 33:10)
 - ii. The members of the tribe of Levi are teachers; and a teacher is a bridge, responsible for transmitting God's values to the nation, so that Israel, in turn, can embody and spread them to the rest of the world.

- V. And now that we understand the special role of the Levites as bechorim, we understand why we couldn't just start Bamidbar with the stories of Israel in the desert; why we first had to hear about a census, a camp formation around the Mishkan, and the Levite role.
- a. Because after finishing Leviticus, I, a regular Joe in the nation of Israel, might be feeling pessimistic about my own chance to connect with God.
 - i. Yes, we saw in Bechukotai that Leviticus progresses from service inside the Mishkan, to a more macro-view -- how God's presence in the Mishkan impacted life outside it as well.
 - ii. But even so, it was still within the framework of the Mishkan, and the priestly role. I can't help but look at Leviticus and think: even though I have some laws of purity and holiness, it's really the priests who have a special relationship with God, through their work in the Mishkan. I don't get that relationship.
 - b. But the book of Bamidbar is about God's relationship with the people.
 - i. So before the people can begin to travel away from God's palpable presence at Sinai, they need to see that they have potential too.
 - ii. So we start with a census of all of Israel, as if to say: not only the priests are important. The whole nation is a kingdom of priests!
 - iii. Rabbi Fohrman explained last year, counting is a way of not only showing love, but also the unique importance of each person who is counted.
 1. And, by explaining the encampment formation, God is really saying, each of you is fully part of this camp, connected to Me.
 2. Each of you counts. Everyone surrounds Me - not in a line behind the Mishkan, with some closer to Me, and some farther from Me.
 3. Everyone resides around My presence, within their place in the spiritual order.
 - iv. And that's why the Leviim belong at the introduction to the book of Bamidbar.
 1. Right after we hear about how the tribes were positioned around the Mishkan, we hear about the position of the Levites between the camp of Israel and the Mishkan.
 2. The Levites, quite literally, are the transition point, between the people and the place of God. Between Sefer Vayikra and Sefer Bamidbar.
 3. This is why they had the special duty of carrying the vessels and assembling the Mishkan. As representatives of the nation, they are the ones charged with building the place for God amidst the camp, over and over again.
- VI. So when I look at the beginning of Bamidbar, I feel better about my place in the community.
- a. I don't feel like only some people count.
 - b. Just as a king has a palace, and his palace has servants, the Mishkan has Priests and Levites.
 - i. But God, the king, doesn't love His servants any more than he loves His subjects.
 - ii. God places His house in the midst of the people so that he can be close to them.
 - iii. He is interested in them.
 - iv. Yes, the Levites have this spiritual role as the teachers, but imagine a society where everyone is a teacher!
 1. Without the farmers, there wouldn't be wheat for the showbread.
 2. Without the olive presser, we couldn't have oil for the menorah.
 3. Without the people of Israel, there would be no nation, and no King.

4. Everyone has their unique role in the service of God.
- c. Through the spiritual order, and the chain of bridges God has created, we each have our own role, through which we can each feel connected to Him and share that connection with the next link in the chain.
 - i. Bamidbar teaches us that, like the Levites, we have a dual destiny.
 - ii. We must support the Levite, honor the priest, and cling to God, but we also have a responsibility to model God's values, and be a light unto the nations - to take up the charge of Father, as bechor to the rest of the world.